



## Life Doesn't Give You A Third Chance

### Rathindra Nath Bhattacharjee

Simran has finally left me for good. I realize now, after their departure, that neither my estranged wife, Simran, nor my daughters will ever come back to my life again.

This evening, I lept out of bed and started doing things that I wouldn't have done just before their arrival, if I hadn't received the call from our elder daughter.

"Are you home, dad? Can we come over? "

"Yes. You can." I replied briskly.

Having answered the call, I felt energetic again. I walked upto the mirror to look at my reflection in it. The stranger with the white stubble, in a way, resembled me. I rubbed my hand over it and

stretched it out to the top for the comb. There was what looked like the faintest outline of a smile hovering at the corners of the mouth of the reflection that was getting more familiar each passing minute.

I tried to arrange the room in its former shape before that fatal afternoon. It was a Sunday. The day had gone off well till then. But I felt uneasy at the lull in the atmosphere of our single room which served as the drawing room cum bed room cum dining room. I never bothered about all this. Not even how fast my daughters were growing up.

"Dad. Can you turn towards the other side? I need to change." My elder daughter, Aradhya, who was going out for her tuition class, asked in a matter of fact tone. She didn't mind my presence in the room any more.

Simran, who was lying in the larger of the two beds in the room, was talking to herself about the unfairness of it all. She could never believe that of all people, her husband, the man she had spent the last twenty years of her life with, could be this narrow-minded. Let me get back to what happened that afternoon:

The relative Simran was talking to over the phone on the previous night, wanted to talk to me. Now I rarely talked to her people. In spite of being aware of my aversion, Simran couldn't tell the elderly relative anything. The conversation between us was going on the expected lines with the relative finally beginning to praise Simran to the skies to me.

I phoophooed the idea, chuckling to myself.

"Excuse me, Tarunda. Simran may be an ideal woman to you but she is not my definition of an ideal woman," Simran, lying by my side, could hear me talking in that high pitched voice. She turned uneasily in bed, towards me.

"What is your definition of an ideal woman then?" She heard her doctor brother-in-law ask me.

"My definition of an ideal woman is that she is someone educated, intelligent, hardworking, empathetic.. "

"What do you mean by that? " I was cut short by Tarunda.

"By empathetic, I mean someone who feels for others. When she finds her parents working, she doesn't sit idle. She is always there ready to lend a hand." I stopped to inhale..

"Don't you think, Arya, that Simran has all these qualities?" Tarunda asked.

"Simran?" I couldn't help chuckling again in a nasty way while stressing her name. "No way. She has seen her dad working while her mom lazed around. Like mother, like daughter always."

By the time the conversation ended and I got under the blanket, I found Simran with her back towards him, fiddling with her mobile. I didn't feel like taking her in my arms like I did at times.

The storm had been brewing since then. To cut a long story short, last Sunday afternoon She, was talking to herself aloud, " I could never talk like that to any of your relatives! Do you think you are perfect and we all are pure RUBBISH?" She almost hissed out the last word.

That set off the scene. Half an hour later, Simran was throwing some of her clothes into one of her suitcases. She didn't utter a word. Asked Aradhya to take care of Arshila and scampered out quietly. She didn't bother telling me where she was headed for.

I also remembered how hysterical Aradhya had been towards the end of the scene. She was shrieking at the top of her voice asking her mother to keep her mouth shut.

"Why don't you two stay separately rather than making these scenes almost every day? If staying separate is the only solution, why don't you give it a try, for God's sake?" She asked with tears streaming down her cheeks.

The next day, the daughters were unusually quiet. The three of us had a wordless lunch together. I didn't even know that that was the last time the three of us were sitting down on the floor for lunch. Not for once did I ask my daughters about Simran's whereabouts though I knew that she had called them on a couple of occasions.

As the daylight made way for the dusk, I was surprised to see the girls get up and start dressing. Soon they had two bags filled with their clothes. They bade a hasty good bye to me and the next moment they were gone! Just like that!

I didn't bother to ask them either where they were going. Aradhya called me once in the night to tell me not to worry. That they were fine. She also told me that their mom would visit me soon as she needed to take a few more things from the house and discuss something with me.

By the time Simran had turned up, I had reached my tether. I simply couldn't think anything good about my wife. How our marriage was a big joke, how my wife could never get along with my aged mother and younger sister as well. How she would go violent at me if I did so much as ask her any questions on her return from her parents'. How she often lied to me about from where she got those crazy ideas into her head!

She came back to take a few things a few days after the scene. This evening was the second and last time. She looked quite tired by the time she entered the room. Both Aradhya and Simran got busy extracting things like a mug from here, a tube of Colgate from there, the daughters' dresses and the small images of the idols she had brought from her parents' house.

"Would you like to have anything? Coffee? Snacks? You must be tired coming from somewhere?" I asked hesitatingly.

"Aradhya hasn't been keeping well. She's suffering from dysentery. She won't take anything. "

"What about you?" I thought it best not to ask any questions regarding Aradhya's health.

"Let me make some coffee while you do the packing. And, by the way, you can take any damned thing you want from here.

"I know," Simran answered briefly.

I picked up a few biscuits from the plate I had offered her and ate hungrily while sipping coffee.

"What did you have for lunch?" Simran asked.

"Don't bother." I sounded angry even to myself.

It was precisely at that time that I vented out what had been accumulating in my heart for the last so many years.

"You never treated.. nither mother nor my sister well. In fact, you were mean to both of them. I am sure you never liked my house, my people, anything associated with me. Now on a lame pretext, you are distancing the daughters from me so that you can have the sole rights over them... . Okay. Go ahead." I was going berserk, losing my cool.

"You can say whatever you feel like. Once you pour it all out, you won't have anything against me any more." She was surprisingly quiet.

"Okay, do however you want to bring up your daughters. I won't trouble them any more."

There was a tone of finality and acceptance in my voice. I wanted to shout some more, to tell her that I would never step in their rented house unless I was paralysed or something but changed my mind at the last moment.

As the cab driver honked from outside, I picked up the heavy suitcase and went out, asking the driver to autolift the booty and placing it there. Aradhya had, in the meantime, come out with two more bags. I realized then that during her stay in the house, she didn't utter a single word. Finally, Simran rushed out of the room, carrying a bag with her vanity tucked under her right arm. She cast one longing look back at the house where she had spent the last

twenty years of her life. She bent down to touch my feet as is the custom in the Hindu society. I put my hand in the pocket in spite of myself, and offered a hundred rupee note to Simran. I banged the door shut next, and asked Aradhya to be mindful of the luggage.

I was back inside the house without looking at the retreating taxi even for once.

Half an hour later, while I was looking for the purse in the cabinet of our almirah, I was hit hard by the sight of the empty rack where Simran used to keep her saris and churidars arranged in neat piles. The sight of the empty rack reciprocated the emptiness in my heart. I closed the almirah a bit unmindfully and sauntered across to the other side to lower my tired limbs in the wide spread of the double bed.

Now, back in his lonely room, I am thinking about what could have gone wrong in our relationships, with my wife and daughters. Shouldn't I have been happy with what was given to me, unasked? I realized then that I was blessed with a caring wife and two lovely daughters. Life might not have been a roller coaster ride but it was not an unbearable one either, despite the scenes. It could have been better only if I, if all of us, had been a bit more patient.

Unfortunately, realization only dawns on us when it is too late and there is no hope of rewinding the clock back to undo the damage already done.

## **Rathindra Nath Bhattacharjee**

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