



The Second Chance

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Somewhere in the village of Samastipur, Bihar in India, as the priest finished chanting his *mantras* and signalled the ritual of garlanding to begin, the groom obeyed dutifully. The bride was about to garland the groom and just as he had bent forward, sudden chaos broke out around them. A group of gun-wielding men had barged in the venue and one of them knocked down the groom with the butt of his gun. The fallen groom scrambled to a place where a gun had been kept and grabbing it he too opened fire. Just then somebody attacked the groom from behind. The well-built attacker soon overpowered the groom while pulling out a Rambo knife and with full force brought it down to thrust it in the groom's

chest. With all the life in him, the groom tried to divert this thrust with his bare hands...

Matching his dream sequence, the rapid movement of Rishi's hand had dislodged the glass bowl containing oil from the bedside table and sent it crashing on the floor with a sharp noise that pierced the still of the early morning. Anju woke up with a start and looked at Rishi, who'd now woken up and looked at his bruised forehead in his Goregaon east apartment, in Mumbai. Their 8 year old daughter Riya was also disturbed by this noise and was half-awake but was put back to sleep by Anju.

Later, sitting up in bed next to Rishi, she quizzed him about this latest nightmare. Anju wanted to know if it was the same sequence where in the face of a danger he was not able to move his limbs and run as fast as he could. Anju advised him to do some meditation before sleeping every day. Rishi instinctively understood the undercurrent of sarcasm in her tone but preferred to keep quiet.

Far away in a high security defence establishment at an undisclosed location, a Commanding Officer chaired a meeting with majors and colonels and other high ranking officers. The CO Brigadier Bikram Singh announced that a grave situation had arisen.

“The top-brass in the army has been accused of malpractices in recruitment. An investigation has revealed that the irregularities date back to past ten years. Keeping in mind the shortfall of manpower in army and allied services, the top brass has taken a bold decision. And I need your cooperation in making the mission a success” said the CO to his company. “Your orders for the next stage of operation Shaurya Khoj codenamed SK will reach you soon” and saying so he dismissed the meeting.

When Anju brought her tea in the bedroom she found Rishi trying to look over his head in the full-length mirror. Sipping on the hot tea and pouring through the morning's paper, she asked Rishi to accept the reality. She said, "the baldness has considerably spread and now it cannot be reversed." This had saddened Rishi who at 35 still managed to look a bit younger. He looked lost and felt miserable as his precious hair oil had spilt today morning in that freak accident. Then subtly moving his hand over his protruding paunch he tried to draw it in. Unable to contain her amusement, Anju broke into laughter and chided him for not doing any exercises. She bluntly told him "hey, age is catching up with you and it's time you accept the fact and move on." Pointing at his tummy, Rishi tried explaining, "look here, see? Hasn't it reduced in the past few months? And compared to people at my office this girth of my tummy is negligible" and, he further reasoned, "most importantly, have I not been able to maintain my weight for the past ten years?" Anju ignored him and got up to go into the kitchen. As she left, she warned him to get over and practice some light exercises instead. Had she not given him a could shoulder, he would have liked to tell her that for the past many weeks he took stairs to reach his office on seventh floor and their home on the fifth on alternate days.

A day earlier, Major Garima Kanda along with other officers was handed out an envelope containing a name each that had been rejected in the combined defence services (CDS) interviews a few years ago. They were instructed to begin their secret investigation keeping in mind their undercover status and report their findings within a fortnight.

As Anju emerged out of the bathroom after having a bath and got busy with getting ready for the day, she kept instructing Rishi on the chores that needed to be completed including

dropping Riya off to school. All this while, admiring his half-clad pretty wife, Rishi had gotten up to slip behind her and grabbed her in his embrace. Anju instantly broke away and rebuked him for always harbouring thoughts of physical intimacy. Looking defeated and without putting up any resistance, Rishi had backed off and timidly covered up saying, “it’s been long since we got cosy. I was only trying to remind you...”

Anju again chided him, “you are not what you used to be.” Rishi still tried to protest but didn’t know what to say. He simply resigned, “making love helps burn calories, you know, and should be done regularly without any sort of rationing.” Again, Anju countered him, “let’s please not start it all over again.”

The next instant she turned around and again questioned Rishi about the nasty post on the country’s army on his social media account. “I don’t understand how you could post something so critical against our defence forces? Did you not yourself wanted to be a part of it? He tried clarifying, “look dear, what I have expressed is absolutely harmless and very logical. Did you not see how many people have liked it?”

Anju rebuked him, “you ought to delete such mindless posts lest it got us all into trouble.” She added, “Wait, I understand it all, actually you are jealous of my boss, Major Mohan Bhargava, and which is why you vented out your anger like this.”

Rishi shrugged off her remark and simply began preparing to test his blood sugar with the Glucometer. Anju again looked frustrated and chided him for wasting the precious strips meant for his mother. But unmindful of her remarks, Rishi continued with his antics and looking in the mirror, popped a question, “may I know who’s gifted this pretty necklace you are busy adjusting for so long? “Oh don’t even bother, I have

to contend with a fake one like this. Do you wish to get a real one for me?” Rishi thought better to ignore.

In his car on their way to office, Major Bhargava as usual complimented his secretary Poonam Shroff and told her that she would have to get the TV star’s manager eating out of her hands. The Major then mischievously reminded her about how she was supposed to handle Anju. Saying so, he’d entered the society premises where Anju lived.

On her way out, to her utter displeasure, Rishi told her to convey the message to her smart boss to not honk loudly in the society premises early in the morning as many members had already complained to the secretary about this ritual.

After picking up Anju, Major Bhargava complimented her as well and she seemed to blush slightly. She thanked him profusely for the costly necklace. She told him it was such a huge gift to receive and though she was grateful, it was still a burden. Poonam seated next to the Major, butted in and justified it by saying she rightly deserved it for her hard work.

On his way out to drop Riya for the school bus pick-up he bumped into the well-endowed Kavita Makhija, his attractive neighbour, who was in her jogging suit. They briefly stopped to greet each other and she flirtingly taunted Rishi about only boasting of being a marathon runner in college days yet not joining her for an early morning jog. He promised her very soon he would and moved ahead. He bid Riya a loving good bye after making sure she got seated in her school van.

Enroute to his work, Rishi was joined by his buddy Rafiq as they moved toward the station. While having tea at their favourite tea-stall, Rafiq asked, “Hey, what prompted you to make such an uncalled for post on the nation’s army?” Rishi once again had to explain, “Look bro, it was simply a point of

view about how all trades and vocations are equally important for nation-building.”

The Goregaon suburban train station looked more overcrowded today than usual. But soon as it barely pulled out of the station, the train came to a grinding halt. Precisely at that moment, the locomotive driver’s announcement blared on the speaker asking passengers to shut the doors immediately. Before anybody could react, a flurry of stones was pelted at the compartments.

Outside a large group of young men had taken to *rail-roko* and some of them had resorted to stone pelting. Unfortunately a stone had also bruised Rishi on the temples. Rafiq remarked that certainly his post on the social media had caused the riots and they were here to get you. This made them both chuckle. Seeing blood on his clothes, Rishi instinctively had tried calling up Anju.

Busy in planning which restaurant to visit for the lunch, Anju had seen Rishi’s number flash on the screen. She chose to ignore this call and looked out of the window. Major looking into the top rear-view quizzed her about her sadness. She admitted, “I don’t know what Rishi is up to. I am just a bit nervous about his antics, you know.” Poonam heard her out patiently and comforted her, “dear, excitement and enjoyment in life are all relative terms.

Soon the cops took charge of the situation outside and asked the wounded passengers to alight and proceed for free medical treatment. Rishi was accompanied by Rafiq. On their way out a group of camera wielding media persons pounced upon them to take their reactions to the violence perpetrated by the disgruntled candidates aspiring to join the army. When it was

Rishi's turn he passionately expressed his strong views that a job in defence sector is over-hyped. When probed further, he let it out saying nobody gave a damn about the two percent honest tax-paying civilians losing their lives and spilling their blood while going to work in these sub-human conditions.

By now Anju had seen the news clip which had gone viral and everybody was debating the issue. Rishi's social media article had suddenly been found out shared, trolled and commented upon thousands of times. The Major had also ridiculed the content of the post and rubbished Rishi's byte on TV. She immediately called him up but his phone was switched-off.

At dinner, Anju again reminded him that any innocuous comment in today's times could prove fatal and it was not wise to go and preach wisdom to the world. Taking it with a pinch of salt, Rishi mentioned about his college-class reunion coming up ahead in the week. He asked her if she would like to join him as everybody would be accompanied by their spouses. Anju bluntly denied and asked him to go ahead as catching up with old pals was more important than taking her along. She then told him that Major Bhargava had bagged another important security contract with some celebrity, and she had been made the in-charge for the assignment.

His batch-mates had all achieved material success in their chosen careers. Some of them derived heavenly joy by passing snide remarks and the remaining few showed subtle sympathy to Rishi, who had apparently not made it that big. Just then, something somewhere shone and flashed and the moment in time came to a sudden halt. Everything around him seemed to vanish, as on this pristine path, Rishi took his steps towards Garima Bajaj, his old-flame.

Rishi confided in Rafiq that he was beginning to feel he was a loser-on both personal and professional fronts as he was heading nowhere today. Rafiq advised him to consult the one closest to his heart and offered to take him to the holy *dargha* of the Pir Baba Mohammad Qutubuddin Mastan.

A chance meeting with Garima at the dargah led to further bonding between the two. On one of their rendezvous, Rishi was presented with an opportunity to show some courage and presence of mind when a hurly-burly group of roadside Romeos had come chasing after them. Without thinking for a split second, he spit mouthful of *paan masala* in their eyes and shooed them away. On another occasion, he could impress her with his strength and stamina as he climbed up the Gilbert Hill-the hillock a second time to fetch Garima's satchel. Before leaving that day, Garima mentioned about how life does give all a second chance. Rishi smiled and strongly felt like believing her.

In the past fortnight Rishi had completely transformed from a depressed individual into a lively person. He had now enrolled for the city half-marathon along with Kavita. In his early morning preparation for the marathon, Rishi had completely impressed her with his athletic stamina. One fine morning, on their practice run to the Aarey Colony forest tracks, Rishi was devastated at what lay before his sight. Suddenly stopping in their tracks Kavita had pointed at the clearing ahead of the bushes; it was Anju in the embrace of the Major, her boss. Heart-broken when Rishi desperately sought Garima's company that day, he found she had now vanished into thin air leaving no trace behind her.

Things were never easy from that day on but somehow Rishi seemed to be unaffected and showed grace and composure in handling things at home and in office. Anju had prepared to leave him but not before accusing Rishi of doubting her. After

returning home from office one day, Kaveri handed him out an envelope with his name 'Rishi R. Varma' neatly typed on it. And also post-scribed were the insignia of the Indian Army. It was a call letter to attend an interview for selection to the Territorial Army-an extension of the defence forces that recruited able bodied men up to the age of 42 in the best of their health. Just then little Riya had come running to him holding another envelope in hand. Inside it was his picture with his hands raised jubilantly as he had crossed the finishing line at the city marathon. Behind the photograph were the words, "ready for your second chance?"

Legends:

Mantras: sacred religious chants

Rail roko: Forceful Stoppage of locomotives by agitators

Dargha: Mausoleum

Paan Masala: Flavoured chewing beetlenut

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