

## *Zindagi itefaq hai*

(Life is chance)

by Veena Gokhale

A gust came in through the window of Vishwanath's office at *The Daily Disquieter* and playfully blew a stack of paper off his untidy desk. Most of the sheets landed on the dusty floor, but one piece continued to float in the air. It was claimed by another gust, intent on more mischief, which blew the sheet out of the window. The page was enjoying its flight - oh, the lightness of being! - when gravity staked its claim, and it fell, not straight like a stone, but rather meandering like a temperamental kite, towards the alley two storeys below. Vish was not a senior enough journalist to have an air conditioned office, a secretary, a peon, or even a paper weight, any of which might have prevented the page from escaping.

Minutes later, Vish entered his den - a partitioned cubicle in a large room, having just received an earful from the publisher Jagdish Kukreja.

The day before Vish had written a story in the honourable tradition of investigative journalism - a report about a land grab scam indicting the city's big builder - Ramkumar Singhanian. Singhanian's company routinely advertised their suburban housing complexes in *The Daily Disquieter*. Singhanian was also distantly related to Kukreja. He was the second cousin of Kukreja's brother-in-law's aunt's husband. Singhanian had called Kukreja's PA that morning, threatening to withdraw all advertising and sue *The Disquieter* for libel.

Vish had been egged on to do the expose by *The Disquieter's* flamboyant editor, Vikram Minuwalla. The story had taken up most of the tabloid's front page, the other eye catcher being a sexy condom ad. Kukreja never confronted Minuwalla, who would have resigned at the slightest reprimand. Instead, he directed his ire at underlings - reporters, sub-editors, typists, typesetters.

Minuwalla, with a reputation for brilliance and eccentricity, was a sought after editor. This was the first time he had condescended to work for an afternoon paper, his forte being national dailies, temples to good taste and worldly intelligence. Kukreja's business interests spanned telecommunications, computers, chemicals and finance. Yet Minuwalla made him uncomfortable. It was difficult to guess what went on in Minuwalla's busy brain from hour to hour, let alone say anything definitive about his motives in general.

Vishwanath Iyer, Vish to his colleagues, was Minuwalla's favourite reporter. This singled him out for Kukreja's target practice. Half-an-hour earlier, on that fateful day, Kukreja had summoned Vish to his posh office on the first floor of **The Disquieter** building. Vish had been typing out a story about a complicated and controversial amendment to the state's Industrial Disputes Act. The amendment had been passed by the state's Lower House the day before.

“WHY, why wasn't I consulted before the story was printed?” Kukreja thundered as soon as Vish stepped in through the door. At nearly six feet, the corpulent man cut an impressive figure, as he stood behind his desk glaring at Vish.

The editorial department could have, at the very least, displayed some common sense and hinted at the builder's name, instead of being so brazenly direct about it. Did **they** want to shut the paper down? Did **they** want him to go bankrupt? Was that **their** ultimate goal? There was no teamwork in this organization, none whatsoever. **They** always did what **they** wanted without consulting the other departments. Kukreja ranted on and on.

Vish heard Kukreja out. This was clearly not the time to invoke the Indian Constitution, speak of the freedom of expression, elaborate on the right and proper role of the press in a democracy, or point out that an editor's role was quite distinct from a publishers. To argue that it was not very likely that Singhanian would sue because, for one thing, he did not have much of a case. **They** had covered **their** ass very well. That Singhanian would, in all likelihood, continue

to advertise in *The Disquieter*, because he and Kukreja had other business dealings, which he would not jeopardize. That the paper's circulation had risen, and kept rising, since Minuwalla had taken over.

There was no point saying anything since he was merely a conduit. Later that day Vish would have to report everything to Minuwalla. Minuwalla's lips would curl up ever so slightly; his eyes exhibit a tiny sparkle, from behind heavy glasses. Nothing brought Minuwalla greater happiness than a pissed-off publisher. It meant he was doing a good job.

Kukreja cursed Minuwalla yet again as Vish left the room. He should have stayed with *The Disquieter's* former *avatar* - cheesy centre spreads, Bollywood gossip, lots of sports news and the odd story about the municipal government bungling something or the other. (*The Disquieter* did not receive much government advertising. That went to the morning papers.) Could he afford the respectability that Minuwalla had brought to the paper? Could he afford investigative journalism, all the rage in the country, a fire that threatened to burn the moral fabric of the nation to cinders?

Vish's thoughts ran parallel as he ascended to the editorial department on the 2nd floor. Investigative journalism. At one time he had thought he would stake his life on that upright pole which would eventually unfurl the flag of his triumphant success. Now all he could think about was how tired he felt. Eight months at the paper, strung like an unhappy Chinese lantern between Kukreja and Minuwalla, had worn him out. His mother, who had visited two months ago, had remarked on this thinness, his careworn appearance, and suggested marriage - the cure for all ills.

As Vish entered his cubicle, he nearly stepped on a typewritten sheet lying on the floor. Picture him with curly, unruly hair, glasses poised at the end of a long nose, wearing a sweaty, blue shirt. *The Disquieter's* cartoonist would have enjoyed sketching him in this pose - foot stuck in air, inches from the floor, chest rigid, mouth agape, hands petrified.

“Oh my god!” said Vish and stooped to pick up the scattered sheets. His fingers seemed to lose the ability to firmly grasp objects that humans acquire very early in life and baboons even earlier. But after some effort, Vish had the pages in his grip.

There was one missing! Now there was a gaping hole in the industrial disputes amendment act article that was to go as the second lead on the front page. And there was no copy.

Vish looked around wildly. He searched among the papers on his desk; he dove under it. He opened drawers and checked - just in case. Then he repeated his actions. It was no good, page two had disappeared. Vish looked out of the window. Directly below, in the dingy little *galli*, was a rubbish dump, with a cow nosing through the garbage.

He rushed out of the room and down the stairs. The cow regarded him coolly as he approached. “Shoo,” he said to her, “Go away.” The cow stared at him with large, deep eyes and swished her tail. She did not budge. Bloody cows, thought Vish. Animals with an IQ lower than dogs should be banished beyond the city gates. He struck some threatening poses before the impassive animal.

Hearing a sound from behind, Vish turned to find a skinny street child, dressed in stained, oversized half-pants, impressively bald. Vish pulled out his wallet and extracted a one-rupee note from it. “*Isko bhagao.*” (Get rid of her) he told the urchin, waving the money.

The urchin leapt forward at once and pushed the cow, shouting insults at her. The cow took the hint and ambled down the alley, loudly registering her protest. Vishwanath burrowed into the stinking garbage which contained large quantities of soiled paper in many colours, textures, sizes; mostly discarded press releases. The urchin tugged at his sleeve.

“Good boy,” said Vish giving him the note. Then he continued his search. The boy joined in, flinging handfuls of garbage here and there. Vish heard heavy footsteps and looked

up to find himself nose to nose with a policeman. ``*Kya horelai yaha?* (What's going on here?)" he demanded.

Vish felt repulsed; Bombay Hindi was so uncouth. Vish, though a Southie, had grown up in the North. He had been taught Hindi by a teacher who wrote beautiful Urdu poetry. Bombay was a slaughter house for Hindi and Urdu - oh those mellifluous tongues which he had come to adore during his painfully romantic adolescence!

Suddenly Vish noticed then that there was garbage all over the place. Before he could explain the situation, the urchin told the cop in a shrill, convincing voice that he had been paid to search through the garbage and showed him the rupee Vish had given him.

Vish could not believe his ears. As an investigative journalist he encountered human folly and treachery at every turn. But that fact had not turned him into a cynic. If anything, it had made him more sentimental.

Minutes later Vishwanath returned to the editorial department empty handed. The urchin had taken to his heels, laughing, and the cop had accepted the fact that Vish was the injured party. Vish and the cop had kicked the garbage back in place, becoming almost friends in the process. It occurred to Vish that though it was apparently illegal to have rubbish spread around, it seemed OK to have it pile up for days at one spot. He had held his peace; the paan-chewing cop may not have had a high tolerance for Aristotlean logic.

``Want to take a look at Rajni's report?" Arun, one of the sub-editors, called out to him as he walked into the editorial section. Rajni, the pretty new trainee reporter, had made an impression on Vishwanath since she had joined the organization two months ago. Unfortunately, there was no way of calculating if the opposite were also true.

They had started out sharing insights on Italo Calvino's fiction and progressed very well from that point, conversationally that is. During the past few weeks Rajni had started consulting him about the articles she wrote, surely a healthy sign. But Rajni also had tete-a-tete's with

Royce, the crime reporter, a brash young man who wore loud shirts, was an expert jiver and sped around town on a heavy-duty mo-bike. Rajni seemed to have quite an appetite for violent crime. How could someone who enjoyed Pablo Neruda's poetry smack her lips at the latest gang killing, Vish often wondered.

“No time,” Vish muttered. He did not want to think about anyone's report but focus instead on his own, one-legged story.

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Abbas took a short cut through *The Disquieter galli*, passing underneath Vish's window at the precise moment that page two made its descent. He felt it brush against his hair and reached for it instinctively. Absorbed in the cricket commentary pouring out from the small transistor radio clutched to his ear, Abbas did not bother to look at his find. It must be an ad of some sort, he thought, shoving the paper into his *jhola*; he would attend to it later. The India-Australia test match was at a crucial point and the ears of the nation were firmly turned Down Under.

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Back in his cubicle Vish surveyed the narrow, airless, dingy space. Paint was perpetually peeling off the walls, dirt clung obstinately to corners, cobwebs sprang up overnight despite the hostility they inspired in the cleaning woman. What was he doing here anyway?

The most important part of the article was gone. Page Two contained a lengthy quote on the Industrial Disputes Act amendment from Mayank Bakshi, the High Court judge. All he had to do was call Justice Bakshi and get the quote again. It wasn't such a big deal. Vish picked up the phone and asked the operator to get him the Justice.

“But you just spoke to him in the morning, no?” the operator protested.

“Be a sweetheart and get me his number again, Nilu,” said Vish with all the sweetness he could muster. “It’s a matter of life and death.”

“Isn’t it always?” said Nilu going off the line.

Vish lit a cigarette while he waited. The nicotine coursed happily through his bloodstream, joining other excited chemicals there. The merry toxins decided to start a Heavy Metal band and set up a practice session on the spot. Vish continued smoking purposefully, feeling much better. He had tried to cut down after he had overheard Rajni telling a colleague that she hated men smoking, but loved the smell of whisky on their breath. And if it was premium scotch, all the better.

Arun stepped into the cubicle just as Vish was stubbing out his cigarette. He had grown up in the North, in Lucknow, the fabled city of kings, writers, connoisseurs. He was Vish’s friend and confidante. Arun made impatient noises on hearing the news about Page Two.

“I can’t understand why you people don’t make a copy,” he said. “Don’t you have carbon paper?”

Vish said nothing.

“You know you’re supposed to make two copies,” Arun persisted. Then he assumed a more sympathetic tone, “Don’t you have notes?”

Vish explained that he had been typing the first draft of the piece when Nilu had got him the High Court judge on the phone. Vish had written down the lengthy quote, full of legalese that he could barely comprehend, at the back of Page Two. He had been planning to retype the whole story with the quote in the right place when Singhania had sent for him.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get the quote,” said Arun, sliding off the desk. “Don’t forget we are going out for lunch for Meenakshi’s birthday.”

He departed in a good mood. This was the first disaster of the day. There would be others as the sun climbed higher in the sky. As a sub editor Arun was denied direct participation in the hurly burly of public life, forced to get his kicks from internal fuck-ups.

Arun's a good chap, mused Vish, wishing he was a sub-editor. All Arun had to do was sit and sub copy, while he, Vish, was expected to perform tricks all the time. It was hard to follow one acrobatic turn with another that was higher, faster, better. True there were underhand deals all over the place, waiting to be exposed. But why did people have such an appetite for them?

The phone rang shrilly, scaring Vishwanath. "Justice Bakshi's office, Sir," said Nilu in her best secretarial school voice. Vish asked for the Justice and was told that he was not available. He had come in early, for a mere two hours, and had left the city, soon after.

"What do you mean?" said Vish.

"He's gone to attend his granddaughter's wedding in Delhi," chirped Bakshi's secretary. "I myself booked the ticket. AC Second Class."

"I don't believe this," Vish muttered, half to himself.

"Do you know that his grand daughter is getting married to the son of the Maharaja of Ujjain who is a MLA who...."

"Never mind," Vish cut her short. He asked for details about the train, and for the second time that day, bounded downstairs at a dangerous speed, barely remembering to grab his note pad. He decided not to bother with a taxi, wishing he had invested in a two wheeler. Not a mo-bike, but a scooter would have been all right.

He walked rapidly towards V.T. station, the train might be late. There had been a big derailment just yesterday, unfortunately not on the route to Delhi, but in the Southern state of Tamil Nadu. The morning papers (those high and mighty national dailies who thought they were the cat's whiskers) had gone to town on the accident, paying scant attention to the



Industrial Disputes Act amendment. They would front page the story tomorrow, the bloody vultures, always sniffing for fresh blood spills. Vish just had to get his story in that day.

VT Station was a tide of bodies, a cacophony of sounds - human and mechanical, a solid flow of heat-resistant energy. Nevertheless, the announcer's steady voice talking alternatively in Hindi, Marathi and English managed to prevail over the chaos. Vish impatiently scanned the electronic display board. The Bombay-Delhi Express was not mentioned. He turned towards a *coolie* who was hurrying past and inquired about the train. "Just now only it has gone," said a shrivelled-up, old man who had overheard him.

Vish turned away. FUCK. OH FUCK. A wave of fatigue hit him, making him dizzy. Then it passed. It must be his low blood pressure. He wove his way slowly through the crowd, letting himself be pushed around, wishing he was on the train, Delhi-bound. Back at St. Stephans College, doing his Bachelors in Political Science. He could have gone on to do his M.A. and become a lecturer. He had got a First Class First. The Head of the Department had called him to his office and said he should study further. He was eligible for a scholarship.

He could have gone abroad, to the States, where so many of his classmates had gone. But he had chosen journalism because his grandfather, a freedom fighter, had wanted him to be a newspaperman and had brainwashed him since childhood. "Journalists will be the revolutionaries of independent India," he had said. Or words to that effect. So here he was. The wrong man for the job. The wronged man as well.

What was the next stop for the train? Kalyan. The train would take about 45 minutes to get there. The only way to intercept was to grow wings and fly. Kukreja owned a private plane. A faint smile played on Vish's lips for the first time that day. It was crazy to entertain the thought that Kukreja, who had bawled him out a couple of hours ago, would sanction a flight in his plane, his most cherished possession. He was more likely to give him the sack. The only thing that stood between Kukreja and his walking papers was Minuwalla. And God only knew

how long the restless Minuwalla would stay at **The Disquieter**. There was no Justice in the world. That was obvious. None whatsoever.

Back at the office, Ganpat came around on his second tea round and placed a glass of boiled-to-death brown liquid that passed for tea, on the window sill. Vishwanath fumbled in his pockets for change, but couldn't find any.

“*Baad mein dena* (Give it later),” said Ganpat carrying on, the tea tray gracefully balanced over his right shoulder, his face as peaceful as the Buddha's. His demeanour did nothing to calm Vish who downed the cup at one go and lit a cigarette.

Could he find a replacement for the dear, departed Justice? He had to make the story work somehow. Could he interview someone else? Not really. Because Justice Bakshi was the country's foremost authority on labour law. He had written weighty tomes on the subject that would have given most people acute constipation.

He had set scintillating precedents as a High Court judge. There was another lawyer in Delhi, Bakshi's former assistant, who might be able to help. But would he say anything, given the controversial nature of the amendment?

Arun came in to collect money. They were going to buy a gift for Meenakshi, the birthday girl. Vish gave him a ten-rupee note. “I don't think I'll come for lunch,” he said. Rajni would be there. And Royce. There was no way he could compete with the eternally buoyant Royce today. He had to salvage the story somehow. Vish asked Nilu to get him Chandrakant Bhat, the Delhi lawyer. Then he lit another cigarette. The train of thought that had started at VT station resumed its journey. Yes Delhi. If he had chosen to live there he would have been surrounded by chaste Hindi. He could have attended *mushairyas*, listening to renowned Urdu poets through enchanted nights. This job did not allow him to plan anything in advance. In any case, he was too tired during his time off to do anything but sleep.

Investigative journalism. It was all about pinning down the truth, whatever the hell that was. That's what Minuwalla believed. He did not have the stomach for investigative journalism nor *The Truth*, Vish decided.

The phone rang again. Nilu had got him Bhat's office but Bhat was out. He was in Amritsar. Doing what, Vish asked in exasperation. Attending an important meeting, replied the secretary mechanically. Vish hung up fearing for the justice system, what with judges and lawyers prancing all over the country instead of staying put, applying themselves seriously to their work.

Vish stared moodily out of the window. There was not much to look at. Just the grimy facade of an old building. He turned purposefully to his typewriter, put in a sheet of paper and started typing out his story - flat, almost pointless without the all important quote. He handed the copy to Arun. "Don't give me a byline," he said.

"Get a drink *yaar*," said Arun sympathetically.

Vish made his way slowly to the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, a seedy, dimly-lit, backstreet restaurant, popular with serious drinkers and randy lovers, because the waiters turned a blind eye on petting couples and clients who methodically drank themselves into a stupor. It was the nearest watering hole for **The Disquieter** crowd.

There was a huge garbage heap on the way, a prince of garbage heaps if not the queen. Vish felt himself being pulled magnetically to its periphery. A stink rose from the pile of plastic, paper, leftover food, discarded items. Rubbish. Rubbish. Rubbish. A piece of yellowish paper caught his eye. It was backside up and obviously typewritten. He pulled it out carefully from under a coconut shell. It wasn't Page Two.

A young rag-picker with a blackened face and dreadlocks eyed Vish curiously as he turned away dispiritedly.

Vish found a corner table at the restaurant. Nursing a peg of whisky (alas, no scotch for an underpaid reporter), munching moodily on *masala chana* (the snack was on the house), Vish contemplated the crude mural of a turbaned, bearded man in a white *chudidhar-kurta* (presumably the legendary poet - Omar Khayyam) reclining on the ground, languidly holding out a wine glass, while a half-veiled woman in harem pants coyly poured a drink from a pitcher. The touching tableau was set against the backdrop of a fountain and two spindly-looking trees. The artist had put in his masterstroke at the recumbent man's feet - a loaf of bread. He had even painted his name, D. D. Pujari, with a flourish, at the bottom right.

For an absurd but delightful second he imagined that he was Omar Khayyam and Rajni the provocative beauty. On a normal day he would have spent some time embroidering the fantasy, but not today. Vish took a large gulp of the whisky and let out a deep sigh as a mournful Hindi film song started to emerge from a nearby amplifier.

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Farha was waiting for Abbas at their usual table, sipping *limbu pani*, reading Femina. No sooner had Abbas sat down, Farha took hold of his *jhola* and started rummaging through it, as was her habit. Being the possessive type, she staked her absolute claim on Abbas and everything he owned. She discovered Page Two almost immediately and started grilling Abbas about it. Where had he found it? What was it?

Abbas was in no mood for an interrogation. He had had a busy day. He had got up at 5.30 am to attend his morning law classes. Then he had gone directly to his brother-in-law's import-export firm, where he worked part-time. After lunch he would go back to his brother-in-law's office for a couple of hours and then, in the evening, he would make the rounds delivering wedding cards which his sister designed and printed, as a small business.

But Farha persisted. ``Take a look at it Abbas. It looks interesting."''

Abbas took hold of Page Two just as the waiter came to take their orders. He ordered chicken biryani, Farha ordered mutton.

Abbas crooked his eyebrow. "How come you're eating mutton biryani today?"

"Just like that. For a change."

"Tomorrow you'll show up with a new boyfriend and say the same thing."

"Read the paper, **baba**."

Abbas glanced at the typewritten words. Weird. He looked at Farah and shrugged.

"Read the other side," said Farah.

Abbas turned the page. Suddenly he looked animated.

"Hey! It says Justice Bakshi... and there's something about the Industrial Disputes Act..."

"What?"

"Let me read it...O.K. Remember, I told you about Justice Bakshi who came to college as a guest lecturer?"

"Yes. You said he was an impressive speaker."

The biryani's arrived but Abbas ignored his favourite dish to re-read Page Two while Farah tucked appreciatively into her aromatic meal.

"My guess is that this is part of an article of some sort about the Industrial Disputes Act amendment."

"Is it important?"

"Ya. I mean... I don't know. I haven't seen anything about the amendment in the papers. But it just went through."

"Where did you get this?"

"No idea."

"Think Abbas, think."

Abbas started eating his biryani. He thought over his morning and recalled the dingy **galli**, the rubbish heap, the paper falling out of the sky. He described the location to Farah.

Farha had been to **The Disquieter** office a couple of times to visit her friend, Priya, who worked in the ad department. Feeling very pleased with her detective work, she surmised that the page had come from **The Disquieter** building.

“Do you think this is lost property? Should we return it?” she asked anxiously.

“Lost? No. I don't think so. Anyway, there's no way I would ever help that paper, that rag,” said Abbas contemptuously.

Farah raised her eyebrows.

“Don't you remember how they accused my uncle of being involved with that smuggler? Kaneeza aunty fell ill after that. Remember?”

“I thought that was because of your uncle's *lafda* with his secretary,” said Farha.

Abbas ignored Farha and concentrated on his *biryani*, fuming. What a silly girl she was. Really!

“Well, newspapers. You know how they are. They like to create controversy,” said Farah, trying to make up.

By the time they ordered *kulfi*, they were friends again. Abbas complained that he was feeling cold and begged Farha to come and sit on his lap. Farha obliged, giggling.

Seeing a chance of escape Page Two slipped off the seat and fell inches from Vish's feet. Vish had been silently eavesdropping on the conversation, his desperation reaching a near heart-attack level. Now he bent down, ever so swift and stealthy, and picked up the page. Alas, Page Two was not fated to be free for long.

Leaving some money on the table, Vish tip-toed out of the restaurant, observed only by an unseeing drunk drooling into his drink. The smooching couples of course had no eyes for him.

Outside, he broke into an exhilarating run. He would just be able to get his story in before **The Disquieter** went to press.

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*Author's note:* This story is set in Bombay (now officially called Mumbai), in the mid 1980s. The title refers to an old, Hindi, film song which I like because it's lightly philosophical and rendered in a flirtatious, upbeat style.)