

The Dream



It was not just another winter morning in Tariq's life. Several people including him had waited for this day to come- his father, friends and his old time sweetheart-Neena. While his car sped on the ring road, he could see the horizons of Delhi, spires partially bathed in orange sun and partially shining with shades of morning blue. When the car would leave the highway and merge with the service road, as every day, they were to get trapped in the traffic; meaning it was still an hour from his office. He started imagining the outside scenery smelling of the Berry Patch aroma that emerged from his car freshener and pretended as if it was New York City, the city of his dreams!

He had been to the US several times before; on short term news reporting assignments. Six times to New York City, once in a diplomatic delegation with the Commerce minister of India. In fact, his first trip abroad was to New York

too. The Ferry to Staten Island, Bright LED Digital Signage at Times Square and the Malaysian restaurants in China Town... every bit of the city enamored him. "The city has a sex appeal", he would tell Neena over phone, "and I will marry it before I marry you". Neena would smile and curiously start asking about the Path ride between Jersey City and Manhattan.

The news house that Tariq had been working with for years had a nominal representative office in New York City, handled by one Ramesh Patel, an NRI who actually worked as an independent columnist for Wall Street Journal. Tariq's writing style, a mixture of news analysis blended with a common man's romanticism and down-to-earth perspectives, had always appealed to the masses. His weekly column of the newspaper was gaining unprecedented popularity with every passing year. That was why in spite of several multinational news agencies venturing into India, Tariq remained with the same employer. Not that he never thought for a change; but every time he did, the Editor-in-Chief would come up with a tempting salary hike. "Buddy, would you like to fly to New York? We again need to cover the Indian Entrepreneur summit there", he would say; and escort him to an instantly-planned five-star dinner.

And yes, it was a trip to the same city when he lost his mother. The reporting assignment was too important to miss. Her sudden death was a shock to him; but he could not have flown back even if he could know about her heart-attack three days before she died. The only son in the family, Tariq could not even come for the funeral ceremony. Two years ago when Neena fractured her leg in a traffic accident, Tariq was flying to Seattle the same day for a reporting

assignment. When he learnt about the accident, Neena was in the hospital and he on his way to the airport. “Sweetheart, I am postponing my flight-ticket; and coming straight to your hospital”, he called up from his car. “No, please fly; else you will miss this event the day after...lets meet three weeks later when you are back... I shall be OK”, Neena had said. Realizing the importance of his assignment, Tariq was helpless not to press much.

Things were a bit different last Friday when he arrived at his office. Everyone started clapping when he passed the lobby and his cabin’s glass door was covered with a huge “Congratulations” card. Before he would open the door of his cabin, his assistant reporter stuffed his mouth with a pastry. “You did it Tariq”, she said. Anxious, he hurled towards the greeting card. It read-‘Congratulations sir, on your promotion as the Chief of brand new New York Bureau’. Mr. Sengupta, the chief managing editor rushed towards him, shook hands and said “So, the board decided Tariq, who else than you could be the right person to start our news-reporting operations in New York; that city is all yours now”, he continued, “...and that comes with another great news: the Institute of International Humane Journalism (IIHJ) has decided to award you with their annual title this year. We thought of clubbing the awarding ceremony with our formal public announcement of our New York Operations”. Tariq felt elated.

In fact, Mr. Sengupta was one of the contenders for the New York position. Tariq’s extensive reporting experience in New York City and his public appeal forced him to take up the second option: Europe. Mr. Sengupta did not resist for two reasons: first, Europe was a larger portfolio to handle; and secondly, he knew that New York project had been Tariq’s dream.

The venue for the felicitation ceremony was close to Tariq’s office. His publication house

had spent heavily on publicizing the New York operations. IIHJ office was located close-by too. They were a group of senior journalists from the National Capital Area who had been nationally acclaimed some time. “Locally spread, internationally integrated” was how their tagline read below the logo. IIHJ came up with strategic level openings several times. Tariq wanted to work with them. He had been a big fan of the famous columnist- Mr. Sahani who was the president of IIHJ. Joining the Institute would have given him the opportunity to work so closely with Mr. Sahani. But his intent to join IIHJ was always contested by his friends: “Will you really leave your big company to join this non-profit??? They do not have any foreign trips to offer; not even a proper HR system in place. Are you nuts, Tariq?...” Definitely, his present job was too good to give up. Tariq decided that he would passively work with IIHJ whenever he is relieved a bit from his role at work. That never happened.

His office room was artistic. Beautiful brass artifacts, glass furniture and an impressionistic oil-painting of a Manhattan street covered with thick copper border. The border had real patina on it that resembled the real color of Statue of Liberty. The brass miniature sculptures reminded him of his childhood days that he spent in a tiny shack in Moradabad that pretended to be a house. His father worked in an exporter’s factory, chiseling brass sculptures. Tariq would often come with him to the factory on Sundays and do his homework in the factory’s resting area. His father worked overtime to feed his family of three; and also save for Tariq’s education. The shop-owner traveled the world to sell his products, many a times to New York. That is, perhaps, how Tariq’s passion for the city had developed.

Tariq’s father, an avid sculptor had started creating miniature statues of liberty with molded copper. Impressed by what his father did, Tariq

often came up with this idea expressed vehemently, “Abbu, I want to be a sculptor like you”. His father would reply “No, you little rascal! You should probably do the business of sculptures rather than being a sculptor...”, he continued “you see, son, appreciating the art is one thing; and becoming an artist another... earning your livelihood in spite of being a great artist is not that easy. I think you should study, and be a business man. Your school master told me about emm-bee-aye thing; and you must get that degree”. And he would invariably add “...but stay back in your country, stay close to the soil... we are born here; and must die here...” Perhaps he was completely disillusioned by his own employer’s frequent business trips abroad. How these trips ruined his family life and how materialistic he had become were some things that Abbu was never tired of describing.

When Tariq grew older, he chose a journalism school instead of business. Several of his near and dear ones thought it was a wastage of his father’s hard-earned savings until he got hired by this company with a handsome salary package; directly from the college. Within two years, his Abbu stopped working in the factory; and set up his own with the money Tariq sent to him.

In fact, frequent foreign trips also helped Tariq find the international markets for his father’s art work. That business flourished to an extent that his father had to employ a Manager for the factory and another for the outlet. When they needed loan to buy automatic molding equipments from Germany; Tariq guaranteed it; and the bank readily agreed to release the amount, partly because they were impressed by Tariq’s job and partly because they were awed by the powers of a newspaper.

On weekends, Tariq would typically drive down to his father’s place in Moradabad and spent most of his time in the factory. Especially after

his mother died, his father preferred to spend his weekends in the factory too. They had a small “art room” in the factory. Its setup resembled their old house. No elaborate furniture; but a clean, bamboo mat and a large ply-wood board lying in the center of the room. That was his father’s canvas to draw newer designs for the sculptures. Tariq enjoyed watching his father designing. By the by, over the cups of tea they also discussed their perspectives on the world. Abbu was not educated; but his insights about life were impeccable. Tariq drew most of the basic ideas for his upcoming stories from Abbu’s talks. In short, his Abbu’s factory was the place where creativity spawned in varying manifestations. With time, Visits to Moradabad had become a pattern for Tariq’s creative process.

One fine weekend afternoon, when it started raining in Moradabad, Tariq and his dad sat in the balcony chatting over the sips of hot cardamom latte tea. Enjoying the faint splashes of the drizzles, Abbu asked him “Tariq, is the snow fall in New York as beautiful as these rains in our neighborhood?” Tariq looked around from the balcony. All he could see was houses and their terraces with patches of trees wherever an open piece of land was left available. Across the street downstairs was the cart of the tea vendor which could barely balance itself on the four spoke-wheels surrounded by thick mud. The neighbor’s rooftop was flooded with a black fluid caused effortlessly by the old tire bleeding due to water flowing through it. Not too far from the site was Yadav’s dairy with a semi-open yard for cows and buffaloes. The cowdung leaked through the weeping walls and the smell could sporadically be felt from Tariq’s factory. In all, there was little that could be cited as a “pleasant site” if one was to compare it to the view of Ellis Island from a Manhattan hotel, especially when it was snowing. Tariq did not know how to answer this question. He took a

deep breath and the smell of soil and exposed bricks absorbing the rains passed through his nostrils. He found himself lost in trance; and it suddenly felt like days of childhood to him...how he and his band of friends ran in the rain in spite of mothers shouting at them; and how the catch-me game would soon turn into a pleasant mud-race... “No Abbu, these rains are the most beautiful things on earth” he said. His father gazed at him with amazement.

“Do you want me to park the car at our office first; or should drive directly to the IHHJ auditorium, sahib?” This was Tariq’s driver. They were close to the office now. “IHHJ, please”, was Tariq’s short answer to him. He wanted to steal a few moments more and remain in the memories of his past. Thanks to Tariq’s collection, many of his childhood pals had seen the photos of New York City- the lady with a torch, tall sky-scrappers that touched the sky, the KingKong at a building’s spire. “Tariq, you must go to this city when you grow up. You are meant for it”, his best friend Raju would say. Raju was almost an orphan adopted by a distant uncle who made him work hard in his grocery shop. Tariq’s clout in the band, which was due to his academic standing at school, motivated Raju to finish his college. After that, he joined an adult-literacy NGO of Moradabad as a local fund-raising officer. Later, Raju was able to convince his organization to start a subsidiary in their neighborhood to help orphaned kids. Raju became the head of that wing. They ran playschools for orphaned children and collected public and private money to ensure a minimum of high-school education for the children they pledged for each year. This particular initiative was recognized by the federal government as an ideal model; and the scheme was awarded annual government funds. Statutorily, they needed a Board of Directors to prepare annual strategies for the NGO. Tariq was the first person Raju requested for the Directorship. “We

shall pay you honorarium for your work, please join us, friend”, Raju had written to Tariq. Tariq’s reply was obvious-“Raju, my friend, who else than I would be more interested in this job? As it will be part time and in-absentia, I can easily manage. I come to Moradabad every week, anyway; so we could schedule the Board’s meeting on weekends. I cannot tell you how much passionate I am to be a part of this. Maybe, soon, I can work full time with the NGO. I’ll talk to my boss tomorrow as a formality, and let you know...” He did discuss the matter with his employers; and his boss’s reply was simple-“Tariq, you are a man of very high potentials. Leave such jobs to people who aspire far less than what you deserve. Moreover, our organization’s policy will not let you work simultaneously for two employers”. Raju kept modifying and re-modifying the proposed assignment of directorship to suit Tariq’s employer policies, every time to be rejected. Later, Raju had to hire a professor from Delhi University for this job. Yesterday, when Raju learnt about Tariq’s New York assignment, he immediately called him up and said, “Tariq, now that you have achieved a bigger thing in life, you can easily forget the smaller ones you lost in past...congratulations”. Happiness evinced in each word he said.

As the car moved towards the IHHJ auditorium, which was visible now, right on the middle of the terminating straight road in the front, Tariq’s feeling that his dream was realizing was growing stronger. Neena was driving down to the venue directly from Moradabad. In her last phone call she told that she was bringing a surprise gift for him. Tariq bought her a present almost every time they met. This time was no exception.

By the time they arrived the parking lot, the function had started inside. Tariq got out of his car and stared around looking for Neena. She has just arrived the venue too. They hugged, and hurriedly exchanged gifts. Tariq ran towards the

dais and lost vision of Neena who had found herself a seat among the audience. It was a huge auditorium, almost full. The first row had colleagues, journalists and some white-clad politicians. People clapped when Tariq climbed the steps and was escorted by a host to his designated chair. A large banner on the backstage said: “the Annual IHHJ award ceremony”. Tariq’s press was named as the lead sponsor.

Neena could not wait any further to see her surprise gift. She unwrapped the packet; it was an envelope tied with a ribbon around it. Beneath it was a greeting card with these lines handwritten: “I decided to not take up the New York assignment. I am resigning from my job to join Raju’s NGO. I have also decided to work on Abbu’s sculpture business. Attached is an envelope with air tickets to New York; for you and me. New York is a beautiful tourist spot; and that is what it shall remain to be for us!”

By then, Tariq had spotted Neena in the crowd. He had un-wrapped his gift-packet too. The gift for him was an aerial photograph of the Statue of Liberty. “Freedom”, he murmured and looked at Neena with a smile. She shook her head, as if none of the two was surprised.

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