

## A Small Gesture

Rashmi was hurriedly getting Suraj ready for school. They had to make it to Tillu's Tea Stall by 6 am every day. The school-bus came at that spot at about 6.15 am approximately. A few other kids from the neighbourhood embarked on the school-bus from the same pick-up point. Suraj was five years old and it was his first year in the school.

Rashmi reached the tea-stall, with little Suraj holding her finger, and tagging along. It was a chilly December morning and the mercury had slipped considerably over the past one week. On spotting Suraj, a little boy who worked at the small tea stall came rushing toward him. Every morning, till the school-bus arrived, the little boy would remain standing and chatting with Suraj. He appeared to be of the same age as Suraj. Both would gleefully greet each other in the morning. Once in a while, Rashmi found them hugging each other fondly too. On some days, Suraj would take out one of his books and show it to the boy, who would excitedly stare at the attractive pictures in the book. Rashmi looked at them amusedly and enjoyed their innocent talks and actions during those 5-10 minutes.

The little boy seemed to be witty and hard-working. He had, in a few weeks, picked up many English words from Suraj. He seemed eager to grasp whatever he could, while listening to Suraj and also while peering intently into the books. Suraj too was always excited while showing his books to the little boy. Early in the morning, there being hardly any customers at the tea stall, the boy seemed to have the time to be with Suraj. On some days, the boy would be busy cleaning the unsteady tables and the rugged benches. Otherwise, he never missed the chance to be with Suraj. If a customer happened to arrive that early in the morning, the owner's voice could be heard from inside the roofed structure:

'Mehmood, come here quickly and attend to the customers'.

Rashmi often thought hard while looking at the boy's tiny hands cleaning the tables or scrubbing the utensils or holding 2-3 glasses of tea deftly in each hand. While other kids who gathered at the pick-up point were smartly

dressed in their school uniforms and carried the school bag on their shoulders, Mehmood simply stared at them longingly, while performing the chores. As the other children embarked the bus, waving happily to their mothers, Mehmood would slowly walk back towards the stall and start washing the glasses.

One day, Rashmi and Suraj reached the pick-up point at the usual time, but the little boy was nowhere to be seen. Suraj was craning his neck in all directions, searching for Mehmood. Even Rashmi looked around and was wondering why was the boy not there. The bus arrived, and Suraj hopped in. Rashmi walked towards the tea stall and saw the owner- Tillu lighting the stove.

‘Where is that little boy- Mehmood, who works here?’, she asked him.

Tillu greeted her with a *Salaam*. ‘No Madam, he did not come today. He is my son... He had a high temperature in the morning. Hence, he is resting at home’.

‘Oh... How did he get fever?’, Rashmi sought the details.

‘Madam *ji*, I think it must be due to the cold weather’, Tillu gave his assessment. Rashmi recollected that Mehmood always wore one of his few threadbare or tattered shirts made of muslin, even in the chilled December mornings.

‘Did you take him to a Doctor? Has he taken medicines?’

Tillu went silent. He hesitantly answered: ‘Had I taken him to the local government hospital, it would have taken a whole day. How would I have then opened the shop?’

‘Oh... Oh! This is not right... Your wife could have taken him to the hospital. Where is she?’

‘Madam, she is no more. She succumbed to a long illness, and died last year.’

‘Oh...Am so sorry. What happened? What was she suffering from?’

‘The doctors had said that she suffered from some kind of cancer’, Tillu said while wiping his moist eyes.

‘Then, is Tillu all by himself at home, with a high temperature?’



Rashmi was aghast to hear Tillu's reply on being asked whether polio drops were given to Mehmood. Tillu revealed that the *Maulvi Saheb* of their area had strictly warned all the residents against administering drops for polio to any child. He told Rashmi that even when the government volunteers had come to their neighbourhood for giving drops to the children, they had been driven out of the colony- at the behest of *Maulvi Saheb*. Rashmi told Tillu that the tests on Mehmood had shown traces of polio, but timely medical intervention would ward off the impact and Mehmood would be alright soon. Rashmi was, however, quite upset with Tillu. She blurted out: 'What kind of a father are you? Your son is so bright and you, instead of sending him to school, make him wash utensils and clean tables. You did not even bother to protect him against polio, and instead drove the volunteers out...', and Rashmi went on scolding Tillu, in an emotionally charged voice. Tillu stood shamefaced, with his head bowed.

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Suraj had a ten-day long Christmas break at school. On the first day when the school reopened, Suraj reached the pick-up point along with his mother and they found Mehmood cleaning the benches and tables. On seeing Suraj, he gave his broadest grin and came rushing towards him and hugged him hard. Rashmi was overjoyed too, seeing him fully recovered. Both, Suraj and Mehmood began to excitedly chatter like long-lost friends. Rashmi noticed that Mehmood had taken the school-bag from Suraj and was holding it for him. Rashmi had tears in her eyes, noticing how innocent and earnest the little boy looked, carrying a school-bag on his shoulders. The school-bus arrived and all the children boarded the bus. For many minutes after the bus departed, Mehmood kept waving enthusiastically at them. He always looked so happy and excited during those moments, as if he was himself going to the school with them.

Rashmi felt sad for an instant, and then walked towards Tillu's stall. Tillu looked up at her and greeted her with a *Salaam*.

'Your son is quite bright and seems interested in learning too. You please let him come to my house for 1-2 hours every day and I will teach him to read and write. Then, you can admit him in any school nearby', Rashmi said matter-of-

factly but her eyes were pleading Tillu to agree to her proposal. Tillu who was listening to Rashmi with his head bowed down, looked up and smiled. *He has agreed*, Rashmi mumbled with a sigh of relief.

Mehmood started going regularly to Rashmi's house. She had bought a few books for her, and also a school-bag which he proudly hung on his shoulders and walked up to her house—as if he was going to school like the other kids. A few months later, the summer vacation began and the schools closed for the break. Mehmood, however, continued to go to Rashmi's house and with Suraj now being at home, they had a lot of fun playing together. When the schools reopened for a fresh term, Rashmi secured an admission for Mehmood in the nearby Primary School.

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Today, Vijay came home beaming with happiness. He was promoted to a senior position and was transferred to Lucknow. Rashmi was thrilled too on hearing the news of his transfer. But then, several thoughts crossed her mind at once: *What will happen to Mehmood's schooling now? Will Tillu continue sending him to school? Or, will he make him drop out and resume working at the tea stall or anywhere else? For Tillu, even if Mehmood learnt how to repair bicycles or learnt how to drive and became a driver, it was a matter of satisfaction. He could not think of anything greater or beyond that...*

Several years passed, since Rashmi and Vijay had left the town, along with Suraj. Before departing, Rashmi had tried her best to explain to Tillu the benefits of a decent education and had urged him to not discontinue Mehmood's schooling.

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'Ah, you have made me so proud, my son!!! Am so very happy... How I wish that your mother were alive today. She would have been so proud and happy to see that her son has become a police constable'.

'*Abba...* I am not a police constable. I have become a DSP—Deputy Superintendent of Police...', Mehmood tried to explain it for the umpteenth time to his father.

‘Oh yes... Yes, I know Deputy something... you have become’, Tillu replied with tears of pride in his eyes. He was thoughtful for a while and then added: ‘I think we should go and thank Rashmi Madam for all that she has done for you. It is due to her initiative and efforts that you could achieve this rank and position today.’

‘Yes, *Abba*... We must go and meet her. I do not remember very vividly but you have told me many times that how she taught me reading and writing in my childhood and was persistent about my schooling. But, how do we get in touch with her?’

‘Hmnnnn... I think we should go to the clinic of Dr. Pandey who had treated you once and who was also their family friend. He would surely know their address’.

They went and met Dr. Pandey who informed them that Rashmi’s husband Vijay had passed away about four years ago, and her son Suraj was in the US. ‘Rashmi is presently staying in a Home for the Elderly in Lucknow’, he added.

Mehmood felt sad on hearing all of that and took the address of the Home for the Elderly where Rashmi was living. He decided to pay her a visit there.

Two days later, he reached at the given address and asked about Rashmi at the reception. He was guided to her room. The door was open and he spotted Rashmi seated at a chair peering over a few photographs spread out on the table before her. It was a small room- clean and compact, with a bed, a small wardrobe, and a table and chair. Mehmood knocked gently and entered the room and stood by her. Rashmi slowly turned to look sideways and looking at him with her grey sad eyes, tried to recollect if he was someone familiar. He was dressed in his uniform and Rashmi could not remember having known any police officer personally.

‘*Mata ji*, I am Mehmood’, he knelt down and said gently. ‘The one whom you had taught to read and write and then later, admitted in a school; the one who used to play with your son- Suraj.’

Rashmi was looking intently at him, and several different shades of emotions crossed her face in a moment or two. All traces of sadness vanished in a flash from her face. ‘Is that you? Mehmood? Oh, you have grown so well... and you

are such a high-ranking police officer now?', her voice was trembling with excitement.

They hugged each other and wept. Her happiness knew no bounds on listening to his entire journey from the primary school to excellent grades in the civil services examination.

'*Mata ji*, where is Suraj?' Mehmood enquired innocently although he knew he was in the US.

A wave of sadness swept across the wrinkled face once again. 'Son, he is in America... But, he remains in constant touch with me. He writes to me and calls regularly', and saying so, she forwarded the pictures and the letters on the table towards Mehmood. He glanced at the pictures and looked at the date on the letter. It was written more than six months ago. He changed the topic and they chatted for hours on all that had transpired in their lives and in the world around them.

'*Mata ji*, I think I may soon be transferred to Lucknow. I will then come daily to meet you', Mehmood said excitedly.

'Oh, that will be wonderful. I hope you do get a posting here', Rashmi said hopefully.

It seemed to her that she had had such a long conversation after a long interval. Mehmood left, but Rashmi kept thinking about him for hours together. She remembered the young boy whose eyes used to lit up while looking at the pictures in Suraj's books; the young boy who scrubbed the benches and tables at the hotel, clothed in tattered shirts. *A little step can go such a long way in terms of its impact*, she smiled with a sense of satisfaction. She remembered that she had smiled and laughed too, after several months.

Mehmood did not visit Rashmi for the next four months. She eagerly awaited his visit, every day. She would sit near the window and wonder for hours: *Why am I feeling bad? My own son does not come for years to meet me. He has not called since several months now. He does not forget to pay for my stay here... But, is that all that matters? What is my life like? Maybe, Mehmood has also forgotten me. He must be busy too in his work...*

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Rashmi was feeling unwell since a week. She had high fever that day. The doctor who visited the Home had examined her and given her medicines. She was lying on her bed- staring at the ceiling and sometimes, taking out Suraj's photograph from under the pillow and looking at it fondly. The photograph was four years old, and in these four years she had wished a thousand times, that Suraj emerge out from the photograph and sit beside her in 'reality'. She lay with her eyes closed, when she felt as if someone was calling out to her. She opened her eyes, to find Mehmood standing before her. He had come after six months. She did not complain, but smiled weakly. He sat beside her and explained that he was in distress owing to the sudden deterioration in his father's health.

'I was running from one hospital to another', he told her.

'How is he now?' Rashmi asked worriedly.

'He passed away last week', he said and broke down into tears. Rashmi consoled him for a long time. He told her that he had shifted to Lucknow and was presently staying in a hotel. He would be allotted a house in a day or two, he said.

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Mehmood had shifted to his new house. Today, he had brought Rashmi with him to show her the house. It was a very spacious house, and he was going to be there all by himself—though there were a couple of servants to attend to his needs. Rashmi looked around with a sense of pride and contentment. She stayed there for the whole day. The cook had made many delicacies for her, as instructed by Mehmood. She was very happy. It was a nice and a happy change for her. Late in the evening, she requested Mehmood to drop her back at the Home.

Mehmood began to visit her almost daily now. One day, he spent hours trying to convince her to leave the Home and shift with him permanently. He said he could not bear to see her live all alone, when he was there in the same city, and could take good care of her. He also admitted that he needed her love and care and blessings. He had no one else in his life, and she meant more to him



than his own mother. 'Whatever I am today is because of you... Please come and stay with me. Allow me to take care of you... Please...' She yielded to his persistent requests and moved with him in his house.

Mehmood had taken Suraj's address and telephone number from the Home. He called him quite regularly now and not only himself spoke for a long time but also, made Rashmi talk with him at length. Rashmi was visibly happy these days. She felt that the distance between her and Suraj was now closing gradually.

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One day, Suraj was expressing his gratitude to Mehmood. "I cannot thank you enough buddy for all that you are doing for my mother... I am so far but you have erased all my worries. You are taking such good care of my mother. I am really indebted...'

Mehmood told him that he, in fact, was the one who was grateful. He had never known the joy of living with a mother and of being pampered, he said. 'She gives me so much love and guides me at every step... she comforts me when I am disappointed and encourages me when I am demotivated..."

They chatted for several hours that day. At last, when he kept the receiver down, Rashmi came upto him and said: 'With whom were you chatting for so long?'

'I was talking with Suraj... And, guess what? He has decided to come back to be with you. He misses you... He will return now, forever...'

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