

Once Upon a War: A Falling Hero

Dressed in his army uniform, Chandrakumar Shah clicked into the video chat five minutes before schedule, reporting on time for duty. He sat up straight with his hair neatly tucked into the back of his camo green army cap. It fit him perfectly like a glove tailored to fit a hand. His posture straight, reminding me to check mine, remained on point throughout the interview. His calm attitude, mixed with the modest display of his camouflage uniform highlighted his various medals that shone in the awkward light from the computer's reflection.

He caught my gaze as soon as I stopped peering over his collection of medals strapped to his chest. "These, right here," he points "are my pride and joy. They taught me the value of mankind, the fragility embedded in our race." He looks down and unbuttons the first two buttons on his uniform. A large scar grazed his collarbone and led to a deep cut struck across his shoulder. "This was the first scar I recieved. A quick shelling in the night. It killed many of my friends. I remember stepping out of the underground house to get a quick breath away from the stench of puke and dirt." He looked down at his hands. "Actually I went out to smoke a cigarette." He quickly regained himself and went back to telling his story. "That's where I got this medal from. The Vir Chakra; it is presented for acts of bravery on the battlefield. I ended up saving 2 of my comrades as the shells exploded around our barracks."

"How did it feel to be a hero?"

"I wasn't a hero. I was a coward. I saved my friends and left everyone else to fend for themselves. I wanted to bring my friends to safety so I wouldn't have to live with the guilt for the rest of my life."

"What happened to the others?"

He looked down at his hands again. Seemingly ashamed of what was coming next. He slowly lifted his eyes and locked our gaze. It was so strong that I was uncomfortable in the moment, but he seemed unphased.

I looked at the man sitting in front of me. The egotistical maniac I had once labeled him as; but this was another person. Someone with a heart. Someone I wanted to talk to; someone I wanted to know more about. My whole life I had grown up thinking he was a heartless human being, that he didn't know what it meant to be a part of the family. He seemed so distant from everyone all the time, I would've never thought there was a reason behind it. The way he'd distanced himself from us made me think that he didn't care to know us. His omnipotent aura didn't help that thought either. He was always seated at the head of every table, making sure when he was to voice his opinion it would be heard. I truly never knew the man, I mean, I didn't even know he was a war hero till I decided to interview him. I just thought it'd be interesting to see how he describes himself with his 'I'm the best man on the planet' attitude. These secrets he was telling me built a connection that I never thought I could have with him, especially him.

"The shelling continued the whole night."

"When we walked out the next morning there were parts of bodies scattered everywhere. What I didn't realize was through the dark, my commander had stepped out to smoke, like me. We found an arm, with a little bracelet hanging off it. 'Aarti' was beaded into the plastic thread that ran through the course of the colorful beads. It's my most prevalent memory from the time. I remembered him talking about his daughter. The way she loved art and how she would grow to be the greatest artist of all time."

He held his gaze for a second longer and then dropped it. "I'm sorry that may have been a lot to take in." He was quiet for the next few minutes not dropping his gaze but not completely engrossed in the conversation either. His eyes were glazed over, in deep thought. The clarity of his light brown eyes reflecting the computer screen in them. One of his butler's came out to ask if he was doing okay, if he needed any refreshments. His gaze broke and a stern look washed over his face. He looked up and flinched at the proximity of another human being. The butler immediately moved back and immediately corrected his posture. Chandrakumar seemed used to this service asking for something under his breath with a few hand movements, which the

butler somehow understood. The butler bowed, turned back to the screen, looked at me, bowed again and backed away from Chandrakumar, making sure his front was facing the war hero.

Once again the shock on my face was evident. He took a minute to let me come back to the conversation and explained the importance of discipline in Indian culture. "When I was in the army, the first thing we learned was to never question your superior. We were disciplined to listen and act as we were told and those are the practices that I have implemented in my house today." His mannerisms reflected his values. He held the straightest posture, and his mouth barely moved while he spoke in his low voice.

The office behind him was filled with rustic treasures. A Buddha, almost green in the ray of sunlight, shone through the closed blinds. A grandfather clock in the corner of the video; a rustic gold clock ticking in sync with the analog seconds progressing in the corner of my laptop. "Those are nothing compared to the treasure I keep locked away."

"What's that?"

He pulled a small box out from under the desk. It was a shiny chrome brown box that reflected the light from the window. The intricate engravings that line the edges were dull compared to the beautiful music that played as soon as he opened the box. He pulled out a little thread of beads that seemed to be eating away at themselves, covered in mold and dirt. As the camera focused on the tiny beads you could see Chandrakumar's fragile, veiny hands shaking. The green veins protruded through his olive skin, the top of his hand stressing as he fumbled to place the thread. It was clear to him that I didn't know what he was trying to show me. He softly placed the thread in his hands and shifted the view of the camera downwards. "Aarti" he said softly, his voice barely hovering above a whisper.

I almost forgot about his commander's daughter when I heard the almost inaudible name. To me, this word means worship to God, a large part of Indian culture. A name like this symbolizes purity and holiness. To hold onto something so small, so fragile, it must have meant a lot to him. It was the one memoir he had kept safe to remind him of what he had seen during

his time at war. "I want to say something." He paused for a second, but it seemed like an eternity.

"War-zones are not what you think they are. Your view is perpetuated by media and debate through politicians. Is that what you see as truth? Is what you see equivalent to the pain, the suffering, the torture, emotional and otherwise, that the civilians face in these sadistic situations? Peace is crushed by violence, hope by fear. How are we responding? How is it that white skin matters more than color? Why is it that our front page news corroborates the falling of the pound but not the thousands killed daily in Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and India? Who are you, as young journalists, to dictate the information corrupting our minds, the details that fail to provide us with the reality of rubble, of death, of tears?"

He remembered to shift the camera back into focus and he finally said, regaining his calm nature, but somehow he looked like he was in physical pain "I need to go. Thank you for your time and for listening to my story." Chandrakumar nodded upwards and the camera turned around to another butler who seemed to have been listening the whole time. In the back you could see a large family portrait surrounded by a rustic wooden frame with the clear engraving 'DO MORE THAN NECESSARY' with a smaller photo below, a more modern polaroid captioned in black marker with 'Aarti'.

As the new butler bowed at me once again I could hear the rustling of dozens of more butlers entering the door. I knew he was rich, but his the fortune that he must've been holding onto was unseen due to how estranged he was from our family. Most times it was almost like he wasn't there, he was kind of a ghost lurking in the background listening in to every conversation but keeping his distance. That was the last I saw of Chandrakumar, 'Dada' or grandfather to me; of his calm stature, his stern face, and his emotional dilemma. Before I thought about interviewing him, my dad mentioned how he'd just gotten a stem replacement and he was in fragile condition. I had tried my best to go easy on him. Frankly, I hadn't expected to get to know him so well, but I guess his health conditions had made him realize that he wanted to be more

connected to the family, and I guess, in some twisted way, he thought this was the best way to do it. A heart attack had finally turned him to dust like the memory of a war we once talked about.

This may just have been an interview but the opportunity gave me a newfound respect for someone I never thought I knew. His final confession of his cowardice made me realize how hard it must have been for him to hold on to that fact, to think that expressing himself would've made us think less of him. But what he told me, he will be my hero forever. A fallen hero, but a hero nonetheless.