Short Story

Second Sight, Second Chance

In the shadow of a soldier's valour, a woman learns to love again.

By Wg Cdr DP Sabharwal

"Wow! What a graceful walk! What a personality!" Hardly had I completed the sentence, when all my friends turned the way I was looking and then suddenly Abha, thrusting her books in my hands, ran towards him. Before any one of us could even fathom what she was up to, she flung into the open arms of the tall man dressed in a smart army uniform.

The next moment we heard her excited voice, "What a surprise, Bhai!"

What happened next was another surprise. Without getting back to us, introducing her brother, or even looking back and saying 'bye', she just carried on walking with her arms around her brother's waist. It was her brother who, before they reached the college gate, looked back and waved to us. His waving wasn't casual. It was rhythmic, and there was an enigmatic smile on his lips as if saying, 'Sorry girls, I'm taking your friend away.'

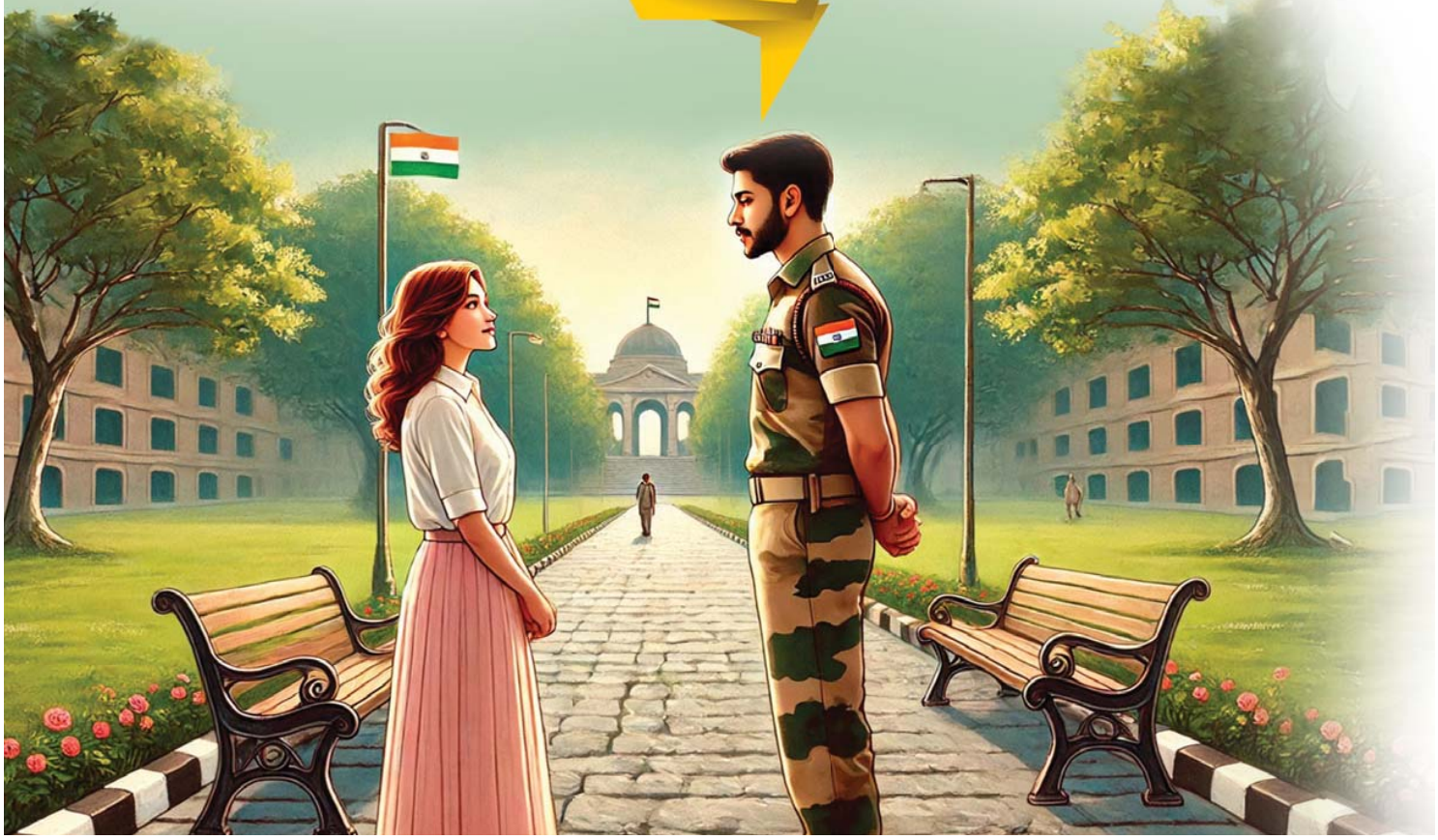
The rest of the day was quite different from other days. The remaining classes were bunked, and the time was spent in the cafeteria, emptying cups of tea and coffee. When nothing more could be consumed, we went out and sat on the lawns. The topic of discussion throughout was Abha's brother.

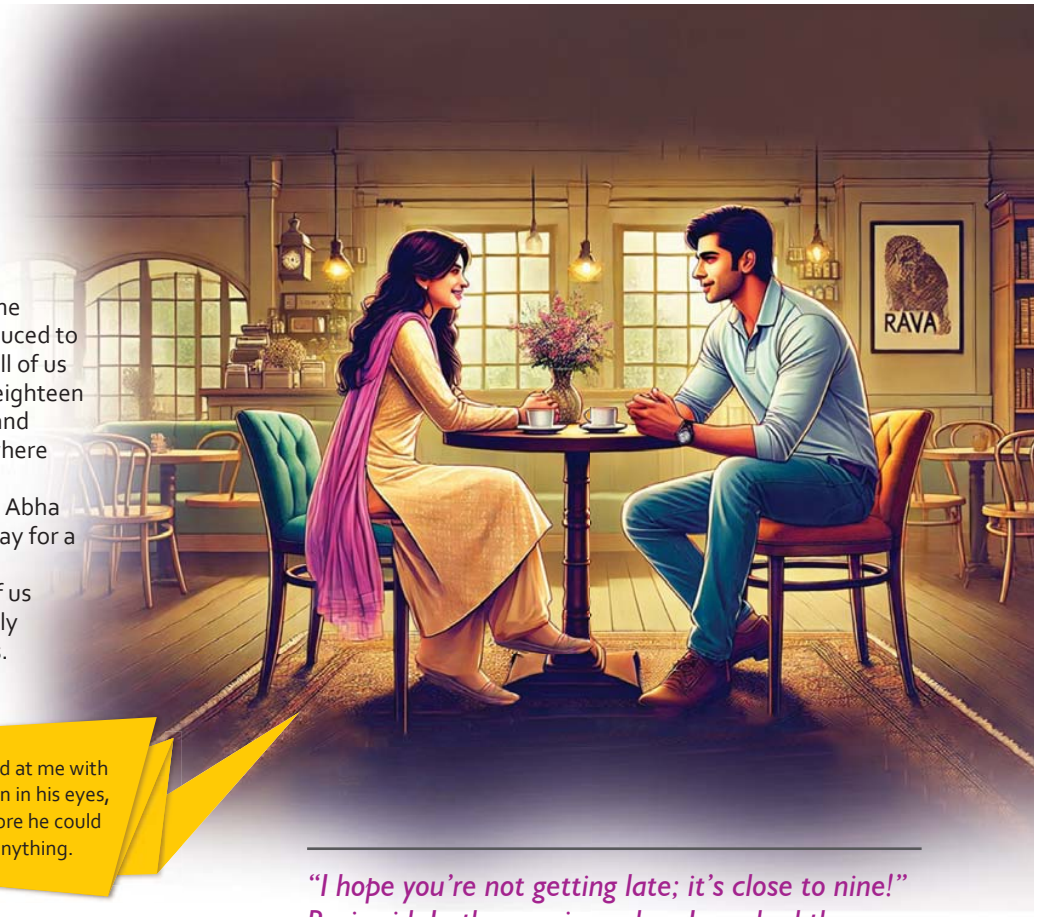
Various adjectives like handsome, good-looking, athletic, smart, dashing, and debonair were used liberally and frequently during the endless, not-leading-to-anywhere conversation! My contribution was that of a silent spectator, for which one of my colleagues commented, "What happened to our bubbly and chirpy friend? Why are you so silent?"

"I am feeling bad at missing the classes," was my reply, though I knew it wasn't the truth. The fact of the matter was that I had lost my heart to the military man the very moment I had looked at him. It was love at first sight!

The next day, Abha was literally grilled. Whenever there was a little break between

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the periods, the talk was about Ravi, her smart fauzi brother. It was apparent that all my friends were highly impressed as each one expressed the desire to be introduced to him. It was sort of natural since all of us were in our late teens, between eighteen and nineteen, a time when love and romance seemed to float everywhere in the air.

There was a big 'hurray' when Abha invited us to her home on Saturday for a party.

It was a small gathering, six of us in addition to four of Abha's family and three of Ravi's school friends. The centre of attraction was Ravi, obviously. Even his friends were adoring him for having bagged the coveted Sword of Honour during the passing-out ceremony from the Indian Military Academy for being the best all-round cadet.

He looked at me with a question in his eyes, and before he could say anything.

I didn't get a chance to talk to my heart-throb during the entire evening, but as I was leaving, Abha asked him to see me off at the gate. It was during this brief period that I asked him, "Can we meet sometime tomorrow?"

He looked at me with a question in his eyes, and before he could say anything, I added, "Five o'clock at Quiet Corner in Taj."

"I hope you're not getting late; it's close to nine!" Ravi said. I realised how fast the past four hours had gone by. In the evening, when I reached the venue at four fifty-five, Ravi was already there.

When I looked at my watch, he said with a simple smile, "Fauzi time is ten minutes before."

On my reply that "I'll keep that in mind for the next time," he quipped, "You're planning for the next one even before the first one has started!"

I sort of blushed, to which he commented, "You look cute with that smile. I look forward to seeing many of these." With that, any ice—if it ever existed—between us melted and evaporated then and there.

For the next five days, we met from five-to-nine every evening, each time ending with laughter and growing fondness. Then, like all good things, his leave ended. However, before he left, we agreed to chat every night on email from ten-to-eleven and talk on the phone only on Sunday evenings.

This lovely routine continued for four years, broken only by his vacations.

During those years, many things happened. I graduated and enrolled in post-graduation in psychology. Ravi got promoted to Captain. We got engaged when I turned twenty-two. His unit moved from a peace location to the higher reaches of Kashmir Valley.

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Only one thing did not happen, though both of us, as well as our families, were keen on it: our marriage. The obstacle was an Army rule that did not permit officers to get married before attaining the age of twenty-five. Once he moved to the field location, there were interruptions in our chats since quite often he did not have access to the internet.

This void got filled with the so-called outdated method of communication through letters via snail mail. But what a thrill it provided! Since each letter would take about a week to arrive and we wrote almost daily, we had to number our letters and make replies quoting the letter number.

Every time I read or wrote a letter, I had to keep referring to his earlier letters to make suitable and sensible replies!

Though we were far away from each other, yet time was literally flying, and the countdown to the marriage day had started. He would be twenty-five in three months, and we were to get married within a month of that. The day had been fixed, and the preparations had begun. But there was another important day in Ravi's life that no one had ever given a thought to.

The day of his martyrdom! Yes, it was a late evening

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when we received a call from his father announcing that Ravi had paid the supreme sacrifice that a soldier can... that of laying his life defending the honour of his motherland.

That it was a shock for me would be an understatement. I became listless and speechless. I just did not know what I was going through and what was happening around me. When Ravi's body arrived in the tricolour, and I was asked to pay my last tributes, I just stood there with flowers in my hand. I couldn't offer these to him, for he was not responding, nor was he receiving them from me!

It took me about six months to come to terms with reality, and I was trying hard to come out of my isolation when another incident hit me. The occasion was the Defence Investiture Ceremony at Rashtrapati Bhavan, where Ravi was to be honoured and awarded posthumously with the Kirti Chakra, the nation's second-highest gallantry award during peacetime.

I was present at the ceremony with his parents. When his name was called, and his mother got up and started walking slowly but gracefully towards the podium, a piercing chill went through my already broken heart. Ah! What a destiny.



How I wished I was walking to receive the honour as his wife! At that time, for the first time, a feeling crept in that 'some wrong' had been done to me. But who had done the wrong wasn't clear to me.

I started pondering as to who was responsible for the state I was in. I couldn't think of anyone in particular for the condition to which I had been pushed—a state of wilderness at the grand age of twenty-three; an age when there are supposed to be colours and happiness all around.

However, a lingering doubt persisted in my mind if it was due to a particular action of Ravi that had caused me all the pain. In one of his letters, he had mentioned very casually, of course, that 'there are chances, though remote, that I might get an opportunity to do something for which everyone would be proud of me.'

Then, I had construed that perhaps he was referring to his participation in an international marathon race since he had been a cross-country long-distance runner during his cadet days. I could never realise that he was referring to some action on the front.

I wouldn't call the mission in which Ravi sacrificed his life a dangerous one, because every mission on or across the border is dangerous. But it was definitely a difficult mission, as his regimental colleague told me later. I was perplexed and not able to understand why Ravi volunteered for the mission.

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Was he thinking only of himself and the subsequent glory he would get once he was successful, or doing something of which I would be really proud, or just doing something to add another feather in the already chequered history of his regiment?

I wasn't able to get anywhere close to the real reason, as he just wasn't there to provide the answers to my never-ending list of questions that kept germinating in my mind. I was, however, determined to get suitable answers to such situations, so I decided to pursue a career in occupational psychology, concentrating on military personnel.

It took me four years to get my doctorate and another two years to submit my post-doctoral thesis. During those long years, I interviewed and talked animatedly to almost one thousand jawans and officers who had been injured or seriously wounded in various military operations.

For this, I travelled across the northern and eastern borders of the



country, spending endless nights in various military hospitals. After years of search and research, I arrived at the irrefutable conclusion that the thoughts predominant in the minds of military personnel while undertaking difficult, dangerous, and hazardous missions are never about their personal achievement and glory.

The thoughts about what would happen to their closest ones, like the parents, spouse, children, and beloved ones, do flash through their minds but don't stick. Such thoughts just come and fade away.

The only thoughts that remain there and, in fact, goad and propel them to move ahead and take undue risks are about the honour of their motherland and the izzat of the Paltan (regiment) they belong to.

"Would you mind if, instead of sitting and talking here in my office, we move to the café?"

The day my hypothesis was accepted with thunderous applause at an International Symposium, I became at peace with myself. All questions of how and why it happened not only got a legitimate answer but a stamp of approval as well. Thereafter started the cycle of living a normal life.

Once again, I started seeing and enjoying the colours of the rainbow. I started relishing getting wet in the rain yet again. The food tasted good. I started noticing and enjoying the chirping of the birds and the giggles of the dating and doting young ones in a café.

While all this was happening, I never forgot that I had first met Ravi eleven years ago and had lost him seven years back. But these memories were no longer a burden. Instead, they gave me the pleasure of revisiting the past that was full of joy and happiness. After so many years, I started feeling like a girl of nineteen again!

My parents were noticing the change in my routine and life. Then one day, buoyed by the fact that I had started meeting and going out with my friends that included male ones from my profession, my father said,

"Me and your mama are both thrilled to see you bouncing back to life. Recently, we have received a couple of proposals. Both the boys are close to thirty, almost your age, and doing well. Have you thought about marriage?"

I let his words sink in.

Noticing that they were waiting for my reply, I said, "I can appreciate your concern, Papa. To be honest, when Ravi met his destined fate, I didn't think I would ever fall in love again. That is what everyone says after a heartbreak. But the difference is that I'm not heartbroken.

I'm not cynical, or pessimistic, or sad. These days I am feeling good, a feeling that I did not have for a long time. But still, I am not ready yet for settling with someone. You will have to wait... I don't know for how long, perhaps a few years." I continued with therapeutic sessions for the injured and wounded at the military hospital.

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He was traumatised and had applied for discharge from the Army. Having acquainted myself with the complete background of the officer, I asked my helper to let him in.

The next moment, there was a knock on the door, and as he walked in with a limp, I noticed a prominent scar on his left cheek, which I could relate to one of the few injuries he had suffered during the skirmish with the terrorists.

"Good morning, Doc," he said, and as he came close to the table, with a gentle smile and an extended hand, added, "I am Major Deepak." I got up and shook hands with him. The handshake was firm and warm. Then something strange happened.

Instead of asking him to sit down, I heard myself saying, "Would you mind if, instead of sitting and talking here in my office, we move to the café?" He looked at me, and after a pause, said, "No, not at all, Doc."

He held the door open for me, and as I stepped out, I noticed him adjusting his walk. We reached the cafeteria in synchronised steps.

By the time we finished a few cups of coffee, I realised that our thoughts too were in sync. I closed my eyes for a moment, and the realisation dawned: Yes, I was in love again. It happened just five days after I had the talk with Papa!