

Ache

The bus came to a halt at the Rajgarh bus station. The passengers scrambled to get out of the bus, even as the *rickshaw pullers* and *coolies* began colluding to get hold of the bags of those getting down. I got down, and Anwar followed suit. He was holding mine as well as his own bag. As the *rickshaw pullers* thronged towards me, I stood stupefied, wondering which *rickshaw* to take. Almost suddenly, a *rickshaw puller* who was standing at a distance, came rushing towards us and without a word, took hold of both the bags from Anwar's hands, and beckoned us to follow him.

Anwar took a brisk few steps and went and sat on the rickshaw. I was still a little curious. '*Bhaiya*, you have not even asked us as to where do we wish to go?' I enquired with a quizzical expression on my face.

'*Babu...* I stay next to *Saheb's* big *haveli*', replied the rickshaw puller humbly, while pointing towards Anwar. Anwar smiled, nodding familiarly... and I sat beside him. I took a close look at the rickshaw puller. He seemed to be young but the day-long toiling had taken a merciless toll of his youth. The signs of premature ageing were ferociously clamouring for attention. His eyes and cheeks seemed to have caved in quite a while ago, and the receding hair line appeared faintly visible at the horizon. He was pulling the *rickshaw* with his full might, and yet the *rickshaw* was moving feebly ahead. The path too had quite a few steep stretches and turns.

Anwar and I worked together in the IT Department of a large multi-national firm in New Delhi. The hustle and bustle of living in a crowded city often left me yearning for a little quiet and solitude. Anwar belonged to Rajgarh and had always bragged about the

tranquil and beauty that lay plenty in his town. He had been insisting for quite some time that we spend a weekend together in his home town. He was sure that I would feel at peace and would be able to laze and unwind as I had always yearned for. I agreed, following his persistent and excited plans.

The *rickshaw* had left the busy market-lanes behind, and was slowly inching towards the residential areas. People seemed to be just idling away, sitting outside their houses- on both sides of the road. I saw a group of men huddled together outside one house and cheering loudly. There appeared to be no television in sight, for I thought a cricket match was perhaps the cause of the excitement. I looked quizzically at Anwar and he explained that there was a carom match going on between the residents. '*How do they possibly have such ample time to spare and simply waste it too?*' I wondered. Having been brought up with an oft-taught dictum that *time is money*, I felt a bit angry at such a colossal waste. There were children all around, who had obviously taken a cue from their elders, and were either chasing a bicycle tyre aimlessly or playing *gulli-danda*.

'Most of the kids here do not go to school and hence waste all their time, doing silly things', explained Anwar. 'They simply lurk around, doing nothing... and if I try to instil some sense, their parents come out in their defence and question my interests', Anwar added. I was beginning to feel angry at the young boys. At a distance, a group of boys were engaged in a scuffle, and were using foul language. Their loud verbal duel was falling harshly on my ears and I had a strong urge to get down from the *rickshaw* and give them all a slap or two. Sensing my outrage, Anwar tried to soothe my frayed nerves. 'Forget it... you cannot teach them any lesson. If you try to, their parents will come out and you will be engaged in a verbal duel, worse than the one you can hear. It is the parents who are responsible for this state

of affair. We can just sigh in despair, and do little to rectify their ways of living’.

The *rickshaw* had entered another lane and Anwar pointed out that they were nearing his house. A child, suddenly, came running from somewhere and began to run after the *rickshaw*. ‘Another little fellow, with nothing to do but waste time in silly pranks’, I mumbled to myself. I was already agitated with the scenes I had encountered a while ago. The child was running after the *rickshaw* and as he was about to lay his hands on the side-rail adjacent to the seat, I pushed him back with a force. He was taken aback and stood staring at me for a few seconds. The *rickshaw* was moving very slowly on the steep path. The boy started running once again, and wanted to catch hold of the wooden plank between the two rear wheels. ‘What a stubborn ill-bred child...’ I thought angrily.

As he was nearing the *rickshaw* once again, I lifted my hand and tried to strike at him lightly, but because the *rickshaw* was moving, my hand fell a little hard perhaps on his face. I could gauge that the impact was harder than estimated, for he stopped with a shudder and was wiping his eyes with his shirt-sleeve. I felt remorse. ‘I should have been careful’, I thought. But then, the next instant, my guilt vanished as I saw the boy running again and following the *rickshaw*. I felt angrier at the brazen shamelessness on the boy’s part, in trying to swing from the plank. I was sure that he simply wanted to have a little fun, hanging from the wooden plank and enjoy a free ride.

We had reached Anwar’s big *haveli* and as the *rickshaw* was entering the compound of the *haveli*, we got down. The path was winding upwards steeply. The *rickshaw-puller* too stepped down and was trying to now pull the *rickshaw* with his hands. The small boy reached there and started pushing the *rickshaw* with all his tiny

might. 'Oh, he has now come here too... Indeed stubborn and naughty... and has nothing to do probably', I was still muttering to myself. I did not deem fit to scold or discipline the child then. The *rickshaw* had reached the main door of the *haveli* and the *rickshaw-puller* was wiping the perspiration from his face and hands with his *ghamcha*. After taking the bags and placing them down, he turned around and fondly picked up the small boy and began to cuddle him.

'Is he your child?' I blurted out.

'Yes, *Babu ji*... he is', he replied and then lovingly placed him on the driver's seat.

'Oh... ', I was flabbergasted. 'You should have told me earlier... I was unnecessarily trying to reprimand him', I said.

I was clearly embarrassed.

'*Babu ji*, his mother died a few years ago. He is very fond of me. He keeps looking at the road, waiting eagerly for me to return home every evening. And as soon as he spots my *rickshaw*, he starts running towards it.'

I was looking at the child intently. The small boy who, a few minutes ago, had appeared stubborn and ill-mannered to me, now looked very innocent, with an angelic face. He was beaming with such pride, sitting on the seat of the *rickshaw-puller*—as a prince feels while sitting on his father's throne. While I felt a wave of affection flooding in me for the small child, I felt shame for the way I had behaved. The innocent child was so excited on spotting his father's *rickshaw* in his own neighbourhood and I had been so harsh and angry with him. It was not that he wanted a joy ride, but perhaps he wanted to help his father in pushing the *rickshaw* up the steep path. And in order to help his father, he persistently ran, despite my reprimand.

Anwar was giving the fare to the *rickshaw-puller*. He had turned the *rickshaw* for going back, with the happy child perched up on the seat in a royal manner. I had a strong urge to run to the small boy and hug him hard. But I could do no more than playfully ruffling his hair. In response, the angelic face smiled at me. I smiled in return, but felt a dull piercing ache inside.

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