

## WHERE DO YOU WANT TO GO TODAY?

The infant he saw in the Police Station continued to haunt Vishu. Initially he was not sure if it was a boy or a girl, but as the conversation caught momentum he found out that all this fuss was because the baby was a girl. If only things were simpler he would have had quick fix solutions. He would offer them instantaneously. But life was more complicated than just that. Possibly it was just as well. It would help him avoid taking impulsive decisions, which he might have to regret at leisure.

Vishu and Nayana had been thinking of adopting a baby for the past three years. There was a tragic middle-class contradiction in this. Soon after they got married, they had decided that they would never have a baby. But as both approached forties, they seemed to have a change in mind – needless to say that it was a bit late for them to do something on their own. Since then, they have been discussing the plan amongst themselves, but as usual, they have never had the courage to take a stand. The moment they thought they agreed on something, they would start questioning the decisions over and over again and get into an introspective spiral.

This was possibly because they had got into the habit of staying with each other and anybody else in the family appeared to be an intrusion. But a child after all, was a child. When Vishu saw this cute girl in the Police Station, he literally felt like picking her up and taking her away. There she was – just a day or two old, hardly big enough to fit into his palms, unaware of the surroundings, smiling away – not even knowing the future in store for her! But Vishu did not have the courage to intervene at that moment. He was an outsider to whatever was happening and could at best be described as an interested observer.

The atmosphere in the police station was not to his liking in any case. The lighting was dim, and there was a strange element of fear around the Station. It was possibly the power of the uniform that made Vishu uncomfortable. He had been experiencing this week after week, ever since there was a burglary in their house about six months ago. Both Vishu and Nayana used to go for work and a lock on the main door was a necessary ornamentation most of the time. Surprisingly the burglary had happened on a Sunday when both of them had gone off to attend a family wedding. They had lost a whole host of electronic items – the television, the video recorder, the music system and a good collection of cassettes and CDs of hindustani music.

Though the surroundings of the police station were familiar because of the regularity of his visit, every time Vishu came, he would see something unusual happening. As he patiently waited there for Goud – the Station House Officer to have a look at him, he saw an intriguing story unfold in front of him. He would want to get into the thick of the conversation and action, as everybody else in the

Police Station did, but held himself back – he was the only “sophisticated” person around – the rest had come from the slums.

As he entered the station, he saw that there was a heated argument going on about a baby. It took some time for him to focus on the surroundings and on the topic that the people were discussing. As he got used to the ambience, he saw that there was a baby placed on a small mat on the floor. There were large numbers of people standing near the SHO. Apparently they’d all come from a nearby slum. All of them were talking in loud voices and it was difficult to understand what they were discussing. But as Vishu got used to both the light and the sound of the station he could gather bits and pieces from the conversation.

Vishu had known Goud for a while now. Though, he was not the SHO on the day the burglary happened in their house – it was another officer by the name Krishna Reddy – Goud had taken over in about a week’s time. Vishu remembered - that on the day of the burglary – soon after they discovered that there was a housebreak – he had done everything a good citizen had to do. He immediately came to this police station and had filed an FIR with Krishna Reddy. Within a week of the burglary, he found that Krishna Reddy was transferred to the control room. That was a day of gloom in the Station – Reddy was of course disappointed – how the hell could they transfer efficient and honest people to the Control Room? After all he was the person who would have cracked Vishu’s case in a minute! But he had now been assigned the job of listening to phone calls and wireless conversations. In fact, Reddy went to the extent of telling Vishu that this occurred in spite of the senior officers having been taken good care of to avoid such a disaster!

Now that six months had past since the episode happened, Vishu and Nayana had reached a state where they could make fun of that day! In fact, Nayana had got a good lot of jewellery from the bank locker for the wedding – just because she could not make up her mind in the Bank as to what she wanted to wear! Luckily the burglars had just taken the electronic items all wrapped in a bedsheet and a pillow cover. A part of the jewellery was very much in the unlocked cupboard – which had not interested the burglars. And Vishu never failed to mention it in his official meetings – particularly when he talked of specialisation and core competence!!

Goud - the new SHO was much younger and quite a friendly chap if he was in a good mood. In fact Goud was quite appreciative of the fact that on that day - Vishu and Nayana had patiently waited outside the house till the police came and took stock of the situation – including the paraphernalia of sniffer dogs and forensic and fingerprint experts. Vishu also meticulously had mentioned the brands, the identification numbers of each of the equipment that was lost using data on the warranty cards and bills that he had retained carefully. Ever since this episode happened, Vishu started going to the

police station on Saturdays to find out if there was any information on the lost assets. While over a period of time they had replaced most of the lost items with newer and better models, Vishu found the weekly visit to the police station to be a fascinating and addictive habit.

In the station there were two men and a woman arguing with Goud. One of the constables on the night beat had caught the woman early in the morning trying to drown the baby in the sea. Now they were trying to sort out and see how the matters could be settled. The woman was insisting that she was in fact trying to get rid of the baby because her husband was a drunkard and therefore the baby had no future whatsoever. He would either abuse and push her to prostitution or kill her. She would rather get rid of the baby now than later.

Vishu was shocked at the type of exchanges that were taking place – but Goud seemed to be unruffled. They were all – including Goud – using foul language with a generous sprinkling of four letter words (the problem with being a police officer is that you'll have to talk the language of criminals – he'd once said in the past). Goud first slapped her in the face before he started giving her a piece of his mind.

"Why the hell do you fuck around have babies if you want to kill them?" Goud shouted. The woman was no less aggressive – she was also hurt and angry. "That's because I have no control over my body. Moreover, I thought it would be a boy". She made two points both absurdly unrelated! "And this bastard will push her to prostitution if she grows up under his control. She's better off dead than alive."

It was now her husband's turn to slap her. "How dare you call me a bastard, you bitch. I tell you sir, I think this is not my baby – she must have been flirting around with all sorts of men. No wonder she wants to get rid of it. I am quite willing to bring the baby up, what if she is a girl." The husband said. Now it was Goud's turn to slap the man. "You shut up", he said. "You are drunk most of the time and don't even know whom you are fucking around. How could one trust you to take care of a baby girl. Forget it. We will send her to an orphanage where she'll be brought up in a more decent atmosphere than your slum."

In the process of his visits to the station in the past six months Vishu had seen several such cases, where the complainants were man-handled, but today seemed to be the ultimate. Vishu had never seen Goud being personally involved beating up the complainants. Vishu wondered why such things continue to happen in the police station. Couldn't these matters be dealt with in a much more sober and friendly manner? It appeared to him that Goud never even tried to understand what the problem was. He felt like intervening in the process. Vishu almost got up at this moment to say that he was

willing to take the baby. This he thought was of the best way of cooling the situation. He also thought that unless an impulse takes you over, the decision to adopt a baby would never be fulfilled. But he was not sure that he could elevate the conversation to a more decent level where these issues could be discussed in a cool headed manner. Secondly, this was not all that simple.

Vishu was trying to compare the behaviour he had seen from Goud in the past six months with his behaviour this day. There seemed to be a sea of difference. Goud was a jolly fellow when he was not too possessed by his job. Unfortunately on the job, he seemed to have very few moments bereft of tension. But still, Vishu had never seen him behave in (what Vishu thought) such an inhuman manner. During the initial days when he started his Saturday sojourn to the Police Station the people there were quite confused as to why Vishu came there so often. But over a couple of months, they got so used to his Saturday morning visits that they would actually miss him if he failed to turn up. On one of the days when Goud was in a good mood – he even went to the extent of telling Vishu that the problem with his burglary case was that he had given too much detail in the FIR! Vishu was of course shocked. But the Goud had a different argument – “If only you were not so clear and specific about the brands you lost, we would have replaced it with something else – after all we keep confiscating something or the other everyday and several things remain unclaimed in our godowns!”

Vishu wondered how Goud would continue to deal with this case. It was after all a case where a small human being was involved and would not be as simple as music systems and televisions. Either way, it was necessary for him to find a way out for the baby – he could deal with the parents in a befitting manner. But Goud looked totally unconcerned.

At that moment the baby started bawling. The mother immediately withdrew from the scene and picked up the baby. She went to a corner and started breast-feeding the baby as if nothing had ever happened. Goud called the man and slapped him once again and asked him to go back home. He left the place as if he had come there on a social visit. Goud also shouted loudly at the woman and told her that he’d put her behind the bars, if he ever heard anything about the girl being discarded. The woman seemed to attain instant *nirvana* the moment the baby started suckling.

Vishu was totally confused and was also fuming within. He thought that these people deserved better treatment. He walked up to Goud and did tell him in as many words that he ought to have treated them better. “You obviously do not think that this is the end of the story, do you? I am sure that the baby is still not safe.” Vishu said.

Goud gave a matter-of-fact response. “You do not know these people. She would not have killed the baby in any case. All this is their way of life. If this rattles me, I would never be able to handle any

other case here. I see such a case once every week – wife bashing, child abuse, bruises and what not. They enjoy living that way. Do you believe that the woman would have given away her baby to you for adoption? Try it out and I think the answer will be NEVER.”

“But what if you made a mistake?”

“Unlikely. If you become a police officer you will also harden. We start our day with suspicion. And suspicion starts with anybody we come across. People do not come to us for nothing. Now what about your case? I have told you that in a short while we will close the file. I suggest you find something else to do on Saturday mornings.” Goud really was not in the best of his moods that day. Vishu also started getting a bit nervous by his tone. How could he convince himself and Goud that his objective was no longer to find his lost stuff – but this had become his lifestyle. Vishu had to desperately find something to keep himself occupied!

Vishu had this lurking suspicion that the story of the couple and the kid was not over just yet. What he failed to understand was the transformation of Goud from a responsive officer to that of a ruthless policeman. There must be more to the case. Though Goud was willing to wash his hands off this case, Vishu felt that he could do something about this. Possibly he had found a solution for a different problem in the police station. The baby. But would that be simple? What would Nayana say?

As he stepped out of the station, he found that the woman got up, picked up the baby and started walking out of the station. “If I see you playing pranks with the baby again, I will put you inside and send the baby off to an orphanage. And take care of that drunkard as well.” Goud shouted from within.

Vishu started following the woman from a distance. He wanted to know where she lived and how to get in touch with her if needed. He however did not have the courage to directly go and talk to her about anything. As he was walking he wondered how people change in their approach in dealing with different strata of the society. He was at one level sympathetic to the woman and was feeling helpless that he could do nothing in the whole episode. Neither could he prevent Goud from slapping her nor could he go ahead and do something about the baby. He actually started believing what Goud said – that the threat to kill, commit suicide etc., were a part of everyday life for these people.

As he followed her, he found that she entered a small by lane and then entered a door soon after. Vishu could not resist the temptation of wanting to talk to her and her husband to get below the

matter. So he went and knocked on the door. The man came to the door and asked him what he wanted. Vishu was about to open his mouth about the baby.

He then suddenly saw a television set which seemed very familiar. Yes there was no mistaking the set. It had all the identification marks that were known only to him – the sticker of Amul butter on the side and a big scratch which had happened on the very day they had brought in the Television. He looked around but could not find anything else.

“Yes what do you want here??” the man asked. Vishu was totally lost. He was too shell shocked to answer. Before he could think of the baby the television started looming large in his eyes and mind. He pointed towards the television set and said “That TV.....”

“That’s not for sale, Can’t you see that we have installed it for our own use. But if you want I can show you a beautiful CD system for 5000. Interested??”

Vishu nodded his head as the man went in to bring the system. Vishu was even more surprised when he saw the music system. There was no mistake at all. The stuff was theirs. “Where did you get these from?” He asked. “None of your business. If you want this, tell me. 4500 is the last price.”

Vishu looked up and told him that he would get back in a while and started walking out of the slum. As he was dragging his feet he was unsure if he wanted to go home or to the Police Station. As he was moving out, the man started following him. Sir, I have other things also, cassettes, VCRs, CDs, you can come in and have a look. I will certainly give you a very good deal on these.....