

Fatally Lucky!

I *t was a dark and stormy night, which brought so many emotions of the fateful event that uprooted my mediocre existence on the earth. I was a certified night owl in my youth, could have been a gold member, if ever there was a club for night owls.*

However, all that changed in a blink of an eye and to this date I cannot face the darkness without the demons of the past raising their ugly heads. Today, of all days brought everything back, the rain, the winds and the chill of the night creating the perfect backdrop for making my nightmare a living reality. I felt my heart rate raising and my hands holding on to the armrest with white knuckle grip as I relived the events once again and the decisions I made in the past that led to the current situation I am in.

I watched my reflexion distort as the fat raindrops hit the windowpane and cruised down leaving long lines of water. They looked like tears cruising down my reflexion on the glass. As I sat there

and listened to the sounds of the rain hitting the glass pane and the sounds of wind wreaking havoc outside, the dark and bitter memories from a decade ago crept in to haunt me, unbeknownst.

10 years ago,

The pouring rain made the darkness thicker than it was, as if you could feel the weight of it surrounding you. The visibility through the windshield was at an all-time low with only a couple of feet seen, even with a full blast of the fog lamp. The innocent laughter and the carefree banter of my passengers added to my struggle than easing it. The children coming home from the class trip were



unaware of the danger they were in.

I strained to see through the windshield cleared by the desperate windshield wipers, to get a better idea of my surrounding straight out

of horror movies. The steep uphill road was narrow with no room for mistakes and to make matters worse, the road is bordered on one side with a mountain and the other, bottomless cliff. The school bus fought me every inch travelled on the pothole-ridden road. The tyres struggled to find a grip on the mud slicked tar as I drove, or more or less dragged the metal can uphill. My hands were exhausted and the muscles just about to give in.

I was drenched in sweat with the tension and the struggle with Mother Nature's unleashed fury. My eyes stung with sweat pouring in to them, and I looked up to clear them. My eyes landed on the rear view mirror by accident and the sight that met my tired gaze reinvigorated my failing determination. The children and the young teacher accompanying them are my responsibility. On the mirror, I met the eyes of the teacher "Miss Rose" and I saw worry and fear pass through her soft features. It only lasted a second before she put a brave face for the children. I grit my teeth as I turned my eyes back to the living nightmare of the road.

after about half an hour of herculean effort, the road came to a dead end abruptly. As I shone the light and looked I saw that my worst nightmare had come to life. There had been a mudslide and the road was completely blocked. The only thing to

do was to go back down. However, there was no way to turn the big school bus, they had to back up all the way down.

"Why did you stop?" the soft voice questioning startled me because I did not see her standing next to me. Her floral perfume filled my nostrils when she stood close to me and the little bit of relief that gave me in the midst of this nightmare was enough to keep me moored in to my purpose.

"There had been a mudslide earlier and the road is completely blocked. The only way is to go back. But we can't turn, so we have to back up all the way down." I watched her face as I said this and saw fear flash through her beautiful features. Moisture gathered on the edge of her blue eyes and her chin quivered with keeping her emotions in check.

However, that show of weakness lasted a mere second before sheer determination made her eyes light up and tighten her lips. She straightened up with hands on her hips "Ok, let's do it then. What do you want me to do?" she asked. I have never been more proud of and glad that this girl was by my side in this ordeal.

"Keep the children secured. They have to be seated and belted properly. It's going to be a bumpy ride Miss" I said and as we looked out the

windshield slight movement caught our eyes.

"I think it moved! We better hurry" Miss Rose said as she rushed back to do her bit in the rescue mission.

As if on cue, earth-splitting thunder cracked above us and through the screams of my passengers and their teachers shouting for them to settle I saw the worst sight that had befallen me. The mound of earth that blocked the road was slowly moving toward us, water spilling from the cracks in the earth, driving the mud forward.

"Rose!" I called to her and she was by my side in a second. I handed her the portable fog lamp and said, "Go to the back and tell me everything you see. You are my eyes right now. Ok?"

She nodded frantically before holding the large fog lamp with both her delicate hands and running off to the back of the bus, reassuring the frightened children as she passed them.

She proved to be as tough as they come in the torturous drive down the hill in reverse. She guided me down with precise and quick instruction all the while keeping the children calm and secured in their places. I kept a close look out for the ever-closing mountain of mud and debris in front of me as I guided the bus down to safety. After what seems like a lifetime and with me sweating through every hair of my body, I felt the back tires hit flat road. The relief

"Rose!" I called to her and she was by my side in a second. I handed her the portable fog lamp and said, "Go to the back and tell me everything you see. You are my eyes right now. Ok?"

that washed over me, could not be expressed for the life of me and the cheer that rang through the bus nearly deafened me. I kept on backing up until we were a safe distance from the mudslide and turned to see my passengers who had been champions in my effort.

Yet, what met my eyes was not happiness or cheer. Their faces clouded in fear and distorted in

silent screams. Rose was coming up wildly pointing to ahead of me. I turned just in time to see a large tree on the side of the road tilting precariously towards the bus. The scene was unfolding in slow motion, lit by the bus's powerful fog lamps. I

put the bus on drive and started to get it out of the path of the falling tree.

“Rose, get the children to the back of the bus. Hunker down and cover your heads.” I shouted at the top of my lungs as I sped back out of danger and just as it seems as I was out of the imminent impact, a rogue branch crashed onto the windshield crumpling the front end of the bus like a toy car. It took me a second to register that we had come to a sudden stop before the pain hit in all the wrong places. Then the blessed blackness took me into her ever-compassionate embrace.

The sweet floral scent filling my nose woke me up from the nightmare, just like all those years ago, grounding me to fulfil my responsibility. Rose held my face in her hands and smiled, “Can't Sleep?” she asked with no prejudice and malice, only understanding and love emitting from her face. The mere sight of her and her presence near me was enough to settle my racing heart.

“No I was just coming back. You get back to bed. I'll be right there.”

I smiled up at her and she kissed the top of my head and walked back to our bedroom.

With a final look at the darkness outside the window and a sigh, I turned my wheelchair around towards the room.

As I wheeled through the corridor leading to our room I glanced at the wall full of photographs, strategically placed by my lovely wife, of course. I slowed and looked at the familiar framed memories. Most of the photos were thank you notes from the twenty students in the bus that day and from their parents. Some of them were from the hospital visits from them. A few were of me receiving the medal of honour and heroism from the mayor of the state. Then, last but not the least, the photos of our wedding. Rose was more beautiful than I would have ever remembered and of course, I am in a wheel chair. I hope this amazing woman know how much I owe her. As she says all the time, “The accident is not all bad because if not for that, we would not have met and I would not have been able to impress you this much.” I guess that is one way to look at what happened and surely my life turned out better than I expected.