

A short story written in Hindi by Dr. Waseem Siddiqi

And translated in English by Dr. Navniit Gandhi

The Liar

'The small wooden idols look splendid', muttered Javed to himself, as he stood gaping at the beautifully carved pieces of art being sold on the pavement by a street urchin. The idols were all the same—an infant clinging to her mother's chest. They were carved out of wood. As beautiful as the idols looked, the boy who was selling them looked pitiable in rags. His vest and his shorts were in tatters, despite the numerous patches on them. And yet, his eyes gleamed with hope... In fact, after the initial wonder that Javed felt looking at the idols, it was the curious mixture of distress and hope on the young boy's innocent face, which intrigued Javed.

Javed stood watching the young boy, from a distance. Whenever somebody would stop by and inspect the idols, showing an inclination to buy them—the young boy's face would lit up with hope. And then, when a potential customer kept the idol down and began to walk away—the hopes would come crashing down on his face. For a brief moment, the clouds of misery would cast their shadow on the forlorn face, and then at the next instant, he would look up with gleaming eyes at the next passer-by who would profess any interest in his goods. Observing this interchange of emotions and the sad eyes of the young boy, Javed decided that he ought to buy an idol from the little boy. It was not to be an act of favour or charity; the idols were simply irresistible.

'How much is this idol for?' asked Javed, looking into the eyes of the little boy.

'Forty rupees', he replied. Hope had welled up once again in his eyes.

'That's too much! Quote a reasonable price,' Javed urged.

'Ok, thirty-five rupees, Sir', replied the young boy.

Javed knew the price was not too much for the beautiful piece and yet, he wanted to explore the negotiating skills of the young seller.

'Twenty rupees and that is my final price', Javed offered. He looked at the dilemma on the child's face and thought to himself: *'If he does not agree, I will give him what he is asking for'*.

Javed pretended to walk away, and had barely taken two steps, when the boy called out:

'Ok, Sir. Take it'.

Javed was surprised. He turned around and gave the boy a twenty rupee note and took the idol from him. As he walked ahead, he felt remorse. *'How could he give for such a low price? After all, the raw material itself must have cost much more than twenty rupees. And then, such a difficult and impeccable hand-carving must have taken days to complete. How could he afford to sell it for just twenty rupees?'* wondered Javed, as he kept walking ahead.

'For how much did you buy this idol?' called out a voice and Javed's reverie was interrupted.

Javed turned around. A man was quizzically looking at the idol in his hand. Javed thought that maybe he was interested in buying a piece and wanted to know the price beforehand. Javed was already feeling guilty at having paid only twenty rupees for such an exquisite work. It was worth much more than that. He told the man: *'I bought for thirty five rupees'*.

'Well, it is quite a beautiful piece of art', muttered the man, and began to walk towards the stall where they were being sold.

Javed felt better. *'Perhaps, the little boy would be able to recover to some extent the loss he suffered from me'*, he thought, imagining the delight on the innocent face. He reached home and placed the idol suitably, but he was still feeling restless. He kept turning and tossing all night. *'I did not do right. Perhaps, the boy had hungry family members to feed and hence, he agreed on selling it at a loss. Or did he have some other pressing compulsions? I should not have taken advantage of the poverty and helplessness of a small child'*, he kept thinking throughout the night. He resolved to go to the stall early morning and give the rest of the price-- twenty rupees to the boy. He felt relieved at his decision, and at last drifted to sleep.

Next morning after breakfast, Javed left for the market. Though he knew that the boy had no fixed shop as such, but he knew that the boy would probably be standing at the same place with his goods, where he was the day before. The shops were closed and the market deserted, when Javed reached there. He had reached quite early, and neither the sellers had come and nor were there any buyers. He walked towards a tea stall nearby and on the way picked up a Hindi and an Urdu newspaper. He sat reading both the newspapers at the tea stall. After a while, he found the usual hustle and bustle finding its way in the market. Shop owners were opening their shops and placing the goods on display and the usual passers-by were strolling at their pace, trying to get an early bargain if they could. All kinds and types of goodies—from slippers and bed sheets to readymade garments for kids—were being readied for a colourful display. Javed walked towards the place where the little boy was standing yesterday, but found that in place of the boy, another man was standing there with a sack and was slowly removing the idols and placing them on the footpath. The idols were the same, but the seller was someone Javed had not seen yesterday.

'Maybe, he is the father of the child', thought Javed. But then, he did not appear to be as impoverished as the little boy had been. Javed walked towards the man and asked him: *'What about the little boy who was selling the idols here yesterday?'*

'Oohh! That liar! You see Sir, we take pity on these poor little children and they cheat on us. I kept the little boy on work just a few days ago, taking pity on his miserable state. And, he lied to me and tried to appropriate my money. He sold an idol for thirty-five rupees, and told me that he had sold it for twenty rupees. He wanted to pocket my fifteen rupees...' and he went on abusing the boy further.

At that instant, Javed recalled that that man was the one who had enquired the price of the idol from him yesterday, and to whom he had lied saying that he had purchased the idol for thirty-five rupees from the little boy. He had wanted the boy to not suffer a loss one more time, by getting a price lower than what the idols were worth.

'Where does the boy live? Tell me his whereabouts, please,' Javed pleaded with the man.

'I do not know where he came from or where he lives'.

'What do you mean you do not know him...? How did you keep him then for work?'

'Sir, I found him the other day weeping inconsolably on the roadside. He begged me to give him some work. He had said that his parents and siblings were dying due to hunger and famine in their village, and he had come to the city in search for work. He kept on crying and begging for work. I took pity on him. For some days, he behaved honestly. He used to give me the exact amount as he would make daily, and I too would cross-check with the customers. I do not have children and I had almost made up my mind that I would take care of him and teach him the intricacies of the trade, and we would expand this little business. And then, yesterday he lied and tried to cheat me. But I too did not spare him. I beat him and did not even give him the fifteen rupees which were due to him, as his wage for three days. So, there was no loss to me. But he lost his job and his money and would think hundred times before lying and cheating someone next time', and the man began arranging the idols once again.

Javed's mind was in deep turmoil. His head was spinning, after what he had heard. He bitterly regretted his attempt at trying to help the young boy by lying to that man. He was sure he would not get to meet the little boy again, in this vast world. *'Oh God! What have I done!'* he lamented. He retraced his steps. He had *lied*, but the little boy had paid the price...

=====

Dr. Waseem Siddqi is a renowned story writer in Urdu and Hindi and has several publications to his credit. He is an Industrial Hygienist by profession and is a senior member of the Writers' Forum, Kuwait.