

## Missed Opportunities

By Rishi Shrivastava

My friend Ritika went to graduate school with me. She was one of the smarter people in our class and finished her MBA when she was only 24. Ritika was now working at an investment bank in New York City. Her fiancé, Rajiv, is a man she has known for many years. Rajiv has built a successful legal practice here in Minneapolis even though he is only 31. I was surprised to get an invitation to Ritika's engagement party in the mail because I hadn't kept in touch with her very much since graduation and did not know Rajiv well at all. I figured that perhaps they had invited me because I was one of the few friends who would attend since I lived in the area.

The event was very low key and took place in the home of Rajiv's parents. All of his relatives had arrived from different parts of the country and many of them had known him since he was only a toddler. I walked into the house and did not recognize many people. However, eager to binge on some Indian snacks I walked into the kitchen. It only took two minutes for the insanity that is customary in Indian American gatherings to begin. For the time being I was lucky enough to be a spectator since I did not know many people there.

A group of old Indian women in their 60s and 70s sat around a table and spoke loudly. They were talking about Ritika and I overheard them as I was getting some spicy snacks. The conversation started innocently enough, but soon degenerated into something that would make Howard Stern blush.

Twice Divorced Woman: "It's great to see that Rajiv has finally gotten settled. Now he can be happy."

Woman with two chins: "Yes, Ritika is certainly nice. But, at only 5'3" she is a little short, no?"

Diminutive Indian woman 3: "That is OK. I think Ritika's biggest problem might be that she is not fair enough."

Woman with abusive husband: "Now all we have to do is work on Ritika's older sister Aparna. At 28 she is running out of time. Aparna! Get over here and talk to your favorite aunties."

Clueless Woman: "I'm just glad that Ritika is Indian. That's all that really matters."

I had heard enough gibberish for one evening, but could not really leave until I had said hello to Ritika and Rajiv. I found them in a nearly empty room of eight people. In the room were Rajiv's parents, Rajiv, a priest,

Ritika, and three friends. Ritika's parents had found the proceedings rather tiresome and were in the backyard. It was difficult to find a good reason after that to stick around and so I went to the backyard to catch some fresh air.

There were a group of Indian men in lawn chairs. One of them was none other than Mr. Kumar, an old family friend who I had not seen in 20 years. It turned out that he is Rajiv's uncle. Mr. Kumar recognized me and asked me to sit down. All that I could remember about him was that he was an ardent liberal and had two children who were about my age.

"So, are you still a fan of bonehead Republicans?" I found this a strange way for him to begin a conversation. He was essentially asking me whether at the age of 32 my views had changed since I was 12. I told him that I was an independent now and had moved to the left on social issues. Then I tried to change the subject to something less controversial.

"Mr. Kumar. How are your children doing? I remember that they were quite fond of football." My hope was that this would segue into some interesting conversation about hobbies and more normal topics.

"Raj and Sri are doing very well. Both are living in large houses and are in senior leadership positions. Raj is on the shortlist to win the Nobel Prize next year. So, what are you doing with your life? Are you making good money?"

I avoided the question by talking about how I was enjoying the Minneapolis area. Then I remembered that Mr. Kumar had a real passion for cars. I asked him if there were any new vehicles he liked.

"I like foreign cars only. The reason is that American cars are garbage. In fact, this whole country is going to hell and will not survive much longer as an economic superpower."

Mr. Kumar was entitled to his views, but I wondered why a rational human being would continue to live in a country that he despised when he could easily move elsewhere. Or, could he? Was the reason Mr. Kumar was staying in the US because he did not have the financial resources to live comfortably elsewhere? I wanted to ask him this, but realized that it would not be the best use of

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