

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

August 2015 Vol. 6, Issue-4



6th Year of Open Access

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Marathon

Akhil Kakkar

I see Sebastian Walker, Manager of Staff Welfare, walk into the office gym towards me. He's looking a bit shabby. Shirt loosely tucked in. Tie crooked. Not wearing his coat. It could be intentional though, to catch me off-guard with his scruffy appearance.

I increase the speed on the treadmill I'm running on. A little exhibition of physical authority always helps.

'Need twenty minutes of your time,' Sebastian says.

That is smart of him. He is ambiguous about why he needs my time. It can be something as casual as an employee survey form I need to fill. Or it can be about a more sensitive topic, like Serghei. Yes, the incident with Serghei is still fresh. You can smell it in the office air.

'Sure. You know how important running is for me. I'll be in my office in an hour. Let's meet then?' I say.

'No problem, nothing too urgent. See you in an hour.'

* * *

Sebastian's walking towards my office now. I see him coming. He's five minutes early. He's made an effort to wet his dark brown hair and comb it back. Slick.

The lines of annoyance on his forehead give some character to his horse-like face. I see he's wearing his tailored power-suit. He's fit, so I can't deride him about his weight. It's really easy winning a conversation with the fat guys at work, mocking the irony of fat salesmen selling medical equipment to hospitals. Not in Sebastian's case though.

I understand it's not about an employee survey form after all. But I have to be in control. Business is business.

'You didn't have to fire Serghei. We both know that was unnecessary. A warning would've done. He was one of the good ones. He shifted from Romania just a year ago, and had finally settled into being a Londoner.' Sebastian pulls out a chair and sits on it without breaking eye contact with me.

So I was right, it was about Serghei. But I felt it from the beginning.

'He lied. He lied on his resumé, he lied every day,' I say. I know this is going to get a little ugly.

'He was colour-blind. They don't allow the colour-blind to drive in Romania, so he couldn't learn how to drive. Give him another six months, he'll get his British driving license. He speaks perfect English, his parents spent all their savings to pay for his British-School-at-Bucharest tuition. Most of the sales guys here have degrees in liberal arts or management, but Serghei

studied radiology, and he needs to pay off his student loan. He's the prime bread-earner of his family now. Everyone has to make a living Patel,' Sebastian says.

'My first name's Divyanshu. It's not an uncommon Indian-origin name. It has the same number of letters as your first name - Sebastian. You Staff Welfare guys should know better than to call me by my last name just because it's easier to pronounce. I don't call you Walker,' I reply. And it was this easy to get an upper hand.

'Sebastian, the job description very clearly stated that candidates needed to have their own cars and valid driving licenses. Do you realise that we would've lost the St. George's Hospital order if I hadn't done some last minute fire-fighting? You put yourself in my shoes. The Chief of Radiology of one of the largest hospitals in London sees one of your sales staff carrying a scaled model of an MRI machine on his lap in the tube on the Northern Line.' I show Sebastian a cutting from an old copy of "The Independent", the 20 cm x 15 cm advertisement we had taken out for the job position about seven months ago.

'The sales staff mostly carry brochures. This was the first time Sergei was carrying a scaled model. You should've let him off with a warning. Serghei was a good salesman. When he travelled for work, he paid his bus, taxi or train fares from his own pocket. He had the least overhead expenses in our entire sales force. He was a man with morals, a good guy, and a really good salesman.' Sebastian shows me a printed spread-sheet of Serghei's expenses.

'Anyone who lies does not have morals. He had the cheapest overheads because he didn't want his lie to be caught,' I say.

'But Serghei was colour-blind. We could've made an exception for him,' Sebastian says.

I tried to avoid this part before. But Serghei being colour-blind was Sebastian's trump card in this conversation and I knew he would bring it up again.

'Sebastian, I was born with congenital hearing loss. I have been wearing a hearing aid since I was a young boy. I have never complained or lied about it. And today, I am Branch Head, and I'm just 33 years old. If I can make it, even when I'm half deaf, Serghei can make it, even if he can't tell sky-blue from turquoise.' I give Sebastian a smile, which I try not to make too sly.

'That was rude,' Sebastian says.

'The world is rude Sebastian, don't be naïve. Look at me. I'm on the treadmill running at 15 kilometres an hour for two hours every day. I'm fit and doing well for myself. You think people weren't rude to me when I was young? The kids in my school played a game where they tried to fit in as many cuss words in a sentence without me noticing it. In college, my flatmates used to wake me up in the middle of the night by honking a blow-horn near my ear. I had to record every lecture I ever attended. I fought and struggled until I could make enough money to buy one of the most expensive hearing-aid devices in the world. And now I'm the Branch Head of the company that makes the same hearing aid.' Both to prove my point and show-off my expensive hearing aid, I fiddle with my hearing aid's volume wheel.

‘All I’m saying is that you shouldn’t have just suddenly fired Serghei. Not in this economy. Do you know he’s a janitor at the Fit Energy Gym now? He’s probably looking for another job on the side, but he has bills to pay.’

‘You never have a recession in the healthcare and medical equipment industry. That’s the beauty of it. It’s been a week since he’s been fired and if he hasn’t got a job by now it just proves that he’s incapable. I can find a job in two days, there’s a huge demand for people who have experience in selling medical equipment,’ I say.

‘Sometimes I wonder what kind of person you are,’ Sebastian says.

‘I’m a good person. We raised two hundred thousand pounds for testicular cancer through our last marathon. Tomorrow, I’m expecting it to be doubled. Now if you can excuse me, I need to go to the gym again to warm up my legs for the big marathon tomorrow.’

* * *

I wake up with the aftertaste of chloroform. In my business you get to know how chloroform tastes. I notice that I’m strapped onto a surgical operation table. It’s a high-end operation table with patient-repositioning and five wheels. The kind our company makes.

I see him sitting in the dim corner looking at me. He was easy to recognise. Short light-brown hair barely managing to be middle-partitioned on his head. A bushy untamed beard that is now somewhat the length of the hair on his head. It was difficult to comprehend where his sideburns ended and his beard started. Short and stout. It was Serghei.

‘Where’s my car?’ I ask him, trying to surprise him with my first question after gaining consciousness.

‘It’s still parked at the office complex. I mean your office complex. I got to you when you left the building.’

I look around. I notice that Serghei’s been busy picking expensive medical equipment from our storage. I recognise our High Frequency Electrosurgical Unit Diathermy Machine, used to cauterise blood vessels. Cauterising is the process of burning the body to stop severe loss of blood.

He probably has a big vehicle. A van.

Serghei has also nicked an Intravenous Therapy Infusion Pump Machine. A state-of-the-art new-age machine that digitally controls the volume of multiple I.V. drips.

I can see what is coming. I try to force myself from the belts I’m tied in. An effort in vain.

‘I didn’t know you could afford a house with a basement,’ I say to Serghei, trying to disrupt his thoughts.

‘I’m house-sitting for my aunt. She’s gone to America for ten months.’

'I have a marathon tomorrow. We're raising money for orphans. You know it would be a substantial amount. And I know you're a good person. So let me go and we'll forget about this incident,' I say.

'Fuck the marathon! You know that I was one of the top three salespersons this year? I could've easily qualified for a bonus and a commission. I was planning to pay for expensive driving lessons and then to buy a car. Yes, expensive driving lessons. Not a house or paying off my student loan. This was because I was made for sales. And you took it away from me. Even when I was one of the best performers. I made the company money, I made you money, and you took it away from me.' Serghei switches on the diathermy machine, to heat it up.

He is speaking in a loud pitch. I can see his fingers tremble. His anger is taking over.

Serghei gets up and pulls an old-fashioned chainsaw from under the operating table. I know that I'm about to be amputated.

'Is there anything I can do to stop you from doing this Serghei?' I say.

'Just when I thought you could not be any more desperate, you surprise me. Well you know what the answer is. It's a clear no,' Serghei says.

I start panicking in terror. I shake my body vigorously to try to get out of the belts I'm tied in. Even though I am very well aware that I won't be able to break them. I give up after a short struggle.

'Arms or legs?' I say.

'Legs. I'm not wiping your ass.'

'You'll get caught,' I say.

'I probably will. But it will take the authorities some time to find out where I am currently living. Also, if I get caught and people know what I did to you, I'll be somewhat of a celebrity.'

'You know I can kill myself if you don't cut my arms off?' I say.

'If you do kill yourself, I still win.'

And then I ask Serghei an important question.

'Awake or asleep?'

'Well just to add some fun, I initially thought of cutting your legs while you were awake. But I realised it's next to impossible. Unless I tie you down completely. I mean every inch of you tied down so tight that you can't move a muscle. The problem is that even if you shiver with fear I may cut the wrong vein. I'm a salesman, not a doctor,' Serghei says.

'Anyway so I finally decided to amputate you while you're asleep. It's not about this pain anyway. It's not a one-off pain you recover from.' Serghei pulls the drawer under the side-table and takes out a syringe and a bottle of general anaesthesia.

‘You know what the best part is, when you’re colour-blind, blood doesn’t look as repelling as shown in the movies. It just looks like muddy water.’

* * *

I wake up and notice that I don’t feel my toes, or my knees. My legs are now only one and a half feet long. Serghei cut both my legs a couple of inches above my knees. The convex circumference of my chopped off legs are connected to a network of I.V. lines, fluids passing through them constantly.

I look at the time on the table clock, 10:30 in the night, Wednesday. I probably have been highly sedated for the past six days. I have very little recollection of what happened. It’s like a hazy nightmare you know you’ve had but you can’t recollect.

After an hour I hear footsteps. Serghei comes down the stairs.

‘It’s time,’ he says unoriginally.

Serghei carefully pulls out all the I.V. lines attached to my amputated legs. My legs are like the small cylindrical containers our company fills with oxygen and sells to paediatric clinics.

‘Get used to your new life,’ Serghei says.

He pulls me up the stairs and out to his van. We drive for about half an hour when I see the neon sign glowing – “Fit Energy Gym”. He unlocks the entrance door and switches off the security alarm. He pulls me out of the van and into the gym.

He drags me towards one of the old treadmills in the gym and straps my chest onto the safety handle of the treadmill with leather belts. He places my amputated legs in a chair with no wheels. With another set of leather belts, he ties my amputated legs to the chair so that I can’t move. I am facing the safety handle, my chin a few inches away from it. Serghei takes my arms and places them perpendicular to the safety handles of the treadmill. He then ties my outstretched arms onto the safety handles.

‘You have no idea how hard it is to get a chair with no wheels in a commercial setting these days,’ Serghei says.

I then see Serghei tampering with the treadmill’s belt-guide. It looks like he knows what he’s doing.

He brings his hand towards my face and rolls the volume wheel on my hearing aid to maximum. My hearing aid is set so loud that I can hear the humming of the ceiling lights.

Serghei switches on the treadmill and starts increasing its speed. The belt of the treadmill starts moving fast and unevenly over the tampered belt-guide. The treadmill starts whining very loudly. With every screech there is a little explosion in my head. A recurring painful explosion.

‘Every day at 12, when the gym’s shut down for the night and I’m done with the cleaning, I’m going to bring you here Patel. This is going to be your marathon from now on.’