

The Deceiver

The bridge had taken a steep upward slope. He alighted from the *rickshaw*. 'It is ok, Sir... Why did you get down? You are just one passenger and that too with a slight built. Sometimes there are two-three heavy passengers and they never get down on this stretch. I still manage to pull the *rickshaw* through...' said the perspiring *rickshaw* puller, feigning endurance and strength.

The ascent had ended and he mounted the *rickshaw* once again. In a while, the descent had begun and the *rickshaw* puller stopped pedalling and relaxed. The *rickshaw* was sliding down effortlessly. He began to think: *The ascents and descents characterise everyone's lives... and yet the lives of these rickshaw-wallahs are so very mundane; like a straight line. Everything is predictable in their lives—they know how much money they have to give to the rickshaw owner at the end of the day; they know they have to bargain with the passengers over meagre sums...They get used to everything eventually. They can breathe a sigh of relief only during these few moments when the road descends and they rickshaw surges ahead without their toiling hard...*

'What is your name?' he asked the *rickshaw* puller.

'Madhav, Sir'.

'How much do you manage to earn daily?' he asked.

He had come down from the United States, where people strictly refrain from asking personal questions. *However, there are no such taboos here*, he reminded himself. *In fact, people enthusiastically make it a point to ask about the other's income—particularly, when one goes with a proposal for marriage to a girl's house. 'How much do you earn?' is the first question shot at the boy.* He recollected the episode when one of his friends had gone to visit the family of his classmate, whom he wanted to marry. The family stayed in a small town of Haryana. The very first pointed question shot at him was, 'how much do you earn?' His friend later confided in him that at that moment he felt as if someone had knocked him down with a straight punch.

Whenever he visualised the awkwardness of that moment for his friend, he felt amused. *After all, how much could a M.A. Final Year student earn in India... This was no United States wherein all students must work and manage their own expenses. The young learners there wait on tables or work as cab-drivers, unlike in India where students in their twenties too, conveniently expect their parents to sponsor their education. In fact, youngsters even expected parents to sponsor their wedding expense, and continued to live with their parents, even after marriage. And strangely, the parents too happily and eagerly shouldered all responsibilities even when their children were in their forties... In fact, they looked forward to serving and taking care of their grand-children too.*

He thought of his own life. His parents had arranged his marriage, and he had bowed to their wishes. He had taken his wife with him to the United States, soon after the marriage. His children were born there and he could just send the photographs to his parents.

'Sir, here comes the Medical College', announced the *rickshaw* puller and he was jerked out of his reverie. He had forgotten what his question to the *rickshaw* puller had been. He had crisp hundred-rupee notes in his wallet and he could have easily given one to the poor man. However, another thought germinated in his mind. He had found the *rickshaw* puller quite an amiable and earnest man. His own parents lived alone in the sprawling mansion they had. He could easily arrange for the *rickshaw* puller to stay with his family in the servant quarters. He could give him a decent salary, and

could feel reassured regarding the well-being of his parents too. Further, they would have interesting company, as well.

'Please wait here, as I will attend to some work inside and be back. I have to go further on and will go on your *rickshaw*... Just wait here and I will be back soon', he told the *rickshaw* puller.

'Ok, Sir', the rickshaw-puller nodded.

He went inside the Medical College and walked towards the cabin of Dr. Khan-- the Head, Department of Cardiology. They met with such excitement and uproar that the patients sitting around got a bit terrified. They were both classmates and close pals who had enjoyed many a prank together. After doing his M.B.B.S., M.D., and M.R.C.P., Dr. Khan had begun teaching in the Medical College, and eventually become a Professor, and Head, Department of Cardiology. He, on the other hand, had left for the US to become a Surgeon. Dr. Khan attended to the last patient and took him to his office. They had much to share with and ask from each other. There followed a long exchange of the present on-goings and the past memories. They kept transiting between the by-lanes of the past and their road-map ahead.

'How is it that my hair has greyed while you have jet black hair?' Dr. Khan enquired.

'Mine have greyed too. I have coloured my hair, or else the patients would not get operated from me, thinking that if his hair is grey, his hands could also quiver while operating', he replied. And both laughed heartily.

Hours passed and though still reluctant, he got up to leave.

'Why don't you wait for a few more minutes? I will then drop you to your home', Dr. Khan offered.

'No issues... I have a *rickshaw* waiting outside for me and have to go to a couple of other places too. Am enjoying the ride on the *rickshaw* and fondly remembering the hey-days. Do you remember how you, I, and Ravi used to squeeze and sit on one *rickshaw*! You always used to sit on the side and never pay the fare either, arguing that you sit with discomfort...' and saying so, he felt choked with emotions. Dr. Khan laughed out loud for the umpteenth time, and he bade him good bye.

He came out of the gate of the Medical College, reminding himself that he had to do something for the poor *rickshaw* puller. Even if he did not agree to living with his parents in the servant quarters, he would, nevertheless, give him enough money whereby the poor man could buy his own *rickshaw*. Then he need not give a share of his earnings to the *rickshaw* owner. He came out on the road but could not see the *rickshaw* anywhere. He walked back and forth towards both sides of the road, but could not spot him anywhere. He asked a couple of vendors and people standing at the small shops outside, but could not get any information about him.

After a while, he had no option but to return home. He was restless and could not cease wondering as to why the *rickshaw* puller did not wait for him. Several hours passed, and he still could not stop thinking about the poor man he wanted to help that day. He could not focus on reading and did not touch his dinner either... While rocking on the chair, all of a sudden, he had a flash. The Medical College had two gates and he probably came out from the other gate and the *rickshaw* puller was standing at another one. He called up a cousin and requested him to come on his motorbike. Both of them rushed to the Medical College and on making enquiries at the other gate, one vendor informed that, 'Yes Sir... there was a *rickshaw* puller waiting here for hours and then had left in anguish. He was muttering that a passenger had deceived him'.

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