

## *The Naive Girl...*

One is generally taught in the early years of life, to not eavesdrop or listen to the private conversations of others. Vijay was aware of this moral code of conduct. But, he could not help it at all when, standing outside the public telephone booth for his turn, he heard the man talking on the phone inside, say, "Try and understand me, my love..." His curiosity was aroused and he inched a bit closer and inadvertently ended up listening to quite a bit of what was a monologue for him. The fact that the telephone booth did not have a door and that no one had bothered to get the repair done, had proved helpful, at that moment.

The man was urging... "Listen to me darling... One cannot get married in the court just like that, any day. It may take 2-3 months."

He paused. "What did you say? You can wait for 2-3 months? No... No... I cannot wait any longer. You meet me at the bus-stand tomorrow at 10 am."

Once again the man paused, and then continued. "Yes, there is a good place to **stay at Rajgarh**. But, at first, we will go to the temple and exchange our marriage vows... Yes... Yes... one can get married this way. It is so easy and simple... Believe me."

Vijay was engrossed in listening to the man's claims. He was going on: "There is no problem of accommodation, dear... I have rented a place at Rajgarh... Do not worry, my love. What is there to be afraid of? I am with you. If you do not come, you will live to regret."

The man was trying to sound confident but there were beads of perspiration on his forehead. He seemed to be desperate. The next instant, he seemed to have relaxed. He was talking once again after a

brief pause. “Now, now... you are talking intelligently at last. No, do not get any belongings or big bags. Just carry your jewellery which you wish to wear at your wedding”.

“What? You surely have some pieces of jewellery??? Why are you so much worried about your father? You are not bidding him goodbye forever... After our marriage, we will come home for the blessings of your parents... Ok... Yes... Will wait for you tomorrow at the bus stand at 10 am”.

The man came out of the booth and walked away. Vijay was nonplussed. He forgot whom was he supposed to call. He found himself walking briskly toward Michael’s house, instead. The man he had heard talking on the telephone did not seem to have good intentions. He was definitely alluring the girl for some nefarious purpose. Vijay had heard of many such villains duping young innocent girls for immoral purposes or for depriving them of their valuables and then vanishing instantaneously. Rajgarh was notoriously known for human trafficking too. Such naive girls were allured by men and taken there and sold.

Michael stayed in his neighbourhood and was quite a big strong fellow, who indulged in petty crimes and even undertook assignments involving beating up someone black and blue. He had often told Vijay that if he ever needed to fix someone up or threaten someone, he could unhesitatingly entrust Michael with the task.

The next day, Vijay and Michael reached the bus stand in the morning. He had heard the man in the telephone booth repeatedly say ‘10 ‘o’ clock...’ Vijay and Michael stood at the very entrance to the bus-stand and were taking a close look at all the passengers entering the bus stand. In a while, a beautiful girl who seemed to be from a very good family and background, alighted from a *ricks*haw.

She was clutching a very small bag in her hands, and had a sceptical look on her face. Her entire demeanour seemed nervous. She paid the fare, and hurriedly walked towards the bus-stand.

“Michael, I think this is the one... She is alone and looks terrified too”, Vijay said.

The next instant, Vijay spotted the man who was talking on the telephone. He too was nearing the gate of the bus stand. Vijay nudged Michael and gestured towards the man.

Michael called out to the man just before the man could enter the bus stand. “Excuse me, Sir... Will you please come this side? Want to have a word with you”.

“I do not know you. What do you wish to talk about?” the man asked, looking at Michael suspiciously.

Michael placed his hand on the man’s shoulder and dragged him towards a corner outside the gate of the bus stand.

“Who are you? What do you want from me?” the man protested and tried to break free.

Michael was too strong, however, for him to be able to release his grip. “Why did you abuse me yesterday?” Michael asked in return, and tightened his grip on the man.

The man was scared now. “When did I abuse you? I do not even know you”. Michael was not listening, however. He was showering the man with blows, using his fists and feet. Michael then caught hold of his forearm and twisted it hard and the man winced in pain. A few more punches and strikes and in less than 3 minutes, the man had slumped on the ground.

Michael left hurriedly and though a few onlookers had gathered, none had the courage to stop him or follow him. The man was bleeding from the mouth and groaning in pain. 'He needs to be taken to a hospital', a bystander suggested. Two men came forth, picked him up... called for a *rickshaw* and took him to the nearby civil hospital.

Vijay, meanwhile, was searching for the girl, inside the area earmarked for the passengers to wait for their bus. He saw the girl standing nervously at a side. She looked quite anxious. Vijay went towards her.

"The guy who was going to come to take you to Rajgarh is not going to come", he told her bluntly.

She was taken aback. "What... what do you mean?"

"That man, who was instigating you to elope with him, could not have been a nice man. He would have certainly made you a victim of the flesh trade that goes on in Rajgarh. But do you not have any sense of your own? Is this the way to get married? Could you not have understood his true intentions?" Vijay was very furious with the girl. He went on and on... "How could you not think about your parents? What would have been the outcome of this on them? Are you that dumb and naive?"

She was simply staring at him, without blinking. He was telling her to go home but she stood stupefied. "He will be in hospital for months and then, police will take him in custody eventually. You go home".

The girl took a step backwards... staggered and broke down into tears. She was sobbing incessantly, and Vijay could not do much but look on helplessly.

Her initial reaction was one of shock but, had given way to remorse now. “Oh, what have I done? How will I be able to go back home?” She had turned her face away from Vijay.

He was baffled. *How could he possibly pacify her, after his outburst?* “Whatever has happened, just put it behind you and go home,” he told her calmly.

“How can I go home now? I left a note behind, informing my parents that I am eloping with a boy, to get married”, and she broke down once again.

“See, you must now face the consequences. Your parents will shout at you or even slap you hard a couple of times... but you deserve that reaction for being so naive and treating your parents in this way. After a few days, they will be fine and so will you be”, Vijay was once again being blunt. “Come, now...”

The girl followed Vijay, as they went outside the bus stand. Vijay called out to a *rickshaw* puller, who stopped on the other side of the road.

“Go... go home now”, he told her. She crossed the road and sat on the *rickshaw*. Vijay was looking at her, and suddenly a thought struck him that *what if she did not go home? What if she tried to jump into the river or take her life somehow to escape the shame and sarcasm which awaited her at home?* As the *rickshaw* was about to pull away, he ran and stopped the *rickshaw*. “I will drop you home, if you do not mind”, he told her hesitatingly. She moved over to one side of the seat and he hopped on. The girl was continuously sobbing. But Vijay felt no pity for her.

“You were about to make such a grave mistake. You could have landed in hell. Your parents will spank you but I feel like slapping you

myself”, he told her matter-of-factly. She looked at him and in between the heavy sobs, she muttered: “Yes, please do slap me. I deserve to be...” Vijay now felt a wave of sympathy rising in his heart for her. He took out a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her. “When you will be thrashed at home, use this handkerchief to wipe your tears.”

The *rickshaw* reached the girl’s house and the girl got down and went inside. Vijay told the *rickshaw* puller to take a U-turn.

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It was Vijay’s 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary today. His daughter Nisha had come down with her two lovely angels, to celebrate her parents’ silver jubilee. His son too had come over, taking a brief break from his training program. He had cleared the Civil Services’ Exams last year, and had chosen to join the IPS ranks. All were enthusiastically immersed in the preparations for the grand celebration in the evening.

Vijay was lazing on the bed, lost in a reverie. His wife had been repeatedly exhorting him to get up and start getting ready. After the fifth call that came from the kitchen, he called out to her lovingly: “Yes, yes... am getting up. Can I have another cup of tea, please?”

“Oh God... One more cup of tea? How many cups of tea have you already had?”

Sangeeta was trying to sound angry but Vijay knew she was not. He smiled to himself, thinking of the 25 years they had blissfully spent together. She had taken such good care of him and of their children and the house. There had been trying times initially, when they had

to struggle to make both ends meet, but she had never complained or cribbed. She had been the optimist one.

“Here, have your tea”, the reverie was broken, and he saw her holding the cup of tea and looking at him fondly. He lovingly looked back at her and gazed into her eyes mischievously.

“Why are you looking at me this way?” she asked.

“Sangeeta, there is something which I have wanted to ask you for about twenty five years now. This question comes to my mind constantly and then it slips out of my mind. But, now that I remember, let me get over with this.”

“Well, do ask...” She was looking at him directly.

“That day, when I had dropped you home from the bus stand, did your parents spank you or not?”

She kept looking at him for a few seconds, and then burst out laughing. “Yes, I was spanked hard. Daddy did not speak with me for 3-4 days, but Mummy’s anger was uncontrollable. She slapped me hard a couple of times and thrashed me mercilessly...”

And Vijay had burst out laughing, looking at the child-like expression on her innocent face.

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