

“A sound Idea” from Sanjay Chopra’s *Talespin*

There are those who are born and bred in big cities and then there are the outsiders. the outsiders can’t understand just how us city dwellers take the stress, the noise, the overcrowding. Why we need the overstimulation or why we feel isolated and get bored easily.

The gasoline fumes blended with hot stale air from a million air-conditioning vents gives all us inmates a constant hang-dog expression. And yes, to an outsider we’re all inmates of this urban prison. Morning to night, rain or shine, like terriers we keep searching, sniffing, pawing, crawling and chasing elusive bones. And then, for a few hours, we come home.

It takes an outsider to point out that the tiny hovels that we happily call home are not much bigger than a zoo cage. For me, the outsider that shone the light was my wife. She’d lived all her life with her parents in suburban Pune, miles from the big city of Mumbai. Daddy’s doublestoreyed bungalow had sights that most of us in Mumbai can only enjoy in movies or classic paintings: a lawn and a backyard.

To be fair to her, she was graceful enough to wait a week after our wedding before using words like dump and slum for my one-bedroom fl at.

Any middle-class bloke from a big city will tell you that just owning a couple of walls to hold a roof over your head is an achievement. So you can imagine my state when my wife of a few days started talking about houses with gardens front and back!

A sound engineer’s existence is at best middle-class, unless he finds that ‘special’ tune and cracks the cutthroat market. that tune had eluded me so far. Have you noticed though, that once wives convince themselves that something can be acquired they immediately discard all reality. My wife was convinced that if I looked hard enough, I would find a house like she wanted. the belief was flattering and infuriating at the same time.

Don’t get me wrong. I love my wife. Leena’s a doll. She’s got more beauty and brains than all my friends’ wives’ put together. And she knows it.

God save us from women who know their value!

Sometimes I wonder why she chose me. I’m all right, I guess, but I’m no catch. We had a whirlwind courtship, I clenched my belly and popped the question and she said yes!

Among Leena’s many interests was astrology. She

picked out an auspicious date. Her parents were abroad at that time so we decided to only have a court marriage. We're still to have the big reception and I am yet to make the formal trip to meet the in-laws.

It was only a matter of time before she had me scouting for 'livable' places in complete earnest.

For some time, she almost made me believe that it was possible. But reality was that after scraping the bottom of my financial barrel and borrowing from everyone I knew, I couldn't manage more than thirty lakh rupees. That's like spare change in the highly inflated real estate market.

Strangely enough, my wife's belief in our ability to find her dream house turned out pretty accurate. For it was not an ordinary fl at that we found, but a cottage with stucco finish walls and a sloping Mediterranean roof. A cottage smack in the middle of the city enclosed in its personal little grove of mango trees. the baroque-style fountain and pristine white marble flooring in the living room were a bit much. But for Leena, it was out of a fairy tale.

Okay, I'm from the big slummy city ... I have no taste. 'It's so much like Daddy's,' are high words of praise for me.

Every fairy tale must have its goblin, and for the cottage, it was the real estate agent, Mishra.

'Don't worry, darling,' said Leena. 'Nothing so dreamy ever comes unattached.'

Funny, she's never said anything like that about me.

Mishra is a hard nut to crack. Even though the cottage has been lying vacant for years, he's in no hurry to sell.

'Arre, Mukul sahib, I've waited so many years ... I'll wait some more. the owners live abroad. the prices will pick up in a year or so. My best price is eighty-five lakhs. No negotiations, huh. Please.'

Over four months. I have tried cultivating the man, but Mishra, with his betel-juice-stained, starched kurtas and quivering belly, never gets ruffled.

One evening, I had just finished a long recording session at my studio and lit a cigarette before locking up.

Can't smoke at home, you know ... Leena doesn't approve.

A man walked into the studio. He was an agent for a new stereo manufacturer. We get a lot of walk-in salesmen from new sound companies and I try to shoo him out. This one is more adamant than the rest.

He says his company is offering something revolutionary in sound technology. He takes out of his bag, three speakers the size of golf balls, a woofer the size

of a cigarette packet and a remote control.

When he hits the play button, the sound is unmatched for in depth and quality. Much larger and more elaborate sound systems don't produce the same effect. I'm impressed.

'In fact, sir, you can use it for all your live background sound playback. the quality of sound is crystal clear, but the real speciality of the system is its remote. It's got a range of 200 metres.'

I set-up the system and check it out. the guy is right.

The sound is great and the remote works even from across the street.

'I like it, but five lakhs is too much for this.'

'Sir, you don't have to pay now. Just keep it ... try it out for fifteen days. Give me a post-dated cheque. I'll encash it only after two weeks. But I know you'll never want to give it back.'

That night long after Leena is asleep, I make myself some tea and creep out to the balcony for a smoke. At first, the idea appears just as a niggling thought, like you've missed something in the picture. Before long, I've smoked half the packet. then suddenly it's upon me with heart-pounding clarity.

The sky has just started turning a shade lighter. I want to go in and wake Leena.

But I don't have to. I know that she's there behind me on the balcony. I haven't seen her, but I've always been able to sense her presence. I've seen her many times like this, just standing there looking at me. It's flattering mostly, but sometimes it gives me a start. the overcast pre-monsoon sky discharges a few drops.

I take her back into the flat to tell her my idea.

'Sweetheart, why do you think that though this cottage is so beautiful, it's priced only at eighty-five lakhs? I mean, a place like that, in Mumbai, should be worth much more I tell her.'

'I don't know. Maybe it's isolated or the access road is bad. I never thought about it. Maybe you big city types are only happy when you live nose to armpit!'

Wow! It's 4 a.m. and she can still be testy.

'I'll tell you what I think. Nobody says this openly, but I think it's because the right boundary wall of the cottage is adjacent to an old deserted cemetery.'

'Really? I had no idea.' Leena seems a little disturbed.

'Hey, how does it matter, right? I mean, for us it's our dream house.'

'You're right. I don't care. that place is too pretty for

me to care.'

This was the time to reveal my master plan. I wanted to make it sound just right.

'You and I don't care, my darling, but people do. People are superstitious, you know. You'd think only illiterate rural bumpkins would be that way, but people in cities are no different. Deep inside everybody has this dread of the supernatural. Nobody's comfortable living next to an old graveyard. I think that's the real reason not many people are interested in this place.'

I give her my best conspiratorial smile.

'Now listen, till now there is only an abstract fear because of this house's proximity to the graveyard. What if this fear becomes real?'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning, what if something actually happens that shows people that there is something weird about this place?'

'What do you mean weird?'

'You know, what if this place is haunted? People will get scared out of their wits. Even those who show a minor interest will be put off. Then that Mishra is cornered.

You're an economics graduate. You know what happens when there's only one buyer. He dictates the price!'

Leena is a smart woman, but I don't blame her for not following. It takes a particularly unscrupulous bent of mind to understand what I was plotting.

I am big city born and bred. You don't make it here without jimmying ethics a little.

'I don't get it. Why are you telling me all this? Nothing like that ... that weirdness has happened. Has it?'

'No, it hasn't, darling ... but it can be made to happen.'

I use the smile again.

'Made to happen? How?'

Then I tell her about the salesman and the new sound system. I tell her about its incredibly small size, the depth of its sound and the range of its remote control. How easy it would be to set-up the system in the cemetery one night and play some bloodcurdling, chilling sound. It wouldn't be tough. He had access to hundreds of recordings. They could then count on the story to spread till that little cottage became completely pariah.

'I know it sounds miskey, sweetie, but I know it can work, and remember the saying – desperate times need desperate measures.'

I have to say this about Leena. She didn't hesitate for even a minute. Whatever misgivings she might have had,

ethical or otherwise were long eroded by the misery of the cramped one bedroom existence.

'How do we pull it off?' is all she asked.

'We'll get that system. then one evening we'll go and rig the speakers in a tree in the cemetery ... they're too small to be noticed. After that, all we do is park some distance away and play our concert! It'll be our own private sting operation!'

Her eyes turn smoky with promise as she leans closer and whispers in my ear.

'I'd love that. Our own private sting.'

The next day I call the salesman and ask him to deliver the sound system. the deal is that he will only deposit my cheque fifteen days later. that evening, Leena and I drive past the cottage and park near the cemetery. there's no one around. this place has been deserted for years. Most of the graves have been overrun by the undergrowth.

I spot a tree with a wide fork in the middle.

'That's the one.' I point and Leena nods.

It's still light, but the place makes us uncomfortable.

We don't stay a moment longer than necessary.

Over the next two days I put aside all other work. I go through the hundreds of recordings in my data bank. It's difficult to find a sound that is scary yet subtle.

On the second evening, I finally find it. It's a background score from an old movie that had got shelved.

It's the sound of a woman. A stifled shriek followed by heavy raspy breathing. But the crowning feature is the very real rustling of cloth sound at the end of the track.

Just listening to that sound even in the studio makes me uneasy. I remembered the words of an old sound engineer I had started as an apprentice with:

'Sound is the most effective medium, Mukul. Far more impactful than words or images. You know, the brain retains more sounds than images. Always remember that when your clients are being difficult.'

The old boy was absolutely right.

In the evening I open a bottle of wine and play Leena's favourite Michael Buble CD.

'If we play this recording one night and then again after a couple of nights, people who hear it will be convinced that there is something strange about the cemetery. I can see it all happening. We will finally have a house, darling. A real house with a garden. A place to bring up kids in. Maybe even a private studio. Waah! What a life it'll be!'

Finally our big night arrives. Just past midnight, Leena

and I park our car a couple of hundred metres from the cemetery. Leena holds a flashlight as I climb the tree we'd seen earlier and install the micro speakers, the woofer and a battery pack.

Through the dense undergrowth some lights can be seen across a stretch of open ground.

'See that, honey,' I tell Leena, 'There's a new building site. Quite a few construction workers stay overnight in these sites. they'll be our front-row audience.'

We're both breathing hard from the excitement.

Back in the car when we hit 'play' on the remote, the effect is startling. In this dark and foreboding landscape, the sound from those speakers is hair-raising.

Leena even shivers and snuggles closer to me.

'How will we know that the plan is working?' she asks.

'Yeah, I've thought about that. I know this guy, Raju.

He's that estate agent Mishra's office boy. I've been cultivating him for some time ... You know ten bucks now and then. He'll report back to me directly from Mishra's office. But I think we may need to go back and play this a few times.'

'I'm not going back there again.' She shivers again.

'Hey, sweetheart, how can you be scared of our own creation? think of the payback. Focus on that.'

A few days later, we go back at night and repeat our performance.

What we didn't know then was that our first 'show' hadn't gone unnoticed. Some workers had heard the sounds and the first buzz had already begun. After the second time, people started getting convinced that all was not right with that graveyard. Soon the grapevine was aflame with stories of ghosts and spirits. the more imaginative, even claimed sightings.

'Look at these people, huh! I've even heard stories of frightening cries and tortured screams being heard. Let them add more spice ... Good for us!' I tell Leena.

Although Mishra is full of bluster and confidence, unknown to us, that cottage has been a thorn in his side for a long time. He's scared that if the press gets wind of this haunted graveyard story, that's the end of the cottage sale.

It's not long before I get a call from him.

I turn around. I can sense that Leena's been standing behind me the whole time.

'He's brought the price down to fifty lakhs. We just have to wait. He'll come around to our budget.'

'Wow! Our dream house. You're so smart! I've married a genius!'

I'll lap up whatever words of praise come my way. God knows they're few and far between!

The only other time I've seen her this ecstatic was when I gifted her a Mughal miniature painting. It cost a couple of months pay, but the look on her face was worth it. She could spend hours with stuff like that.

'Mukul, let's not wait. I'll arrange for the rest of the money through a bank loan. this house is too good to take a chance with.'

I tell her that banks right now are being hugely anal about who they give loans to.

'Don't worry about it. A close college friend is the head of a bank. He'll do it.'

I'm a little surprised. Like a lot of great looking women, Leena is mostly wary of the intentions of men.

'No free lunches with men,' is something I've heard very often. this house must be really important to her.

The next day I go to Mishra's office and pay him a deposit of two lakhs for the house.

The day after that, the story about the haunted graveyard hits the stands.

A few days later, I get a call from Mishra's office. I wink at Raju, my office boy contact, before walking in.

There are some people in his office. the presence that dominates the whole room is a man of about sixty.

He's tall and lean with a beaked nose and the sharpest piercing eyes I've ever seen. His silver-grey hair are swept back into a pony tail. A profusion of rings with coloured stones on his fingers catches the light. there is a strange mystical aura about him. He's flanked on either side by assistants.

Mishra gets up as I enter.

'Ha, Mukul. this is Professor Jai Varma.'

I extend my hand, but there's no response from the mystery man.

'The professor sahib called me yesterday. You see, he's very interested in that cottage. He's offered eighty-five lakhs, my original price. Since we hadn't signed a deal yet, I'll just return your deposit.' He takes the money out of the drawer.

I'm not sure what the hell is going on. this has got to be the shortest-lived euphoria ever.

I turn to the prof.

'But haven't you heard about the place. Has he told you about it, sir?'

'Arre, that is why professor sahib is interested. He's doing some research.'

'Research? What research?'

The professor gives me a penetrating look once over. He speaks in a fruity baritone.

'He's right. I'm a professor of occultology. It's the study of occult practices and supernatural phenomenon or apparitions and ghosts as you lay people call them. I've been working in the United States for the past ten years. My area of expertise is in the tracking of supernatural energy or spirits, as you call them. I specialize in feminine spirits.'

He sizes me up, probably to see if I'm worthy of more information. Apparently I am.

'Humeira was a beautiful lady of the Mughal court who lived in the sixteenth century. She was known for her looks and even more for her virtue. She'd never lifted her veil to any man except her husband. the emperor of that time, Shah Jahan, built a canopied market called the Meena Bazar. It was a market fair for the court with lavish stalls and silks and jewels from all over the world. Actually it was an elaborate pantomime. the shops were run by the court ladies who haggled over prices, joshed each other in a flirtatious, mildly bacchanalian fiesta. Freely dispensed spiced wine helped loosen the rigid social lines. It was all a bit of sexual tease. the only place where, by the emperor's decree, all the court ladies had to wear veils made of only gossamer-thin muslin.'

The professor stopped to take a sip of the steaming tea which had been brought in. He seemed to slurp over the tea, but I could tell what he really relished was this tale.

'Nobody, not even the emperor could have realized the effect of allowing this permissiveness.

'A senior Amir caught a glimpse of Humeira and was bewitched by her beauty. He was ready to barter anything to possess her. He was a powerful man. Humeira's husband worked under him. the Amir owned an elegant palace made of pristine makrana marble. Made by a Turkish architect, it was the first of its kind.

'Humeira and her husband were Persian immigrants. Though her husband had been employed as a high official in the Mughal court, he was constantly jockeying to rid himself of the 'outsider' badge. In those days, status was totally derived by land and property. Ownership of a rare makrana palace would no doubt provide an instant fillip to his status.

'Humeira, meanwhile, had remained a simple girl who found it difficult to adjust to the jealousies of the zenana and intrigues of the Hindustani society. She had become a liability. Her husband, on the other hand, found his true calling amidst the politics and bluster of the Mughal court. It was essential for an officer to have a patron to advance his career and counter the intrigues of his rivals. Her husband saw a double benefit. He offered her to his elderly overlord in exchange for the marble palace and his patronage. She would never have agreed willingly so the husband pretended that he's divorcing her for another.

'But the emperor found out and was livid at the level of depravity of his courtiers. She was betrayed and killed by both her husband and her lover so that she couldn't give evidence against them. they chose a particularly malevolent method.

'She celebrated her husband's birthday each year with a garden party. In the fall, the high wind with the first hint of chill had blown dry leaves in heaps all over the garden. They poisoned her and hid her body beneath a bed of dry leaves. the next day the heaps of leaves were burnt.'

The professor looked at me

'Do you see? Not only did they murder her for their individual lust, but they even denied her a proper burial. Her spirit has been coming back over the centuries, but this is the first reported contact in the last fifty years.'

I can only stare at the man.

'But how will you find it? And what will you do with it?'

He smiles patiently.

'It's too complicated. You won't understand it. We use sophisticated technology like lasers and sonar and computers.'

This was getting crazy!

'What is it? Is it a ghost? Why does it come back?'

'Oh, the legend is that Humeira was killed by the sting of a Kazdum, Persian for scorpion. Persian was the language of the Mughal nobles. Kazdum means poisoned tail. In Persia, the scorpion was despised not only for its sting, but also because there was poison in its heart, in its intent.

'She always comes back to places infested by scorpions like the cemetery is. Death follows in her wake and her victims have always been men.'

'But how do you know it's the same thing?' I ask.

'Oh, that's simple. Because of the sound. the reported sound is a dead giveaway. It's the exact same sound of Humeira.'

This was fast spinning out of control. I had started to get desperate now.

'But, sir, you haven't seen or heard anything yourself, have you? You're just going by rumours. You know how fickle Indians can be when talking about ghosts and all.'

The professor's eyes flash and voice turns cold.

'That's the problem with you young people. Indians are this and that ... Everything Western is right. My friend, we have an ancient and knowledgeable culture. We were investigating the supernatural much before the West had any idea about it.

'You want to know how I know it's the same spirit? I'll tell you. It's because of the sound. Yes, the rustling of cloth sound at the end. that's the key, the telltale sign of Humeira.

'Her dying shriek is always followed by the sound of her coming back to retrieve her veil, the sign of her purity. It's the veil that trails and rubs on dry leaves as she leaves her body.'

This was insane. I wanted to shout out the truth to this mad man.

'I need the house because it's the perfect vantage point to set-up our equipment. It might take time, but I can wait. I know that she'll be back. My research is funded by an American foundation. Money does not matter. You can never match us. Get yourself some other place.'

I hear the phone ring before I enter my flat. My expression must be a giveaway because it knocks Leena's smile right off. I move to get the phone.

'Morning, Mr Mukul, Just wanted to tell you that we encashed your cheque today since the two weeks are up. Thanks, it was great doing business with you.'

I stare dumbly at the handset. Five lakhs for the stereo system down the drain and no house to show for it.

Then I hear the lilting jingle of my cellphone.

It's the same deep baritone I've grown to hate. the tone of the professor's voice is softer now, almost civil.

'I found some of your stuff on my property. You know the things you'd planted in a tree. I just came to know that you're a sound engineer. I have the equipment, my friend, all I need now is the sound. You have it, don't you? I'm sure we can work out a deal. As I explained earlier, the grant for my research depends on it.'

I take a couple of deep breaths.

'I get it, professor. I have what you need, sir. My offer is this: pay for half the cost of the house, it'll be in my name and I'll live in it with my wife. We'll let you keep

your gadgets there to keep the pretence of your research going and I'll give you a copy of my recording.'

I could make out by his silence that he was going to agree to my proposal. Gone was the attitude, gone was the crappy spirit of scientific enquiry and gone was the saga of some ancient damsel. This was a deal in the real world, something I could understand. He didn't have a choice really. He was paying for my silence. Sometimes silence is really the best sound.

The arrangement worked out just fine. We moved into our cottage. The professor took the outhouse and parked his equipment there milking the American grant for all its worth. Leena and the professor hit it off really well.

Probably because of their common interests in astrology, the occult and the like. I can just about tolerate him.

There's angles to that man that I just can't understand. I'm not kidding that Leena's started spending time with him, but I don't want to sound like a typical husband about it.

A few days later, I've just about locked up my studio.

The monsoon has burst upon the city in full fury. The first few days are always bad. The waterlogging and traffic snarls are a nightmare. I'm not looking forward to the drive. The house deal has left me some extra cash and I've just got myself a new SUV. That baby should be good at handling slippery roads.

A couple of hundred metres and I'm stuck in a long line of cars crawling forward.

Above the thwack of the windshield wipers I hear my cellphone ring.

It's the agent from the stereo company.

'Mr Mukul, sir, I'm really sorry, but there's been a bad mistake by us. Our head office called from Singapore.

They've accidentally packed the wrong remote controls in this lot. You must be wondering why yours is not playing.

Actually everyone else we sold it to called us. Maybe you didn't try out the remote. I called to say we'll change it by next week.'

'How can it be? Mine worked.'

'Not possible, sir. The frequencies don't match.'

What the hell was going on?

There was something very weird happening here. My remote control had played not once in that cemetery, but twice.

I don't know why, but I think it's got something to do with that professor. I'd always suspected him.

Oh, God! Leena was alone in the house right now with him. In my rush, I dial a wrong number twice. The phone

was in the kitchen. I could hear it ring in that empty way when you know nobody's there. I tried her cell. No reply there either. Where the hell was she? What had happened?

What had he done to her?

Should I call the cops? But what'll I tell them?

Why did I leave her with that maniac?

The traffic ahead inches forward. I hit the horn continuously. I try to distract myself by switching FM channels on the radio.

The rain is coming down in sheets now.

The road ahead is slick with wet mud. If I stay on this main road I'll probably take more than an hour to get home. Just ahead, I see a turn, it's an arterial road looking a little more raw and rough because of the rain. But it'll cut the driving time by half, plus I'd skip the traffic.

My new SUV should be able to handle it. Didn't they advertise it as a great off-road drive?

Why isn't she answering the phone?

As I turn to take the side road, my car skids a little on the slick surface. It's getting dark and I need my headlights turned on the unlit road.

A thought comes to me. this road runs through the entire length of the cemetery to get to our house.

The heavy rain has reduced this road to a little more than a mud track. the heavy SUV skids again. I fight the wheel and the tires swing back under control.

I begin to regret a few decisions like taking this road ... like leaving Leena alone ... like getting involved in this house.

What the hell! It wasn't really my fault.

She wanted the house. Come to think of it she forced me to look for a new house.

And *this* house. I remember her waving a newspaper ad ... She'd found it.

She got the loan organized for it. I hadn't even asked how.

Why had I never met any of her friends? Even her parents, including her dear 'Daddy'?

'Oh! You'll soon get to meet everybody, darling.'

When I was hesitant to make a deal with the crazy professor, she was the one who pushed me.

I wrench the wheel hard to prevent another skid. It's really coming down. I can barely see the road.

And now this interest in that madman's work?

I had asked her if she was uncomfortable when she was alone so close to a cemetery.

'No, I find it very ... *restful*,' she'd said.
The radio has all this time been playing the latest film songs. A new programme entertaining requests has just begun. they're playing songs for people by their sunsigns.
The volume suddenly jumps a couple of notches. They're interviewing some hotshot astrologer between songs. His voice is clear.
'This one goes out for all the October and November born. the sign of the Scorpio, known as Serket to the Egyptians and Kazdum to the Persians.'
Kazdum ... Kazdum ... where have I heard this word before?
Humeira was killed by the sting of a Kazdum, Persian for scorpion.
Her victims have always been men.
The whole car is shuddering now. I don't even know if I'm on the road or if there is a road left at all.
I remember her fascination for that Mughal painting. The scene of a celebration.
'We'll celebrate the 29th of October in our new house, my darling. We'll call all our friends. It'll be a birthday you'll remember.'
I remembered the profusion of rings on the professor's hands.
'Oh, those are for my sunsign.' He'd smiled. 'Like you, I'm also a scorio.'
Kazdum is not Persian for scorpion alone. It's also the sunsign scorio. I want to shout it out to the professor now.
The radio breaks in. 'The whole programme today is for scorios. An interesting fact guys. Did you know that according to a poll, Mumbai has the highest number of people with scorio sunsigns in the country?'
Every century she visits a place infested with scorios.
I grab my cellphone. I have to warn him.
It's a miracle I can dial in the badly jostling vehicle.
It just rings endlessly. It's too late.
I can see the lights of our house in the distance. through the rain they seem blurred. Can't judge the distance. they may be miles away or just around the next bend.
Where's she?
I need not bother. I don't have to look in the rearview mirror. I know who's in the back seat. I told you, I can always sense her presence.
Any sound I might have made has dried in my throat,

an urgent high-pitched scream fills my world. It seems to come from the speakers, from outside, from everywhere. In spite of my state, I smile. I recognize it. It's my own recording.

I look in the mirror.

I can't see her face. It's difficult to make out through the heavy veil she's wearing.

The car lurches and goes into a skid.

The tires screech to find traction. the car seems to be lifted off the ground and carried in a river of mud.

This time I know it's futile to fight on.