

BROKEN CRAYONS CAN STILL COLOUR

A Soldier and a Fighter

Captain Rakesh Walia

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*Dedicated to that unlimited power, within, that can change human lives
and shape destinies forever.*

*Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing,
doubting, and dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before.*

~ Edgar Allan Poe

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AUTHOR PROFILE

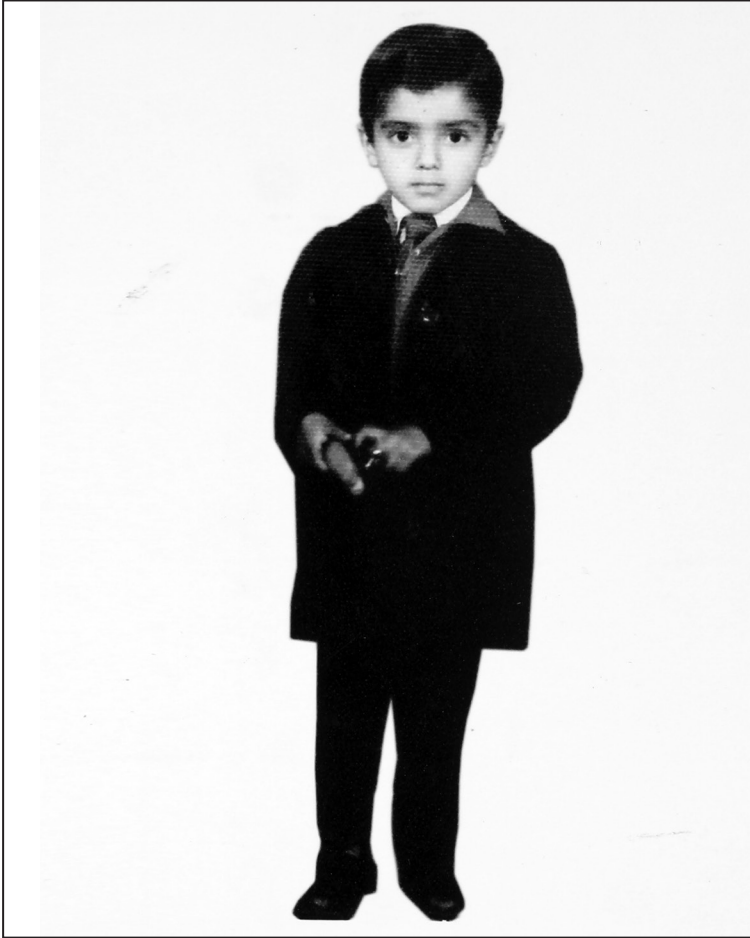


Captain Walia is a man of varied interests; a positive influencer, a motivator and a people's man, who likes to lead from the front. A self-made man, he decided at a very young age, to shape his world, rather than be shaped by it, and pursued his childhood dream of joining the Gurkha Rifles, one of the most prestigious regiments of the Indian Army, in 1983 and by serving the nation in some of the most challenging operations within and across borders. He performed outstandingly well while in national service to be appointed as GSO3 (Intelligence) Headquarters 350 Infantry Brigade, one of the most coveted designations to be awarded to a Captain.

He had to resign from the Army in 1992, on extreme compassionate grounds and later went on to join the corporate world where he continued to make a mark for himself with complete tenacity. He began his corporate foray by joining one of the largest travel conglomerates in India, the STIC Travel Group, where he displayed immense acumen, joining as a Senior Manager to become Director - Corporate & Legal Advisory Services, in a short span of just nine years. While working with STIC, he got associated with some of the most iconic brands worldwide, like Virgin Atlantic Airways, All Nippon Airways, Royal Brunei Airlines, Continental Airlines and Hospitality Marketing Concepts, to mention a few. His next stint in the corporate was with Matrix Cellular (International) Services Ltd, where he is currently positioned as the Chief Administrative Officer.

Capt. Walia remains a soldier at heart and an avid football fan, a sport he enjoyed playing with his men in the Gurkha Rifles. An intrepid traveller and adventurer, he has often taken the road to some interesting and offbeat locations across the world.

Capt. Walia is committed to mentoring, guiding and motivating, especially the youth, to live a life of excellence and be gainfully integrated in the exercise of nation building.



AS SIX YEARS OLD

Chapter 1

A CHILD'S LIFE

(1961 - 1970)

Seated in my plush work office in one of the most prestigious office complexes in India, looking out at the picturesque view of the verdant lawns, I realize I have everything a man could ask for- a high profile job as CAO of Matrix Cellular (International) Services Ltd., a beautiful home in a posh address in Delhi, a doting wife and a son.

The ultimate dream come true.

However, despite all this, I cannot help but stare in amazement when I see a child clutching his mother's finger or sitting on her lap, cuddled with secure ease, for I have always been envious of those who have had the love of their parents.

I miss my mother's touch, I miss hearing my father's voice and the easy, unconditional love they gave me. I miss them every single day. Memory is a strange thing. When I was in that moment, I hardly paid it any attention but today, even after so many years, I can recall every little detail of the incident with cold and pulsating clarity.

It was in the year 1967. I was only six years old when I lost both my parents in a car accident. My memories of them are hazy and broken since I had very little time to build any lasting impressions.

The only memory still alive is that of me in a hospital corridor, waiting outside the ICU. I remember the distinct smell of Phenyl drifting across my nostrils as I could see nurses and attendants rushing around busily. Within the chaos, I remember seeing a nurse coming out of the ICU with two bodies on a stretcher.

Relatives removed the sheet from over their bodies and I remember seeing my father, his face bruised and mangled and his lifeless body bleeding.

Somewhere in the distance, I heard a doctor's voice saying, "There has been an accident. Please complete the necessary formalities."

A deathly silence settled over the room as nobody came forward to claim the bodies. Perhaps they were hesitant or reluctant to pay the hospital bills or as I prefer to remember, just taken aback by it all. I was confused, my imagination at such young age did not have the capacity to grasp the impact of what had happened and I remember watching the whole incident as an observer, from outside, as it were, looking on dispassionately.

Finally, we left the hospital and the bodies of my parents were taken directly to the cremation ground. I remember sitting in the ambulance, staring at the white sheets covering them, wondering what was going to happen next. I was trying to put the pieces together to form a complete picture, absorb the pain, the anger and the injustice of it all.

Still wondering where we were headed to, the van suddenly stopped with a jolt and I was forced to step out of the van as we had reached the cremation ground.

At the cremation ground, the bodies were taken out and kept on rectangular pyres. Everyone collected around the funeral pyre looking sombre. The priest called out, "Who will light the pyre?"

One of my uncles, standing beside me responded, "He is their son. He should perform the ritual."

The priest handed me a wooden stick, lit from one end, and directed me to walk towards the platform where the bodies lay.

I was made to light the pyre. The heat emanating from the pyre was so strong that it not only scorched my arms, but my heart too. I instantly pulled back and went and sat quietly at a distance, on a bench. Slowly I watched the fire spread, the flames grew higher, dancing with destruction as they devoured my parents and ending their presence in my life.

I was too young to understand what death meant, but somewhere I knew that there was something terribly wrong and that I would never see my parents again.

I wanted to bring them back to life, to curl into my mother's lap and be comforted in my father's arms. Seeing me sob uncontrollably my mother's sister, Aunt Maya, came up to me and held me by my shoulders. "Be strong! You are not alone, you are like my son and I promise to keep you safe."

Her loving words and comforting hug were just what I needed at that point. After the funeral, the other rituals continued in a blur and we all went to one of my relative's home. I was told to have a bath and given my cousin's clothes to wear.

The clothes were so oversized that they had to be cut to fit me. The sleeves were just chopped off and I was given a popping string to hold my shorts. Mattresses were spread out on the floor and I was asked to sleep in a room full of relatives. Unnoticed, I took to the corner of the room, huddled against the wall, weeping inconsolably. Covering my face with a sheet, I gradually drifted into a fitful sleep. When I woke up next morning, it was daylight. I looked around a bit confused. It was not my room, or my house. For a split second I thought I was having a bad dream, but then reality rushed in with its acrid sting.

Meanwhile, wondering what to do next, I heard hushed, muffled voices discussing my parents and me. The conversation was not clear, but I caught a few broken sentences.

"What do we do with him?"

"Put him in an orphanage."

"We have enough of our own."

"I don't want him, what a nuisance."

"I have enough children of my own, I can't deal with more."

I couldn't quite figure out what the context of the conversation was, or the consequences, but I knew they were talking about me and it made me feel scared and unsure.

It was only a short while ago that we had led a wonderfully comfortable life together. My parents had spent time with me, cuddling and hugging me. My father ran a successful business in Kapurthala, Punjab and operated from in and around those areas. We lived in a sprawling house with a huge lush green garden and it was a happy home.

But then, in the blink of an eye, everything changed.

I remember desperately craving for the safe boundaries of my home, and the sense of belongingness it had given me, out of reach of the hostile world.

I wanted to go back and visit my house, my room, play in the garden a little while longer, but just a few days later the house was wrapped up like a discarded gift and everything within was sold or divided between the relatives. I was wrenched away from its safe confines and shipped off to my maternal uncle's house in New Delhi. All I had to show from my previous life were a few belongings and some toys that I clutched on to desperately.

My maternal uncle, Rajiv mama, was a quiet, docile man who was never heard or seen in the house. He ran a successful electronics business in New Delhi and was always busy at work.

I would only see him when he came back home from work, at the dinner table, dressed in his *kurta pyjama*. He would make it a point to ask his children about the events of their day. He would then retire to his room for the night. My interaction with him was only when I went and handed him the newspaper in the morning. He would look at me, nod perfunctorily and ask, "How are you doing? Hope you have settled in?"

His wife, aunt Anjali, a tall, sharp-tongued woman, with a loud booming voice, ran the house and took care of the family in her assertive stride. I would have no trouble overhearing her nag and shout at her husband for having brought me into her home. My uncle would try and pacify her, but this would enrage her further and lead to even louder arguments. She would spit out in anger, "I have enough mouths to feed. Why has God sent me another?"

My aunt and uncle lived in a modest three bedroom house, located in a street behind the Liberty theatre in Karol Bagh.

The house was old fashioned and just about big enough to accommodate my uncle and aunt and their three boys- Ankit, Rahul and Punit. Ankit was twenty one, Rahul was ten, followed by Punit who was six years old. The larger of the two rooms was occupied by my uncle and aunt. Rahul and Punit, closer in age, occupied the second, smaller room. At night, Ankit would sleep on a couch in the living room. I was made to sleep in the kitchen, on the floor, in a makeshift bed of an old worn out durrie and a kitchen rag for a pillow. Mosquitoes and ants would attack me all night and I could hear rats scuttling around in the cover of darkness for any scraps or leftovers. It was hard to get a good night's sleep and the soft bed in my old home was a distant memory now.

Ankit, the oldest of the three, had just completed his graduation. He would help his father in his electronic shop, located at Bhagirathi Palace near Red Fort. Uncle manufactured radios and audio equipments, which he retailed and exported to various countries. Rahul and Punit went to a well-known school in the neighbourhood and they were always busy with school and other activities on the weekends.

I was the youngest of the lot, lonely and desperate to befriend Rahul and Punit. I would go into their room, keen to play with their toys, look at their comics and join in with their friends. Initially, I would follow them around, imploring to join in their games, but would be rebuffed and be given a cold shoulder.

One summer evening, Rahul and Punit were playing a game of Ludo with their friends in the balcony. Waving my hands excitedly, I said, "It's my turn now. I want to throw the dice."

Rahul turned around and said threateningly to me, "We don't want you here. Stay out of our lives." Looking into my eyes menacingly, he added, "Mamma says you have no parents. You should be begging on the streets and not living here with us."

Bending close to me, his face appeared sinister. I saw him in exaggerated fragments, first the tip of his nose, then his cheekbones and then his mouth. My heart started thudding in fright and I ran out with tears blinding my eyes. Badly shaken, I clearly got the message that I was the outsider in the family and never to be accepted as part of their inner core.

An undeclared pecking order existed in the household. My position in the house was at the bottom of the rung, that of an errand boy. I would be given a roof over my head and food to survive, but in return I would have to earn my existence.

Sitting alone by the window in the kitchen, I would look out at the action in the street or play imaginary games with the pots and pans, while everybody would be busy in their rooms.

Things gradually settled down to a regular routine. Every morning, I would jump out of bed and prepare tea for the entire household. I would then go to fetch milk, bread and other groceries. On my return, I would help my aunt get the tiffins ready for the family. After everybody left, I would clear up and wash the utensils and clean the car. Later, after completing all the remaining chores, I would be given a hurried breakfast consisting of leftovers from the table.

Being constantly hungry is one of the strongest memories I have from my childhood. My aunt would give me three measured meals, which could never satiate a growing boy. Skinny, emaciated and always hungry, I couldn't remember the last time I had eaten a full meal.

More than the hunger, it was the mortification of being treated like an outsider that really hurt me. I remember an incident that really seared my heart. It was August 14, 1967, almost six months since I had moved in. It was Punit's sixth birthday. Punit's birthday and mine were only a week apart. A host of relatives and friends had joined the celebrations. The house was decorated with balloons and colourful streamers. The table was laden with mouth-watering food. It was a veritable feast. Punit's friends were eating ice creams and cake. My cousins were feasting on popcorn, samosas and sweets.

All evening, I kept running in and out of the kitchen, serving trays laden with food, hoping that I would be called in to join the festivities but nobody did. I kept waiting in vain and finally went to sleep on an empty stomach and an even emptier heart. As a child, this broke my resolve. With no choice but to put up with the discrimination, I would often cry, but nobody cared, for sympathy was fleeting and their indifference, harsh.

To insulate myself from all the loneliness, I would often take comfort in a black and white photograph of my parents, one of the few possessions I had of my earlier life. I can't remember the event, or when the photograph was taken, but I must have been around three. My father wore a fashionable suit in the picture and looked extremely stylish. Mother was elegantly draped in a beautiful Benarsi sari. They both looked so young and happy in the picture.

I would gaze at their photograph for hours and in those lonely days this photograph was of great comfort to me. I still hold this memory enlarged and framed in my living room. It is one of my favourite views and perhaps one of the few priceless memories I have of them.

Anyway, to continue with my journey, we must go back to when I was seven years old. Still living my life from the kitchen, time had treated my body well. I had grown tall, fair complexioned with good features. Whenever I looked at my reflection in the kitchen mirror over the sink, my mother's highbrow and brown eyes would stare back at me. My hair was deep brown and naturally wavy. It was my favourite feature. I thought it complemented my skin and brought out my hazel brown eyes. As most young boys at that age, I took pride in my appearance and visitors would often compliment me on my looks.

Though my aunt would always get new clothes for all her boys, I would always be given their rejects. Seeing my cousins wearing expensive clothes, I too wanted to dress up, but the concept of wearing new clothes was totally unfamiliar and I had to make do with discards. I hated wearing ill-fitting, frayed garments and would take the rejects to a tailor who would reverse and then re-stitch the collar, mend the cuffs and make them look presentable.

That year, on Diwali, I remember my aunt had bought new jeans for all my cousins. Jeans were a rage with the boys in the neighbourhood and I really fantasized about owning a pair, but I knew that I would have to wait years to get my hands on one.

One day, while cleaning my cousins room, I saw Rahul's jeans lying on the bed. I had been dreaming of owning a pair of jeans for what seemed like an eternity. I picked up his jeans and placed them over my waist, tucking them into my shorts. Just touching them was exciting enough. Of course, they were much bigger and hung loosely, but when I looked at myself in the mirror, I felt like a film star.

Just then my aunt walked into the room. Seeing me with her son's new jeans was like holding a red rag to a bull. "Put down those jeans this minute." The whole household could hear her shouting, "You are nothing, but trouble," she said in a loud, infuriated voice.

Scared out of my wits, I started to cry. I tried to explain to her, but she was unwilling to pay heed to my entreaties. "Get out from this room and do not touch Rahul's things, you horrid boy," she said.

Still enraged, she grabbed me by my hair and slapped me hard across my face. That one act of violence broke my spirit totally. Her latent hostility towards me made me shrink completely as I went to bed that night with tears streaming down my swollen face, feeling scared, angry and very, very lonely. For long after, I didn't dare stray into my cousin's room for fear of being scolded again.

Every night, I would tell myself, "Things will be different for you someday, just hold it for now." I would close my eyes and imagine myself dressed elegantly, spoilt for choice, with a closet full of new clothes that I could call mine.

Dreams only last as long as your eyes are closed. As though my home life wasn't full of trouble, right across my house, there was a park, with many trees and a winding path. I would go there just to get away from the

oppressive environment of the house and sit on a bench to rest my weary heart and body. The other children from the colony would come to play in the park. They would all look at me and call me an Orphan. I was never quite sure what the word meant, but it would always sound like an abuse. Having to put up with repeated sneers about my orphaned status, I preferred to sit alone and watch them from a distance, for I knew they wouldn't let me join them anyway.

Most people don't realize the importance of a mother's love or a secure family. Early maltreatment can derail a child's development and is fraught with emotional harm. I would focus on my chores, play silly games to avoid the neglect and social exclusion, but deep within there was a void that grew with each passing day.

It was around then that the first good thing happened to me, in a long line of woes. My father's brother visited us for a family get-together. He was shocked to see me loitering around, doing house hold chores and not going to school. He created quite a stir. I overheard him ticking off my aunt for ill-treating me and for depriving me of basic education.

He warned her, "Do you realize what you are doing and the far reaching consequences it will have on his future"

"You will be responsible, Anjali, for ruining his life!"

It was strange to see my aunt cringe under the barrage of his criticism. She hated to be made to feel small in front of all the relatives and soon after, she was forced to put me into a local government school, with no standard education. Though it was an act of concern, I knew she didn't care about me; this was just an act to pacify the critics in the family and to save face.

And so began my initial schooling at the age of seven. My primary education was limited to the basic levels of schooling imparted in a government school. All the children were from lower income backgrounds and we would all carry a takthi and a slate, instead of the books to school. The school continuously faced shortage of teachers, lacked clean drinking water and toilet facilities.

At such schools, children also worked as petty labour in all kind of jobs, to substantiate the family income. Given the lack of focus, a certain amount of lawlessness prevailed in school. The older boys would heckle the younger ones for food, money and for other titbits. Fist fights and street-like brawls were not uncommon.

Feeling a bit out of place with the other boys, I kept to myself to avoid getting into trouble. I desperately wanted to go to a good school but had no option other than to go to the school of my aunt's choice.

It was during this time that I befriended a boy in school, called Prabhat. He lived behind the school compound in the settlements near the railway crossing. He had recently lost his mother and his father had remarried a few months ago. Prabhat's step mother had three of her own children and would often ill-treat him. He led a sad and miserable life at home and was often the butt of her cruelty. Similar circumstances brought us closer and we would spend a lot of time talking about how we felt, sharing our sorrows and dreams, and aspirations for the future. Many times we would sit after school and plot to run away from home, an idea that we borrowed from the movies of the time.

One day, Prabhat said to me, "Let's run away."

"Yes," I retorted sadly. "It would be better to die free than to live like this." However, appealing as the idea appeared to be, we realized that we had no money and more importantly, no place to go. We laughed at our stupidity, but reassured ourselves that one day we would make it big.

Deprivation feeds the soul, they say. Having Prabhat to talk with took away some of my loneliness. I knew I had a friend in him and we would get through this together somehow.

Two years later, very little had changed in my life. I was nine years old, going to school in the morning and rushing home to endless grinds of household chores. My primary years were dark and bleak with no hope of letting go. My parent's death had broken me into a million pieces with little hope of putting them back together. The visceral separation left me utterly alone in a world of white noise.

Surprisingly though, despite my Dickensian like childhood, I didn't let the sadness enter my soul and most people are amazed at my positivity. When I look back, I see the hand of destiny in my life. The journey of my experiences shaped the man I am today. Although I was too young to understand, I learnt to block out the hurt and to focus on the positives, rather than the lack of them.

The narrow confines of my aunt's world tested my spirit, but it did not break me. Of course, I will always carry a few scars in my heart, but emerged with a deep understanding of my own personal self and with an indomitable spirit to face some of the greatest challenges that life would throw at me in the coming years.

BROKEN CRAYONS CAN STILL COLOUR

I live by the words:

“I am thankful to all those who said No. Because of them I did it myself”

~ Einstein



MY PARENTS JUST BEFORE THEIR ACCIDENT