

A Blessing in Disguise

It was a lonely winter's morning. The tall swaying trees of the park provided a gentle breeze. The birds on the trees added music by singing melodiously. Young and old were in the park for their evening walks and exercises. I had come to pick up my Dad, home. I sat relaxing in the car waiting for him to finish his walk. Suddenly my mind transported to another world, a part which seemed but a dream...

Life with my Mom, Dad and my elder sister seemed a bed of roses. We lived in a slum, stamped with abject poverty. All this made not the slightest difference. We lived as a happy, loving family. When I was six years old, my mother's health gradually began to deteriorate, so we decided to take her to a government hospital. After various tests, reports diagnosed that she was in her final stage of cancer. The doctors said that the treatment would need an astronomical sum of money. My mother preferred dying when her time came.

The disease had a devastating effect on my family. My father was terribly stressed. Ostensibly to calm his nerves, he took up to drinking. Every night he would come home dead drunk. One night mother's condition aggravated. She was in terrible pain. Father had not yet come home, so my sister ran to ask our neighbor's for help. I held Mums hand tightly. Her last words to me kept resounding in my ears, "Deepak," she said, "I want you to work hard and take good care of the family. Promise me you'll do this, son."

There were tears in my eyes. I caressed her face and brushed her hair sideways and said, "I promise Ma." Two hours later she breathed her last. I felt my heart break into pieces.

My sister quit school and took Mummy's place in the house. Yet I felt the absence of my mother greatly. My father got addicted to drinking. I was slowly getting adjusted to this, when another news came to me. My father arranged for my sisters marriage. He thought it to be the best. My sister had the desire to at least complete school but had to oblige my father. I tried to convince my father of what it would be without her, but all was in vain. He borrowed money from his friends for the dowry.

Finally her life changing day came. Her pretty face was covered under the red veil. My only strength, my stronghold was to be separated from me forever. She was in tears as she hugged me and said, "I'm going very far away from you. But remember you're always there in my heart. I love you Deepak." We both sobbed uncontrollably.

To manage school, studies and the house was terrible. I had enough of traumatic experiences within one year and surely wasn't prepared for another. Unfortunately my father invited more trouble due to alcoholism. He was kicked out of his job.

He had to pay the debts. Without work how would the money come and how would he make it? He began drinking more. Day and night he was seen in the bar. My condition worsened. I hadn't any food to eat. My neighbors showed their generosity for a while but couldn't go on forever.

One late night, Dad came home completely drunk. He banged open the door and began abusing me. I had never seen this facet of his before. He cursed me and said that I was the cause of all the misfortunes. I would never forget what he did next. To get out his frustration, he began throwing and breaking things, even his bottle. He began slapping me. He boxed me on my face and kicked me mercilessly. He caught my neck and almost choked me to death. I was helpless and couldn't bear it anymore. I punched him on his stomach and managed to escape from his clutches. I ran out as fast as I could, far away from home.

After having run quite a distance, I knew I was safe. I couldn't believe that my own father would do this to me. Feelings of anger and resentment began to build within me. Past memories made me feel bitter. I had no reason to live, no purpose to fulfill and no strength to fight back. Dying seemed to be the only and the best option. My life had become a burden for me. I couldn't take it anymore. I thought of staying on the roads rather than going back home.

I walked to the railway station which was on the other side of my area. People here were like bees, busy in their own world. Nobody seemed to be bothered about listening to my woes. I later realized that there were plenty like me, so it was not something new.

Gradually night began to fall and the hustle and bustle of the people died down but my stomach was growling. I searched everywhere for food but found nothing. In fact, I hadn't eaten a proper meal for the past five days. I searched for food in waste bin driving away the dogs. I finally found a chapatti which I ate ravenously. I knew very well that I had to learn to survive or else I would very soon die. Compelled by hunger, I begged for the first time. There were rejections and humiliations but a few good people gave me a rupee. After a whole days struggle, I managed to collect twenty rupees. I was very happy because it seemed that I would have a full meal after ages.

I tried to figure out a place for me to sleep, which would be safe from the police. There was none. The night, too, was terribly chilly. I didn't have anything to cover myself with. My hopes of getting a good night's sleep were stamped out. Slowly, as days passed, I began learning by observing the others around me.

At times I had got nothing and I had to sleep on an empty stomach. The most important lesson I learnt was the need to get acquainted with people. I befriended many people like me. I made friends with the other vendors, helping them with their goods. They tipped me with a free cup of coffee or a batatawada. Among all these Ramu, the person who sold tea, became my best friend.

One day he told me, "My Sahib wants a boy to sell newspapers for him. Are you interested in working?" it seemed to me an excellent idea. I thought I would do something useful rather than just go loafing about. I immediately agreed to the offer. My work began the next day in full swing. I became very good in this work. I enjoyed it. I did it with all my heart. Gradually the demand for newspapers increased. I never thought my convincing skills would be so good. There was a deep inner satisfaction within me for I was now working and earning the money.

After a few months of acquaintance, many regular customers became friendly and I got a few benefactors, too. Mr. Gupta was one of them. Every day without fail he gave me a chocolate. He was a daily traveller. Sometimes he used to sit and chat with me. We used to be so engrossed that twice he missed his train; so much did we enjoy each other's company. His small gestures made me feel happy. I spoke to him about my bitter past.

One day Mr. Gupta said, "Deepak. Tonight I want you to dine with me at my house." I wanted to refuse for I had no decent pair of clothes, but he assured me that clothes didn't make a big difference. I felt comforted and agreed to go along with him. We crossed the bridge and walked down the street and turning on the left lane entered a housing colony.

The maid opened the door for us and there before my eyes was a paradise. The house was like a palace, well decorated and furnished.

"Come in son," Mr. Gupta said.

It was as though I was stepping into a wonderland. My eyes were wide open as I stared at the things in the house. "Sahib, if you don't mind can you please tell me where your son and wife are?" I asked pointing out to a huge photo frame that hung on the center wall.

He looked at the photo and then looking into my eyes said, "They are in heaven now. My wife was driving my son back home from school and they met with an accident." There was silence in the room for a while. He wiped a teardrop from his eye and then looking back at me, smilingly said, "Come, the food is ready, let's have our meal." He served me. I began wolfing down the delicious food.

"Wouldn't you want to study?" he asked me.

"O sahib I would love to. I passed fifth standard in my slum school. Now my work takes the first priority. But really I'd love to study.

"Then why don't you stay with me. You can pursue your studies," Mr. Gupta said.

I couldn't believe my ears. I had no words to express my gratitude. I only looked at him. He held me tightly very close to his heart and said, "Thanks Deepak, be my lost son." I could feel the vibrations of those words from his heart. For the first time after years, I felt loved, needed and accepted. I felt that I belonged to someone who needed me. Tear, only tears were my reply to my foster father.

... My loving Dad, Mr. Gupta, bestowed all his love on me, his new found son. I completed my post-graduation and got a job in a famous company.

At a distance I saw him heading from the park towards the car. I wiped my tears quickly. As he opened the car door, he said, "Hey son, hope you had a good day."

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