

Lunch Box

Tring....tring... tringgggg

The school gong went off and the young learners hurriedly and happily closed their books. It was their mid-day recess. She swiftly rushed out of the classroom. All the other girls opened their lunch-boxes during the interval. The aroma of a variety of delicacies—*Paranthas.. Kebabs... Puri-bhaji...* – filled the air in the classrooms all around the school. Every day, she felt dizzy during the mid-day break, with all the aroma of the food around her, and she ran into the courtyard during those minutes. However, some girls took their lunch-boxes outside and sat under a tree to eat their lunch. She never went towards them either. A few girls used to go towards the exit gate, which remained closed during school hours. No girl could step outside the school compound during the interval. A couple of hawkers were allowed to sit near the gate, but inside the school compound. An old couple was amongst those who sat with their baskets, selling *cucumbers, guavas*, and other goodies.

The old couple had been seen in the school selling their goodies, since ages. The school's management had known the couple all these years, and trusted them explicitly. The old man and his wife saw to it that no girl stepped out of the gate anyhow. The school had, hence, not appointed any security guard to man the exit gate. The couple kept a strict vigil on the girls who came near the gate to buy snacks or fruits.

What to do during the interval was a question she had to face every day. She wandered throughout the school... in the corridors and in the courtyard outside. She desperately waited for the recess to end, so that she could return to her class. If she went to the classroom before the gong sounded, some girls would still be having their lunch, and those were awkward and painful moments for her.

I am fortunate that I, at least, get to come to a school and study... I must not complain, she often reminded herself. She lived with her grandparents and did not remember as to when and how her parents had died. Her grandparents were quite old. The paltry amount that her grandfather received as pension was inadequate for them to have two full meals a day. There were days when they had nothing to cook and eat. She considered herself fortunate therefore, that they had enrolled her in a school. Whatever little was cooked in the morning, was their breakfast and even lunch. Sometimes, when her grandmother made *bajra rotis*, they ate the *rotis* in bits and parts over two days, instead of eating stomach-full at one time.

In such a situation, there was no way that she could have a lunch-box to carry to school.

Her day at school otherwise passed off well, except for the interval, during which she experienced pangs of hunger and awkwardness. She, therefore, kept wandering throughout the entire school simply to spend that time. Sometimes, she went towards the exit gate and clutching the iron bars of the gate, she kept looking intently at the hustle and bustle outside, on the road. The old couple kept a watch at her, though they were convinced over the years that the simple innocent girl would never try and sneak outside. They did wonder though, that why did she never buy a guava or tamarind or an orange. She did not mind standing at the gate throughout the interval, as long as she was able to avoid the other girls who laughed and chatted incessantly, with their mouths full of delicacies. The delicacies were packed by their respective mothers, with utmost love and care.

One day, she was again standing at the gate, looking outside. She was feeling the pangs of hunger, more severely that day. She occasionally turned and longingly looked at the fruits in the basket of the old couple.

‘Why don’t you buy something, child? Take a guava...’ asked the old woman tenderly. Whenever the old woman asked her to buy

something, she always said *thank you* and politely refused. Today, she could not hide her emotions.

‘I do not have money to buy anything’, she replied softly. Her eyes were moist. The old woman went silent for a minute. Looking up then at the girl and taking a big ripe guava in her hand, she said: ‘Here, take this guava... do not give me any money.’

She refused two-three times, but then when the old woman kept insisting, she took the guava from her. When she started eating the guava, she felt ecstatic as never before; she felt that she was partaking the most exquisite and royal food in the world. The guava was a big one, and delicious too. She realised that after a long long time, she had eaten till her stomach was full.

Years, thus, passed. She grew up, experiencing full or partial hunger almost every day. She passed her Class XII examinations. And one fine day, a boy from the neighbourhood came to her grandparents, asking for her hand in marriage. He said that he had been observing her since many years and was drawn to her simplicity and innocence. They were married soon thereafter.

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‘Shaheen, you have been very lucky for me. When we were married, I was just a junior clerk, and today, see where have I reached... After clearing the Civil Services Examinations, I have been appointed the SDM of our district.’

‘Oh... that is ok...thank you’, she had coyly replied. Looking at the watch, she got up anxiously. ‘It’s two p.m. and Bunty has not come back from the school’.

‘He must be on his way, dear... Why do you panic at everything?’

And then the sound of the horn of the school-bus reached their ears, and within a few seconds, Bunty came running into his mother’s arms. Shaheen opened his school-bag and took out the lunch-box. Opening it, she exclaimed satisfactorily: ‘Ah, this is good!!! Today, my son has eaten his complete lunch and finished everything that I had

put in the box... Wonderful!!! '. She patted him lovingly, and hugged him.

'No, Mummy... I threw all that was there in my lunch-box... I was not hungry and did not want to bring everything back. I was afraid that you would scold me. So, I just threw everything in the bin'.

'What did you say? You threw everything?'

The mother slapped her little boy hard on his cheek. She was shaking like a leaf. Bunty was too stunned to even move or utter a word. He looked bewildered. *His mother had never raised her hand on him--- not even, when his pranks crossed limits and caused damage...*

Shaheen's husband stood transfixed. *Why did she slap him so hard?* He could not understand at all.

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