

Caught at 100 KBPS

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Introduction: The Smell of Beige

Before the kidnappings, the crypto-heists, and the agonizing, soul-crushing tyranny of the 100 KB/s data drop, there was only beige.

Mini Patel, at twenty-eight, lived in a world suffocated by it. Her cubicle at the Pan-India Logistics data-entry center in Malad was a sterile, lifeless cube of beige fabric panels. The harsh, flickering fluorescent lights overhead cast a sickly, beige-tinted pallor over her skin. Even the air smelled beige—a recycled, dead scent of

ozone, dusty carpet, and the faint, depressing aroma of microwaved dal from the communal pantry. The only sound was the endless, mind-numbing *clack-clack-clack* of two hundred identical plastic keyboards, a mechanical symphony of wasted potential.

Mini was a ghost in the machine, tasked with verifying endless columns of shipping manifests. But beneath her quiet, unremarkable exterior, a brilliant, restless fire burned. She didn't just see numbers; she saw patterns, anomalies, and human stories hidden within the data. While her colleagues mindlessly scrolled through social media during their fifteen-minute breaks, Mini secretly obsessively tracked down online scammers, solved local neighborhood disputes by cross-referencing public records, and devoured criminology textbooks hidden in her desk drawer.

The breaking point arrived on a Tuesday in mid-July. The Mumbai monsoon was raging outside, but inside, the climate control kept the office at a freezing, static temperature. Mini was reviewing a massive discrepancy in a shipping manifest when she realized it was a front for a localized smuggling ring. She compiled the evidence—a beautiful, undeniable digital tapestry of guilt—and presented it to her floor manager, a man who smelled perpetually of stale cigarette smoke and cheap peppermint.

He barely looked at it. “Mini, we are here to process data, not play CID,” he sneered, tossing her meticulously highlighted printouts into the trash. “Get back to your desk. You’re affecting your keystroke quota.”

Something inside Mini snapped. It wasn't a loud break; it was a quiet, resolute click, like a deadbolt sliding into place.

She stood up, the legs of her cheap office chair scraping loudly against the synthetic carpet. Without a word, she picked up her

umbrella, walked out of the beige cube, and stepped into the elevator. When the glass doors of the lobby opened, the city hit her like a physical blow. The air was thick, hot, and vibrantly alive. It smelled fiercely of wet asphalt, crushed mango leaves, and the sharp, spicy tang of frying *kanda bhaji* from a nearby stall. The rain was a deafening roar, a chaotic, cleansing drumbeat.

Mini walked all the way to her tiny, single-room flat in Andheri West, letting the rain soak through her clothes. She felt entirely, terrifyingly free.

The next three months were a frenzy of transformation. She stripped the flat of anything resembling office life. She bought a brightly colored, geometric-patterned mat from a street vendor in Colaba, filling the room with the scent of raw jute. She painted one wall a deep, oceanic blue to serve as her evidence board. The quiet of the apartment was replaced by the constant, bubbling hiss of a cheap aluminum kettle boiling water for strong cardamom chai.

She was going to be Mumbai's premier amateur detective. She had the brains, the drive, and the sheer, spiteful determination.

But a modern detective needed a digital nervous system. And here, Mini made the single, fatal error that would define her entire career.

She walked into a brightly lit, neon-red Eirtel store on Linking Road. The air conditioning was freezing, and the store smelled crisply of new electronics, polished floor tiles, and the overpowering, synthetic vanilla cologne worn by the sales representative.

"I need your best connection," Mini told him, leaning over the glass counter. "I am starting a business. I need absolute reliability. Video calls, massive file uploads, live tracking."

The salesman offered a slick, practiced smile, his teeth startlingly white under the halogen lights. He handed her a sleek, black 4G router. It felt heavy and full of promise in her hands. "Madam, with Eirtel's Platinum Ultra-Fi plan, you are getting the speed of light. Seamless connectivity. Blazing fast uploads. You will never drop a frame. I guarantee it."

Mini signed the contract, the carbon paper leaving a faint, inky smudge on her thumb. She brought the router home, placed it reverently in the center of her desk, and plugged it in. The indicator lights flashed a brilliant, reassuring green.

She sat back on her new mat, the smell of fresh ink lingering in the air, and drafted her first advertisement on her laptop. "*Serious criminal cases taken. No fees unless I deliver justice. Real results for real people.*"

She hit send, completely unaware that she hadn't just purchased an internet connection; she had invited a digital poltergeist into her home, an invisible adversary that would snatch victory from her hands again and again. As she waited for her first client, the green lights on the Eirtel router pulsed steadily, a silent, mocking heartbeat in the quiet flat.

Chapter 1: The Missing Necklace

Mini Patel, twenty-eight and fueled almost entirely by spite and strong caffeine, sat cross-legged on the worn-out, geometric-patterned mat in her tiny Andheri West flat. The stifling afternoon heat pressed against the peeling yellow walls, bringing with it the

unmistakable, heavy scent of impending monsoon rain mixed with the pungent aroma of frying *vada pav* from the street vendor three floors below. Her small living space had been transformed into a chaotic war room. Printed screenshots, illuminated by the harsh, bluish-white glare of her aging laptop screen, blanketed the floor alongside handwritten notes scrawled in frantic red ink. Half a dozen empty ceramic cups, their insides stained with the brown, sugary residue of over-boiled ginger and cardamom chai, formed a precarious barricade around her ankles.

Three months ago, Mini had quit her soul-crushing data-entry job—a nightmare of grey cubicles, the endless clacking of keyboards, and the stale smell of recirculated air conditioning—to become Mumbai’s most determined amateur detective. She had advertised on local housing society WhatsApp groups and brightly colored Facebook community pages with a simple, bold graphic: “Serious criminal cases taken. No fees unless I deliver justice. Real results for real people.” Her first client had arrived faster than she could have ever anticipated.

Mrs. Meera Sharma from Bandra had called in absolute hysterics. Her voice, trembling over the phone line, was barely audible over the background hum of an expensive air purifier and the distant, rhythmic crashing of the Arabian Sea. During her mother-in-law’s 75th birthday Zoom gathering—a chaotic digital affair trying to bridge the gap of physical distance—a breathtakingly expensive diamond necklace, valued at a staggering ₹15 lakhs, had simply vanished. It had been sitting on an ornate, mahogany dressing table, clearly visible in the background of Mrs. Sharma’s video feed.

“It was right there in the frame at 8:45 PM. The diamonds were catching the yellow light from the chandelier, throwing little

rainbows across the wall," Mrs. Sharma wept, her distress palpable. "By 9:15, it was just... gone. An empty patch of polished wood."

The family had fourteen members logged in, their faces trapped in little glowing rectangular boxes scattered across Mumbai, Pune, and Dubai. Mini worked like a well-oiled machine. She collected the complete, high-definition Zoom cloud recording, her eyes burning as she stared at the screen for hours on end. She interviewed every participant individually over crackling voice and video calls, the sounds of different cities—the honking of Pune traffic, the artificial quiet of a Dubai high-rise—forming a cacophony in her headset. She created a meticulously color-coded Excel sheet, tracking timelines in vibrant neon green and glaring danger-red.

It was during her fifth review of the footage that she caught it. A critical, momentary frozen frame at exactly 8:52 PM. The lighting in Mrs. Sharma's room was dim, dominated by the warm, amber glow of a bedside lamp, but a shadow shifted. A male hand, bathed in the sickly blue light of a smartphone screen out of frame, reached toward the dressing table. The resolution was compressed, but Mini zoomed in until the pixels blurred. On the wrist was a distinctive, heavy silver watch. The glass dial caught a shard of light, revealing a jagged, spider-web crack stretching from the two o'clock to the seven o'clock position.

Cross-referencing this visual anomaly with dozens of cheerful, brightly lit family photos pulled from Instagram, the metallic gleam and the fractured glass matched perfectly with Rohan, the slick-haired boyfriend of Mrs. Sharma's niece. Digging deeper into digital footprints, Mini discovered a trail of whispered rumors and frantic text messages pointing to Rohan's crippling gambling debts. The audio from the Zoom recording at 8:55 PM captured a faint door

click, right around the time Rohan claimed a "sudden work emergency" and his screen went black.

For two relentless days, Mini pounded the pavement. She visited the Sharma residence, the air thick with the scent of expensive rosewater and lingering anxiety. She stood in the exact spot, recreating the dim amber lighting conditions with the flashlight on her own phone, proving the angle of the reach. She even braved the labyrinthine alleys of Zaveri Bazaar, the air choking with the metallic tang of melting gold and the sweet scent of sandalwood incense burning in cramped pawn shops. She leveraged a favor from a junior constable friend, plying him with cutting chai and maska pav, to unofficially check recent pawn records. In a dusty ledger that smelled of old paper and damp, she found a matching necklace listed under a hastily scribbled fake name. Everything, from the timeline to the financial desperation, pointed directly to Rohan.

On the humid, sticky evening of the third day, Mini scheduled a decisive group Zoom call. The sky outside her window was bruised with shades of deep violet and angry magenta as the sun set over the smoggy city. "I have solved the case," she told Mrs. Sharma confidently, her voice cutting through the static of the line. "Be online sharp at 8 PM."

The call started smoothly. The fourteen familiar faces popped into existence, their varied backgrounds illuminating Mini's dark room. She shared her screen, a stark white presentation against the gloom, and walked through the evidence with calm, surgical professionalism. Gasps, sharp and sudden, echoed through the laptop's tinny speakers as she zoomed into the frozen frame. She played the exact timestamp, the faint rustle of clothing amplified,

and revealed Rohan's crippling financial records in stark black and white.

Rohan's face, illuminated by the harsh, unflattering ring light attached to his desk, turned a sickly, ashen grey. The vibrant colors of his expensive designer shirt suddenly looked muted against his pale skin. "This is ridiculous! You're framing me!" he shouted, his voice cracking with panic. Heavy drops of sweat caught the light, pouring down his forehead and glinting like the very diamonds he had stolen.

Mini pressed the red 'record' button on her laptop, a tiny crimson dot blinking like a warning beacon. She picked up her secondary phone, its screen glowing cheerfully, and prepared to dial the police. "Rohan, confess right now. Return the necklace, and this stays within the family. I will delete this file. Otherwise, I'm sending everything—the video, the pawn shop ledger, the financial trail—to the police this very second."

Rohan stood up abruptly. The violent movement knocked over his heavy wooden chair, which hit the tiled floor with a deafening, sharp *CLACK* that reverberated through the microphones. He looked wild, like a cornered animal, ready to break the camera or run out the door.

Then, disaster struck.

Mini's Eirtel 4G signal, indicated by four solid white bars at the top of her screen, suddenly plummeted. The bars vanished, replaced by a single, pulsing dot. The speed indicator on her dashboard plunged violently from a steady 15 MB/s to a torturous, crawling 100 KB/s. The vibrant, high-definition video of the family froze instantly. Rohan's panicked expression shattered into a mosaic of jagged, colorful blocks. The crisp audio warped, turning the family's shocked

gasps into drawn-out, demonic, robotic glitches that sounded like scraping metal.

“Wait! Don’t disconnect—” Mini yelled, leaning into the screen, but her words lagged, echoing back to her a full three seconds later. She frantically grabbed her phone, her fingers leaving sweaty smudges on the glass. She tried toggling airplane mode, switching networks, desperately restarting the device. She ripped open her balcony door, the sudden roar of the Andheri traffic and the blinding yellow flash of an passing ambulance washing over her, as she held the phone out into the humid night air, begging for a signal.

Ninety agonizing, silent seconds passed. The buffering circle spun endlessly on her screen, a grey ouroboros of defeat. When the call finally stabilized, the video snapping back to a smooth, high frame rate, the little box containing Rohan’s feed was empty. The knocked-over chair remained, but the man was gone.

By the time Mini and the frantic family called his mobile number, the line was dead, offering only the cold, automated voice of the network provider. Neighbors later reported the deafening roar of a modified motorcycle engine; Rohan had sped away into the neon-lit Mumbai night minutes earlier, the stolen diamonds likely tucked securely in his pocket.

Mrs. Sharma cried on the follow-up audio call, the sound of her weeping sharp and clear now that the network had decided to cooperate. Mini sat completely motionless in her dark flat. The only light in the room was the mocking glow of the “Network Problem – Connection Unstable” banner still hovering at the top of her screen. She had done absolutely everything right. The evidence was solid, the confrontation perfectly timed, the trap flawlessly sprung. Yet the

criminal had escaped by the narrowest of whiskers, saved not by his own cunning, but by a catastrophic drop in data.

"Eirtel," she whispered into the stifling quiet of the room, her voice trembling with a potent mixture of heartbreak and boiling rage. The scent of stale chai suddenly made her nauseous. "You just destroyed my very first case."

She barely slept that night. The rhythmic thumping of the ceiling fan sounded like a countdown clock. Frustration boiled inside her, hot and acidic, but as the first pale, grey light of dawn crept over the city skyline, a stubborn fire ignited in her chest. More people out there needed help, and she swore to the awakening city that she would not let a string of failing pixels and a drop in bandwidth defeat her ever again.
