

REWIND AND PLAY

*Hostel diaries of a frustrated
B. Tech*



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THE GLOVE

‘Ladies and gentlemen, a very good evening once again. Your wait is finally over. It’s now time for the highlight of the evening—the Pathbreaker’s Shining Beacon awards ceremony. At PathBreakers, we aim to bring together the best of technology and honour their contributors,’ announced the emcee of the evening in her well-modulated voice.

‘To announce the awards in this segment, I’d like to call on stage, Roberto. For those of you who don’t know Roberto, he is the most handsome, articulate, well-read, multilingual person you would have ever met.’

Onto the stage walked a man with the physique of Sean Connery and the handsome face of Brad Pitt. The only aspect that gave away the fact was that it was a humanoid, and not a human being, was the walk. The walk, though fairly smooth and almost human-like, had a faint resemblance to Michael Jackson’s moonwalk.

‘Hi Elena,’ said Roberto in a heavy baritone and stretched out his hand in a smooth, controlled motion.

‘Hi Roberto,’ replied a smiling Elena.

The audience roared and clapped wildly.

Roberto raised his hand and acknowledged the audience.

Over the years, the awards ceremony organized by the Pathbreak-

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er's Corporation had become a sought-after annual event for leading technology companies, customers and consultants. Every year, the corporation unveiled one of its own products, and also honoured other companies that stretched the boundaries of product innovation. This year their in-house product innovation was Roberto, the humanoid that was developed to deliver superior customer service for several industries.

The people who followed the awards very closely belonged to the world's leading consumer technology companies. Raghav Diwan, who was sitting in the second row of the auditorium at Hilton Times Square, was one of them.

'And to announce the winner of the most innovative consumer product of the year, I would like to call on stage the Founder and CEO of the Pathbreakers Group, Mr Andrew Hartmann,' said Roberto with the ease of a seasoned emcee.

Raghav watched in awe as one of his idols from the business fraternity made his way onto the large stage. For Raghav, it was a dream come true to be in the same room as Hartmann.

'And the nominees for the award are 4D Home Theatre from Alpha Technologies, Wearable Smart phone from VisionTek and Ultra Chef from Utronics,' said Roberto.

Raghav could suddenly feel his heart pound harder. What would he say on stage if he won the award? What explanation could he give to the senior management if he lost? Just then, his phone vibrated and he saw a WhatsApp message from his wife Tarana.

'Has your award been announced?'

He quickly typed, 'About to be. Fingers crossed.'

'Oh my god! All the best. Luv you.'

Hartmann took the microphone and the envelope with the winner's name from Roberto and said, 'I'm pleased to see new companies that have made it to the list and am also impressed with the themes they have covered. Without further ado, I'm going to announce the winner of the award for the most innovative consumer product of the year.'

'It is the Glove from VisionTek,' said Hartmann excitedly.

'I invite Mr Raghav Diwan, Division Head—Consumer Products, VisionTek, to collect the award,' said Roberto, clapping his robotic hands loudly.

Raghav got up from his seat, buttoned his jacket and walked confidently towards the stage to receive the award from Hartmann. As he got onto the stage, he could see the video of the Glove, with the catchphrase 'smartphones are a part of your life, now they're a part of your body' playing on the gigantic screen.

The visual showed a model with her hand next to her ear and moving her lips. Slowly, she revealed a sleek device strapped on her palm. With the song from Carly Rae Jepsen 'Call me maybe' playing in the background, the effect was simply phenomenal.

Since its launch three months ago, the Glove had shown steady sales and winning the award was an endorsement of its growing popularity. The fifteen-second walk to the stage was worth the endless nights that Raghav and his team had put in through the last three years.

The Glove looked rugged and sexy. It was like the finger cut-out gloves that bikers wore. But behind the rugged looks was state-of-the-art wearable technology. The top of the Glove had a flexible touchscreen with conductive polymer compounds. Circuits in the palm were connected to neoprene buttons that allowed the

fingers of the palm to press the button and activate the phone. The Glove was powered by stretchy supercapacitors using ribbons of graphene. The circuitry was completely insulated by a water-resistant material. All these features made it far superior to any smartphone in the market. The upwardly mobile youth had already given the Glove their thumbs up and were driving the majority of the sales.

At the awards dinner, Raghav was the cynosure of all eyes. Industry veterans, the press and even some of the competitors were jostling to get a piece of him. Raghav savoured every moment of the attention.

Raghav suddenly realized that in all the excitement, he'd forgotten to tell his wife that he'd won. He quickly sent her a message on WhatsApp, 'Time to open up the bubbly 😊'

Driving back home to New Jersey from the Hilton, Raghav's mind was filled with thoughts of the future. First was the vice-president position that he had set his eyes upon. Second was the fact that he would be able to comfortably pay for the new house he and his wife had bought in the Princeton suburb of New Jersey. Third may have been a little far-fetched but it was something he strongly desired. It was buying a small sailboat that had recently caught his fancy. He really liked the name 'Peppermint' that his younger son Vishal had suggested.

Raghav and Tarana had been living in the USA for over fourteen years. They had met while working for the same company in Mumbai, India. After a year of working, Raghav went on to pursue his master's in electronics from an American university but they continued to keep in touch. Over time, their feelings for each other grew stronger and they decided to tie the knot.

Tarun Gautam

Raghav received the Summa Cum Laude for graduating with distinction. He was intelligent, but so were the others in his class. What set him apart from his peers was his hunger—an insatiable hunger that possessed him to pursue his goals relentlessly.

Tarana focused on her career in the initial years of their marriage, but she later chose to stay at home to take care of their boys—Angad and Vishal—who were under the age of five. Raghav and Tarana loved the American way of life and considered themselves fortunate to be staying in the US. Both were now green card holders and wanted to give their kids the kind of childhood they could only dream of in India.

Raghav was sitting at his desk surfing through the pictures of the awards night on Financial Times, when the meeting reminder ‘Project Delorian—Review’ popped up on his screen. Rob Stiller, the COO of VisionTek, held this weekly progress meeting to take stock of their product line. The meeting brought together all the teams—product management, sales, quality, production, marketing and customer relations—on one platform.

‘Great job Raghav on the award,’ said Max Wolffe, Head of Marketing and Corporate Communication, giving Raghav a loud high-five.

‘Wow, Raghav! I saw the pictures on Financial Times. They were terrific,’ said Jane, congratulating him.

Rob walked in and took his usual place at the head of the table.

‘Team, terrific win yesterday. Congratulations! I’m seeing reports of sales and customer requests and they all look very impressive. Inquiries since yesterday have seen a 250 per cent jump. So, guys, keep up the good work. But remember, it will be six months of

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very good sales before we are able to break even. Since production is going to go up substantially, we need to be extra cautious about the product quality. Raghav, we need to keep continuing with our tests.'

Raghav nodded his head and immediately typed out a message to his team asking them to prepare a rigorous test schedule for the next three months. The subject of the email was 'Let's not lose focus'.

'Tough day?' asked Tarana as she opened the door for Raghav.

'Yes, had back-to-back meetings.'

'Are the boys asleep?'

'Yes, they slept early today. Let me fix your dinner.'

Raghav ate his dinner, while Tarana sat with him.

'Today I had a chat with papa. He was finally able to use Skype,' said Tarana with a laugh.

'Great. It'll be nice for him to chat with the boys.'

'He was saying that the Archaeological Survey of India wants him to do a project as a consultant in Bhimbetka, Madhya Pradesh. He's interested, but not sure if he wants to get into all the travelling. He said wanted to discuss an idea with you. Call him when you have time.'

Raghav listened to her but didn't respond. He finished his dinner and took out his laptop and started working.

A few weeks later, Raghav received a phone call. It was Jane from

the quality team.

‘Howdy Raghav, I want to have a quick discussion with you. Can we meet for coffee?’

‘Yeah, sure. Give me five minutes, please. Let me send Rob a report first.’

Jane was already there when Raghav reached the office café. Raghav ordered his usual hazelnut cappuccino and walked up to Jane’s table.

Jane looked a bit anxious and got straight to the point.

‘Raghav, I’ve been running some stress tests on the device. I’ve noticed after a certain number of usage hours; the battery starts to spark abruptly. It’s very strange. I think we need to bring this to Rob’s attention immediately.’

‘Hmm. This is absurd. Our stress tests covered twice the number of standard operating hours. So, I don’t understand what could be wrong,’ said Raghav, concealing his worst fears.

‘It’s probably something on the design side of the Glove. The circuits are probably consuming more power and the supercapacitors are heating up. I don’t know, Raghav. This is serious. I’m getting worried.’

‘Why don’t you run tests on some more samples? Meanwhile, I’ll see what I can pick up on my side.’

Back at his desk, Raghav tried to analyze the situation. If this turned out to be a serious problem, then recalls were imminent. Sales were growing rapidly and were about to reach a quarter of a million. The negative press from this news would be catastrophic for the product. Raghav tried to wrap his mind around what was happening. He immediately called for an emergency team meet-

ing.

After a couple of hours, Raghav called Jane. ‘The team is analyzing the situation. I’ve given them a few days to come back with their findings. I’m travelling this week, but I will closely monitor the situation.’

‘Okay, Raghav. Let me know if we should let Rob know,’ said Jane. ‘Let’s wait for the findings.’

When Raghav got back home late in the evening, Tarana was returning with the kids from a play date. He tried to conceal his anxiety but Tarana could sense something was troubling him.

A few days later, Raghav was at JKF’s duty-free bookstore after his return from a meeting with suppliers in Japan and France. He was flipping through the pages of the book ‘Sailing: A Beginner’s Handbook’ when his vibrating phone distracted him. It was Jane.

‘Hi Raghav. Got a call from Max this morning. There’s been an accident with a Glove user. The battery sparked and the user’s palm was burnt. He has been rushed to the hospital. Daily News picked up this news first and called Max for a press statement.’

‘Oh shit! This serious,’ said Raghav. ‘Let me call Rob immediately.’ Raghav called Rob, and as expected Rob asked everyone to reach office for a debrief.

Raghav picked up his bags and rushed out of the airport. Though Raghav did not notice, this incident was all over the airport screens. The channels were having a field day playing the news in a loop. ‘Breaking news: Young boy critical after smartphone catches fire in his palm,’ screamed the headlines.

Raghav took a cab to the office in the city. He called his team to

check on their findings. The bad news was that there was nothing conclusive yet on the root cause of the fire. Once in office, he dashed towards the elevator and then ran straight to the CEO Greg Duvall's conference room on the twenty-third floor. Just before he entered the room, he WhatsApped his wife, 'In office, something serious.'

Raghav had been to the executive floor several times in the past, but today was very different. The walls of the executive floor had beautiful wildlife photographs taken by Greg from his several visits to game reserves such as Kruger National park, Masai Mara and Serengeti. On an ordinary day they made for an interesting conversation, but today they were an avoidable distraction.

It was 7.30 a.m. when Rob and the others entered the conference room. Rob walked in and announced that Greg was travelling and would be joining over a call.

Rob quickly dialled Greg. Greg got on the line with a deep 'Hello.' 'Morning Greg, it's Rob. I have the entire team with me. After I spoke to you, I called the Daily News and told them that we'll issue a press statement only after our meeting.'

Greg spoke in his usual calm voice, 'Team, it's very unfortunate that this has happened. As much as we did not want this, the reality is we now have to deal with it. We'll need to quickly come up with an action plan. So, let's go around the table to take suggestions on how we can tackle this.'

The meeting didn't last long. Greg ended the call, asking everyone but Rob to leave.

Everyone huddled outside the conference room sharing their anxiety. Most people were stuck to their phones, checking the Internet and social media platforms.

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Raghav was also checking his phone when Rob called him aside.

‘Raghav.’

‘Yeah, Rob.’

‘Greg’s message is that you’ll need to leave VisionTek.’

He paused for a couple of seconds and added, ‘With immediate effect.’

There was a short pause. Greg waited for Raghav to respond. When that didn’t happen, he continued, ‘I hope you understand. In the current situation, managing the media is very important and we have to show that we are taking tough steps. You’ll get a severance package but avoid talking to the media or else there may be legal trouble.’

Raghav had nothing to say. He simply nodded his head, turned around and pressed the button for the elevator.

Though he’d been in corporate America for over a decade and had seen several lay-offs of colleagues and friends, this was the first time he was facing the situation. He felt as though he was leaving a dentist’s chair after an extraction that caused no pain during the process but had left a dull throbbing pain thereafter.

The elevator door opened and a few executives got out and smiled at him. Raghav smiled back faintly, as if on autopilot. As the door closed, his eyes were drawn to a photograph on the wall opposite the elevator.

It was a picture of a lion sitting low in the Savannah, stalking an unsuspecting wildebeest.

INVITATION

Raghav quietly collected his supplies in a carton and walked out of his cabin. He moved across the floor and saw a few puzzled faces and a few sympathetic ones. Some of them wore a veneer of sympathy, but they were probably happy to see him go. Raghav took a cab home. His mobile phone was lying on the seat next to him but he didn't have the guts to pick it up to read the news. He already knew what the headlines would be. Division head of VisionTek fired.

'I was following the news. Raghav, this is really bad,' said Tarana.

'Yes. Only worse. They've asked me to leave.'

What? This is unbelievable!

'It was expected. Don't think they had a choice,' said Raghav, smiling wryly.

Appearing to be in control, he went through all the details with Tarana.

Later that night, as they were about to sleep, Tarana held Raghav's hand.

'Don't worry. Things will work out,' she said, in a reassuring voice.

'Yeah. Let's see.'

Over the next few days, Raghav made a few more trips to the

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office to complete the exit formalities. On one of his trips he met his friend Will Stanton, from the design team. Raghav and Will had worked together on several projects and shared a good rapport.

‘Raghav, I met Peter Semenov from legal yesterday. There’s talk the boy may sue VisionTek for a couple of million dollars. VisionTek may use the media to malign you and get the attention away from them,’ said Will, looking very concerned.

‘There was a whole team behind this project, not just me. So, why go after me?’ said Raghav, swallowing hard and rubbing his chin nervously.

‘You were the poster boy of the project. Going after you makes good media news and shifts the blame from the rest. As a matter of fact, it’s quite simple,’ said Will.

Raghav simply stared blankly at Will. He knew the cost of a legal battle was steep and with no job in hand he knew a catastrophe loomed ahead of him. He wondered if he should put his Lexus and Land Cruiser for sale in the used car market

One Sunday, Raghav was scanning his mailbox for job offers when the phone rang. It was Harpreet. Raghav and Harpreet were friends since their graduation days. Harpreet too lived in New Jersey. Though they had come to the US around the same time, their work lives had kept them so busy that they hardly met.

Raghav was fairly certain Harpreet would have read the news about the Glove debacle. So, he wondered if he should take the call. He was about to take the call, but then stopped himself.

‘Raghav, your phone’s ringing,’ said Tarana.

'Yeah I know.'

'Aren't you going to answer it?'

'No.'

'Who is it?'

'Harpreet.'

Another month passed, but Raghav still had no job offers. Raghav always believed that his skills would be in great demand; so, when there were no job offers, it began to affect his self-esteem. Every single day that he was at home was like being in a prison alone with the burden of his failure. Every time he tried to pull himself out of this state, a household bill would appear from nowhere and push him back into the abyss of despair.

Tarana was worried about Raghav's behaviour. He seemed to be turning into a recluse. He was also very cold towards Tarana and the boys.

Another month passed and the situation was still the same.

Raghav got back home one evening after meeting an old colleague.

'How was the meeting?' asked Tarana.

'Well, he says he'll do something. So, let's see. He says the problem is that the entire incident was in the news. It is stuck in people's memory and that will take some time to fade.'

'Why don't you try shifting to another industry? You don't have to work in electronics design all your life. Why don't you try something else even if the money is a little less?'

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‘No, I won’t do that,’ Raghav retorted angrily. ‘I don’t want to do anything else. I want to go back to this very industry and clear my name.’

‘But Raghav, you are unnecessarily punishing yourself. Don’t do this.’

‘Tarana, you don’t understand. Let me sort this out my way.’

Tarana could see that the discussion was not going anywhere, so she left Raghav alone.

At dinner, she spoke to him again.

‘Your dad wanted to speak to you. Give him a call when you have time.’

Raghav asked Tarana, ‘Why don’t you take the boys and go to India and spend some time there?’

‘Yes, I wanted to spend some time with my parents. But I don’t think now is the time.’

‘On the contrary, I think now is the time. I need some time to myself. Having you guys around is not helping me concentrate.’

‘Are you serious? I don’t know what’s happened to you.’

‘Sitting at home and seeing all of you around me is only adding to my pressure. Only when I’m alone will I be able to concentrate.’

‘Okay, fine. If that’s what you want.’

After a few weeks, Raghav dropped off Tarana and the boys at JFK and was returning to New Jersey when Harpreet called again. Raghav didn’t answer. There was too much on his mind.

Raghav got near Brooklyn Bridge and parked his car. He then walked on the bridge. The last time he had done this was when he

had come to the US for the first time. Time had flown by so fast since then. The country and the city had given him everything. But today, he was at a crossroads. He was without a job, had a tarnished reputation and had loans to pay off.

Raghav kept walking on the bridge aimlessly watching other people. Just then he realized that he had missed his Prozac dose. He turned around and walked back to the car, hoping to find some water. Tarana usually stocked the car with everything one could possibly need for a road trip. Luckily, he found a sealed water bottle. He popped the anti-depressant capsule and sat in the car for some time.

As he was parking the car in the garage, he remembered that Tarana had asked him to call his dad about two weeks ago and he'd completely forgotten about it. He decided to call him immediately.

'Hi, papa. How are you doing?'

'I'm fine. Hope you are keeping well. Don't be too worried about your job. You will get one very soon. Tarana told me that she's coming to India. Have they left for Mumbai?'

'Yes, they have. I just dropped them a while back. Tarana will call you when she reaches her parents' house in Mumbai. She was telling me you wanted to speak to me.'

'Oh yes. Nothing very important, just one of those things. You know since retirement I've been thinking about how to make children more aware of our history. I don't think today's children appreciate our ancient history at all. Today's children just want to play video games and watch movies. You remember when you were very small and I was working at the Bhimbetka rock shelters near Bhopal. You were so fascinated by the 30,000-year-old rock

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paintings that you started drawing them on our house walls. After all these years of working at the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), I wish I could teach young minds more about our heritage. I was wondering if you have any ideas on how this can be done. I was thinking if we could create an interesting online game that teaches kids our history. It may be useful to them.'

'Ah papa. I don't know. I don't think there's much of a market for these ideas. People are not interested in finding out what happened 1,000 years back.'

'Okay, but do you know anyone who has used technology in the field of archaeology?'

Raghav now sounded irritated.

'Papa, I work in consumer technology and have no interest in what archaeologists do. I suggest you take up the assignment that ASI is offering. I'm sure it will be a good experience.'

'Hmm... Maybe you are right. Let me speak to them,' replied his father concealing his disappointment.

Another month passed and still nothing. Raghav even tried to get in touch with the office of Hartmann, the CEO of the Path-breaker Group, but there was no response. His telephonic interactions with Tarana had also started to dwindle.

One evening, Raghav was tired after surfing through the job sites, when he decided to check his email. He was surprised to see a message from Nafisa, a batchmate from his engineering college days.

'Hi, Raghav! Long time. There are quite a few folks from our batch now in New York and we were planning a get-together on

April 9. Hope you will be able to make it.’

Though Raghav had accepted Nafisa’s friend request on Facebook a long time ago, there was hardly any communication between the two. Harpreet was the only batchmate from graduation that he was in touch with. Though he remembered Harpreet mentioning that Nafisa was in Boston, Raghav had never met her. The latest he knew about her was that she ran a data analytics company in Boston, was recently divorced, and had no kids.

In normal circumstances, Raghav may have made the effort to attend the get-together but with his current situation he had absolutely no interest in it.

A couple of days later, Raghav was browsing through the messages on his phone when he came across one from Harpreet.

‘Hey, Raghav. We are planning a get-together on 9th April. Hope you’ll be able to join. Look forward to seeing you there. Cheers, Harpreet.’

Raghav’s assumption that not having Tarana and the kids around would help him concentrate on getting a new job was turning out to be false. The disciplined life that he led as a corporate executive was now a thing of the past. The only semblance of a structured life was thanks to the maid who managed the cooking and the cleaning. But that only helped in organizing the physical world around him. His mind was still in a state of total disarray.

After two weeks, when Raghav was finishing breakfast and getting ready for the meeting with Paul Schuller, the technology head of mobility at RakTech, he saw a meeting request from Nafisa. He was already running late and was very irritated by this distraction. Nonetheless, he quickly clicked on the message.

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Howdy Folks,

Time to relive the memories of those good old days.

Don't miss the evening of your life. So, hurry up and accept the invite.

Cheers,

Nafisa

A part of Raghav was telling him that it would be depressing to attend a do where he would probably be the only unemployed person. Another part of him wanted this repeated distraction to end. He was getting late for the meeting and didn't want to lose focus. In his frustration, he clicked the request and it got accepted. He quickly shut down his iPad and rushed out to take the subway.

The meeting did not last long. Paul was kind enough to meet Raghav because they had collaborated together earlier. Though Paul genuinely felt that Raghav would be an asset to his organization, he was candid enough to tell him that the company was not hiring for the next six months.

In the subway, on the way back from the meeting, Raghav opened his iPad to check for any replies from his network. He wanted to check the date and time of the meeting request from Nafisa that he'd accepted.

He read the subject line, 'LOL Evening,' and somehow it felt so typical of Nafisa.