

## Live And Let Die

He edged closer to me, wielding a sharp knife... was this the end? People say that a person's entire life comes before his/her eyes like a flashback at the moment of his/her impending death. That's what happened to me...my life in a flash back...

It was a bright and sunny day - the day I joined Sacmot, a well known MNC in the field of agricultural bio-technology. They were the leading manufacturers of HYV seeds and pesticides in the country. Before joining I had done my research about the company. I was enthused by the fact that the company was working towards eliminating hunger and poverty from the face of the earth. They seemed to transcend nations and national boundaries. I also heard about a controversy regarding one of their pesticides Wipeout1, which was released only in certain areas. It was believed and marginally established that there was correlation between pesticide use and diseases afflicting the people in that area. This led to legal issues for the company. The company subsequently published a full report wherein they established that they had done considerable research and there was indeed no correlation. I decided to put the controversy aside as I believed in their larger global vision.

Out of the hundreds of candidates who had applied, I was one of the three who had been chosen to work for them! I was confident when I attended the series of interviews and group discussion they put me through; I had my doubts though! So any qualified people – fellow IIM, IISc graduates! So I was pleasantly surprised when one Saturday morning I received a call from Sacmot informing me that I had been selected. My role required me to be the link between the Marketing and Research departments and they deemed me fit for the position. I was thrilled; my excitement knew no bounds when I saw my offer letter and the pay package offered to me.

So the following Monday, I woke up very early, wore my best clothes and thought about

what I would say to my employers. It was all so exciting! I hurried down and caught the bus. I sat down next to a man my age who glanced at me with amusement. Seeing my ID card he said **“You work for Sacmot? Hi, I’m Ramesh Kulkarni and I am close friends with your boss, Mr. Gupta”** I smiled and we exchanged formalities.

I arrived at my office; it may have been just a commonplace office building but at that moment, for me, it was the most sensational place in the world. I walked into my new office. It was large and furnished with a large, teak desk, a bookshelf and a few chairs accompanied with a sleek table. The floors were carpeted and the walls painted in a lovely shade of blue. Blue my favorite color!

I walked up to my desk, with a sense of satisfaction and pride and looked at my new assignments. I filled up some forms and glanced over a manual which talked about the company and their commitment to a global community where poverty is non-existent.

I finished the given work and as it was lunchtime, I went to the cafeteria. There I was joined by a few other colleagues’ who were part of my marketing team. My manager introduced me to the team and we discussed the long term vision of the company and the goals and objectives of our department. Suddenly, someone mentioned Wipeout2.

**“So Wipeout2 is ready for release?” I was surprised and inquired, “They’re releasing a Wipeout2?!”** Someone replied **“Yes...Yes...all the defects of Wipeout1 have been rectified. We won’t see any more legal documents for some time”**

**“Good, good, we can release it as soon as possible. And this time in the global market!”**

**“Have you heard of the new marketing scheme?”**

**“Yes, it seems to be quite exceptional. It’s sure to reap in the profits.”**

After a few months, one day on my way back from the cafeteria to my office, I passed by the conference room. I paused for a minute on hearing voices coming from inside the

room. **“So, are you sure the defects of Wipeout1 have been solved?” “Have we incorporated findings from Fitzroy’s research in our Wipeout2? Is it possible to safely market it?” “Yes, we believe so, but if any problem occurs, we can do what we did last time and need not mention that fool Fitzroy.”** I was positively alarmed to hear this and wondered what they could have possibly done last time. I was shocked beyond belief.

After a few days... at the cafeteria, I heard someone mentioning one Prof. Fitzroy. The name sounded familiar and I asked who Prof. Fitzroy was. He looked around anxiously and quietly told me **“He was an ex-employee who was with the R&D department. He was a brilliant scientist. Sadly for us, he disappeared one day and has not been seen since.”** I stared at him in disbelief, pondering about what I had just heard. I made a mental note of this piece of information. I asked Ramesh about this and he said that the Prof. Fitzroy left on his own. But somehow his answer did not satisfy me.

So, I decided to do some research on my own. I found out that he was well-known in his field, he was also respected both for his ethics and his expertise. So there was much hype about his disappearance. I came across a news article that stated that he had disappeared a few months ago.

I wanted to get to the bottom of the truth and decided to visit Mrs. Fitzroy. Upon my arrival, I knocked on the door and heard a voice over an intercom system asking me who I was. I gave the needed information and the reason for the visit. I was let into the house and was welcomed by a lady in her mid-thirties. She was wearing a skirt and a sweater-top and gave me an inquiring look. I asked her if she knew Professor Fitzroy. She glanced around even though we were in an empty room. She nimbly leaned forward and told me she was the Professor’s wife, Yvonne.

She seemed like a kind woman and asked me whether I had any information regarding

her husband. I realized she had mistaken me for a police officer. When I mentioned that I worked for Sacmot, she turned hostile. **“You...You work for them...?? Get out of my house!!I don’t want anything to do with that wretched company!!”** I was shocked and quickly hurried out. **“But...but...”**I stammered but she slammed the door on my face. Why was she so frightened and angry I wondered? I decided that she was hiding something.

I decided to go back and try my luck again in the night. I rang the doorbell, no one answered. I pushed the door, it was open. I tiptoed in and soon realized that there was no one there. I quickly went into the study and looked around for anything that would give me some leads. I almost gave up when I chanced upon a file in a drawer. When I opened the file, on the inside cover I noticed, scribbled in a slanting handwriting, the words **‘wo1-conf’**. Suddenly, I heard the main gate open, I quickly grabbed the file and slipped out.

I went back home and looked over the papers. Some sheets were dated 19<sup>th</sup> June. I realized that it was a week before the legal cases were filed and also a few days before the Professor’s sudden disappearance. It seemed to me that the Professor had meant this to be a secret document as the information it contained was either cryptic or in a secret code. What I was able to figure out was that the Professor had visited many rural areas and had recorded some observations. There was a long list of medical terms I did not understand. I did some research and found out that these were the names of the diseases. Were these caused by Wipeout1? Is this linked to the Professor’s disappearance? Could this be true? Was the pesticide the actual cause of the diseases? I went over the list of the villages the Professor had probably visited - Ulapur, Sholaynagar and Kambarahalli. Kambarahalli? This was my own village! Had the Professor had gone there as well?

I was taken aback! My own village? The people I know? The kids I had played with

when I went for 'jathras' or holidays? Vijay, Gopal, Madhu and Sita? The next day I decided that I would go to the office to find out more about Wipeout2. We had a meeting that day about the sales management of Wipeout2 which was slated for a global release. A global release possibly leading to global destruction..?

At the end of the meeting, when we were asked if we had any questions I raised my hand. My manager looked at me warmly and said **“Yes, Mr. Pulakhanandam? You have a question?”** I was nervous but quietly asked them what the difference between Wipeout1 and Wipeout2 was. My manager was a little surprised but replied stating that Wipeout2 was the improved version of Wipeout1, with all the defects fixed. I asked them more confidently how they were sure and who had stated that the defects had been fixed? My manager was even more surprised. He stammered **“we-well Mr. Pulakhanandam . A...a..all our pro-products have been certified fit for use b-by the FDA. As you know we have carried out extensive research about the effects. We wouldn't be releasing it into the global market if we had any doubts whatsoever.** I nodded and casually questioned **“Has the company received a confirmation from the Indian Ministry of Agriculture?”** The manager tried to hide his irritation which was palpable and curtly replied **“Well, Mr. Pulakhanandam. I don't see how that matters. Now are we done? I declare this meeting over.”**

As soon as I was back in my office I realized that something was wrong with the new pesticides approval and that the company must have paid of someone to get the job done. Maybe I could find out more about their financial transactions? I logged in to my company account and tried to access the older transaction records for large sums of money transacted. It was protected... ..

I decided that the next best thing I could do was to visit my village.

The next day I took leave of absence for a week stating personal reasons. I had earlier

told Ramesh of my intentions. After a 4-hour long journey I finally reached my village. Most of the things were the same. The houses, the large banyan tree under which the Panchayat meetings were held, Uncle Lallu's little sweet shop ...all there. The village seemed deserted even for a hot, sunny afternoon. A few people milled about. I hurried to my ancestral home. My grandmother had passed away a few years ago, so my Ajja lived here. As soon as I entered, my Ajja walked in. He was wearing his usual white dhoti with a button-up shirt. **"Harish putta, what a surprise? what are you doing here?"** I glanced about uneasily, unsure whether to tell him about the report and the conversation I had overheard about Wipeout1 and 2. My Ajja easily sensed my uneasiness and asked, **"Is everything alright?"** I decided to confide in my Ajja as it was his village too. I narrated the conversation, the Professor, my visit to his home and the report, laying special emphasis on the fact that the Professor had come to our village.

My Ajja was a farmer; let me digress a bit. His story is wonderful. I'd like to share it with you.

In his youth he decided to leave the village and come to the city. He got a job in a transport company. After a few years, he became the manager and one day while visiting a rural area he visited the house of a farmer. They welcomed him and my Ajja noticed how happy they were when they talked about the farm. They stated that farming was the noblest of all professions and they shared the joys of farming. This impacted my Ajja deeply, so he resigned his job, moved back to the village and thus began his life as an organic farmer.

Now back to the story. After listening to me, my Ajja replied, **"Come, let us go see for ourselves whether what you found out is true."** On the street I saw a child sitting with her mother. There seemed to be some problems with the child. As I walked along with my *Ajja*, I noticed few more children with similar problems. My *Ajja* then took me to

my childhood friend Madhu's house. I was stunned to see her. The sparkle in her eyes and the ready smile that I associated with her, was no longer there. She seemed to be pale, tired, worn-out copy of her old self. **"Come in,"** she said weakly. When I went in, I noticed them. Two children lying on a mat...it seemed like Nature had played a cruel joke on them! Then the thought struck me, Was it Nature..... or man-made? The image of the old Madhu flashed before my eyes and filled me with deep despair.

Ajja asked me whether I wanted to visit my old friend, Gopal's house. More bad news. As I entered the house, the first thing that caught my eyes was a garlanded photograph of my friend Gopal. I was shocked. As I gathered myself, Suma, his wife walked in. She gave me a scrutinizing look and she looked at me sadly and said **"Your friend Gopal passed away...** My healthy, energetic, happy friend Gopal? Gone...? I asked her what had happened. **"Well, he committed suicide..." "Why?!"** I Inquired. Gopal was always happy! Why would he do such a thing? **"Well, the debts you, see"** And seeing my blank look she explained. A new type of seed called Seedo2X, that promised higher yields had been introduced, so all the farmers bought it. After some time it overran the natural seeds in the market. Then suddenly, Sacmot, the manufacturing company radically increased the price. As the farmers were unable to buy these seeds and could not go back to using natural seeds, they had to take loans at high interests which led to a deep debt. If this wasn't bad enough the company introduced a new pesticide Wipeout1 which was guaranteed to kill all the pests. So, the farmers decided to buy this as well. This led to even more debt. You see this area did not receive our usual quota of monsoon rains for the past three seasons. This added to our woes. Crops failed two seasons in a row. This was the last straw for your friend, Gopal. He committed suicide five months ago. I was shocked! What had happened here? What had happened to not only my village but possibly to thousands all over the country and possibly the world?

Ajja said to me, **"Do you know that farmer suicides have become a commonplace event, these days. More than 17,350 farmers committed suicide in 2009 alone; the**

**main reason was debts”.**

I responded wearily, **“Some of them can be traced back to Sacmot.”**

*Ajja* replied, **“Do you now realize why I told you not to take up that job?”**

We then went to meet *Ajja*’s friend. We were welcomed in by his son, Vijay who told us that his father was resting. I walked in quietly only to find Venugopal *thatha* who I remembered as a robust and healthy man in a state of decay. It was shocking! I gasped and uttered a cry. He was lying down on the bed. On seeing me he broke into a weak yet enthusiastic smile and we exchanged formalities. Vijay informed me that he had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer –stage 4; he also mentioned that the doctor feels it could be due to the exposure to Wipeout1. The confirmed what I had been thinking all along.

I was deeply distressed and perplexed. I wondered out loud how my *Ajja* continued to be healthy when most of the people I encountered in the village were suffering from one disease or the other. He replied that he refused to use any of these chemicals and he had continued with his traditional practices. He stated that he took adequate precautions. He also stated that, from the very beginning he had a hunch that chemical agriculture was short-sighted and its benefits, short lived. He said that he had more faith in practices that had evolved over hundreds of years. *Ajja* suggested that I go meet Dr. Kumar.

I went to meet Dr. Kumar. It was a little house and I knocked on the door. A man in his thirties opened the door. He looked exhausted and welcomed me in. I told him that I was working for Sacmot and had come to the village to find out about the effects of Wipeout1. He looked at me with an expression of bewilderment. He quickly murmured that I should stop meddling into the affairs of the company as it would bring nothing but

trouble. He added that he had tried and they had ruined his life. I glanced at him curiously. What was he talking about?

Then it struck me, like a lightning bolt. **“You’re Prof. Fitzroy, aren’t you?”** I exclaimed. He checked to see if anyone was listening before quietly nodding. He then explained that after he had complied report and submitted it, out of the blue he was removed from the team. When questioned, he was threatened and he fled fearing his safety. He decided that the only way was to make-up to the innocent people who had suffered because of his work. And the best way to do that was work with people and help them in whatever way he could.

I was touched by his story. I then told him about his wife’s hostility and Wipeout2. **“We have to get back to the city. Please bring your files as I believe we can stop Sacmot.”** We caught the next bus back to the city.

I advised the Professor to disguise himself and we went to the office. It was near the end of working hours so we quickly hurried in. On seeing me, my manager asked, he was surprised **“Harish! I thought you were out on a vacation. What are you doing here? Who is this man with you?”** I replied, **“Oh! Hello sir, this is my friend Gautam, I just came by to collect some files.”** I entered my office and accessed my computer. I tried to access the Professor’s Id but it had been deleted.

I decided that the only place that I could obtain this information was in my manager’s office. I walked up to his door, making sure the corridor was empty. No one was there... I tried the door knob, it was locked. I hurriedly took out a pin and picked the lock. The Professor and I went in. I switched on the computer, one eye on the screen, the other on the door. I told the Professor to keep a watch while I accessed the information I was looking for. Fortunately, my manager had forgotten to log-off and I was easily able to access the financial transactions. I found it strange that large sums of money, ranging

from fifty thousand to five-hundred thousand dollars had been paid over to a private company over a period two years. I researched more about the company and discovered it was a farmer's organization in California, USA.

On further research, I found out that the farmers had sued the company, related to cancer and other health issues. They were able to establish a link between the use of Wipeout1 and health hazards it posed to the people in the area. I calculated the amount of money transacted and it amounted to a little over 10 million USD! That was a large sum!! I looked up the latest news for articles regarding a spread of diseases in California in the past two years. Then a thought suddenly occurred to me. Was this what I had overheard outside the conference room? They had paid off those who had suffered the most.

Then I saw something that shocked me. There was a payment to a Mr. Ramesh Kulkarni that was recently made. **"For what?"** I thought. As soon as the professor saw the name, he turned pale. **"Is this person still around? He was the one I was running away from. He had tried to kill me"**. Professor added, **"I suspect that my wife is in danger!"**

We rushed to the Professor's home to find Yvonne sitting there, pale. She seemed out of harm's way. Then suddenly out of a room came a masked man carrying a knife. Was he going to try to kill us...?

## **EPILOGUE**

Two years later-

I happily sat in my home. I was back in Kambarahalli which was the headquarters of my organization Prakratik Vridhhi. It helped farmers convert back to natural farming. I opened the post and saw a letter from Prof. Fitzroy, who had moved back to Goa with

his family. I then thought of that day two years ago and how luckily for us the police came in time and arrested Mr. Kulkarni. It was latter proved that there was a link between Wipeout1 and conditions of the farmers in Kambarahalli. It was also proved that Mr. Kulkarni had indeed threatened Prof. Fritzroy and was charged with attempted murder. Sacmot had to be closed as it lost the legal battle, Wipeout1 was subsequently banned by the Ministry of Agriculture and also by the Ministry of Health.

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