

Ink Stain

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It is said that those with little knowledge are often the most arrogant about what they know. Those who possess a modicum of beauty often consider themselves the most beautiful. Those with a little wealth tend to view others as poor. And often, it is the person who lacks something who is most eager to flaunt it. Perhaps this is a peculiar human frailty—the more we lack something, the more we sometimes tend to display it. But I did not learn this from books.

I learned this lesson on a Diwali evening, through a little girl and a drop of ink from a pen. This was back when I was neither married nor employed. I lived in our ancestral home with my cousins. Ours was a large family, and the house was equally spacious—a home defined more by relationships than by rooms, and more by a sense of togetherness than by privacy. We played in the same courtyard, ate under the same roof, and squabbled over trifles, only to make up the very next moment.

My father had a good job. We lived a comfortable life, never lacking the basic necessities. My uncle, on the other hand, wasn't as wealthy; his income was meager, so he couldn't even meet the family's needs.

My uncle had a young daughter—Mini. Mini was very innocent. But there was one habit of hers that all of us children found quite strange. If she got a new book, she would announce it to the entire household: "Look, my new book!"

If she got new clothes, she would spend hours wandering around the courtyard wearing them. Whenever she got sweets, she would eat them as if she were the only one in the house who got to eat them.

If she received a new toy, there was no limit to her joy. We, her siblings, used to tease her endlessly about this habit.

“Hey Mini, got a new book, have you?”

“Yes!”

“Is that all? Showing off so much over such a small thing?”

“Look, my frock is new!”

“Oh really! Ours are old, aren't they?”

She didn't even fully grasp the meaning of our words. She would simply be happy looking at her possession and then go about with that same innocent pride.

We mistook that innocence for arrogance.

We believed Mini thought of herself as the smartest, prettiest, and most special among us.

And us?

We were 'smart' enough to recognize her naivety.

Looking back now, I feel that—at that age—perhaps we were the least wise of all.

Then came Diwali.

There was a buzz of activity in the house from the very morning.

A “rangoli” was being created in the courtyard. Boxes of sweets were being opened here and there, and the sounds of firecrackers had begun to drift in. The adults were busy with preparations for the “puja”, while we children had a world of our own.

But that day, Mini was exceptionally happy.

She had put on her new frock first thing in the morning.

She would repeatedly look at her frock, spread out its flare with her hands, and twirl around the courtyard.

There was a joy on her face that made it clear to anyone: for her, that frock wasn't just a piece of clothing.

It was her Diwali.

But what did we know?

We were busy teasing her, just as always.

“Wow! Here comes Queen Mini!”

“Look, look! She looks like a princess today!”

“Make way, everyone! The princess of the realm is passing by!”

We were all laughing.

Mini would sometimes smile, sometimes glare at us, and then go back to adjusting her frock. Perhaps the sting of our teasing didn't hurt her as much as the sight of her happiness stirred up a childish sense of jealousy in us.

Then, I don't know what came over me.

I was holding a pen.

And the very next moment, I splattered the entire ink supply from the pen onto Mini's new frock.

Splat!

A large blue-black ink stain spread across her gleaming frock. For a moment, the entire courtyard seemed to freeze. Mini looked down. Her eyes widened. She clutched her frock with both hands. Then she looked at me. There was disbelief in her eyes.

It was as if she couldn't comprehend why I had done such a thing to her, given that she considered me her dearest sister.

And then—

She burst into tears. It wasn't an ordinary cry. It was the cry of a child whose little world had suddenly shattered.

“My frock...”

That was all she could say. Then, a storm seemed to break loose in the house. Scoldings rained down on me from all sides.

“Why did you do that?”

“Such a terrible prank!”

“You ruined the poor child's new clothes!”

Someone slapped me; someone else pulled my ear. Even I couldn't fathom how a moment of mischief had turned into such a grave mistake. Just then, Grandma tried to shield me. Instead of scolding me, she turned around and scolded Mini's mother—my aunt—instead:

“Why did you dress the child in her new clothes so early in the day? You should have had her wear them for the “puja”! Now look at the state they're in!”

At the time, I felt Grandma was saving me. But looking back now, I wonder if she saw something else entirely. Perhaps she knew that a poor child's simple joy was far more significant than a bit of childish mischief. Anyway, I got a severe scolding that day. I even got a thrashing. And finally, sulking, I went to my room and fell asleep. Evening began to fall.

Firecrackers were bursting outside. The entire house was illuminated with lamps. Yet, for some reason, I felt a strange restlessness within. The more I tried to forget that incident, the more vividly Mini's tearful face would appear before my eyes.

Her eyes...

And that one sentence—

“My frock...”

In the evening, I quietly walked over to the part of the house where my uncle's family lived. The atmosphere there was completely different from ours. It was the same house. It was the same Diwali. But the sparkle of joy... ..was somewhat less. I stopped near the doorway. I could hear Mini crying inside. I peeked in. Mini was sitting on the floor. Her eyes were swollen. She was telling her mother—

“I want a different frock...”

Auntie remained silent. A small pile of clothes lay before her. I saw— Mini's new frock—the one I had ruined—lying to one side. And apart from that...

She had no other decent new clothes to wear. Auntie had taken out an old frock and was mending a torn section with a needle and thread. The fabric was missing in places. The stitching had

come undone in others. She kept turning it over, examining it, trying to make it wearable somehow. Mini was crying and saying—

“Mummy, I won’t wear this... it’s Diwali today...”

Auntie said gently—

“Dear, I’ll stitch it up right now. You’ll see, it will look nice.”

“No...”

Mini burst into tears again. I stood behind the door, watching it all. And in that moment, something inside me shattered. The very frock I had laughed at in the morning lay before me in the evening as the greatest joy of a poor household. What I had dismissed as merely a piece of clothing was, for Mini, a joy she had likely awaited for months. The very thing we mocked her for—she was perhaps the one who truly understood its value. We had plenty of clothes. She, perhaps, had only two. For us, a new book was an ordinary thing. For her, a new book was no less than a festival. For us, eating sweets was an everyday affair. For her, getting sweets was a celebration. And us? We used to make fun of her happiness.

That day, for the first time, I realized that what I had mistaken for arrogance was perhaps just an attempt to preserve her small, precious joy. I stood there for a long time. I couldn't muster the courage to go up to her and apologize. I wondered, what could I possibly say?

“Forgive me; I ruined your frock because I couldn't bear to see you so happy?”

How petty and mean that sentence would have sounded! I quietly returned to my room. That night, Diwali firecrackers kept bursting for a long time. People in the house kept laughing. Diyas kept burning. Sweets were being shared. But deep within me, a question kept burning—

Why do we measure a person's happiness by the number of possessions they have?

We used to call Mini arrogant. But perhaps she wasn't arrogant. She was simply happy. She cherished the little she had. And us? We had so much that we didn't know the true value of anything. That night, I also realized that sometimes poverty teaches a person the value of things, while affluence makes them seem ordinary. Mini had few clothes, so a new frock was a celebration for her. We had many clothes, so yet another new outfit was just that—another new outfit. That day, my ink hadn't just ruined her frock. It had also stained a misconception growing within me—

The misconception that those who have less are somehow inferior to us. Today, years later, when I recall that incident, I shudder deep inside. Mini has likely forgotten that incident long ago, for even today, she calls me her dearest sister. She might not even remember that act of mischief. But I still remember that evening.

That old frock...

Aunt's trembling fingers...

The tears in Mini's eyes...

And amidst those countless Diwali diyas, the remorse burning within me. Back then, I used to think that "we" were the wise ones, and Mini was the foolish one. Looking back now, I realize it was I who was the foolish one. She knew how to find happiness in the simplest of things. I, on the other hand, would be troubled by others' happiness despite having so much myself. She saw her small world as something vast and wonderful. I was obsessed with proving that my grand world was superior to everyone else's. And perhaps, this is life's greatest paradox—

What we mistake for arrogance in others is often just an innocent way of masking their own insecurities. So, do not judge a person's status by the clothes they wear. Do not measure their happiness by the car they drive. Do not gauge the richness of their life by the house they live in. And above all—

Do not mock someone else's happiness. For that small thing they are proudly rejoicing over today might have been something they struggled immensely to acquire. And it is possible that...

To you, it might be nothing more than a simple frock, but to her, it represents the entire joy of Diwali. That day, I had spilled ink on Mini's frock. But to tell the truth—

The deepest stain left by that ink wasn't on her frock; it was on my soul. And that stain has never washed away. Perhaps some stains never fade because they don't mark our clothes, but our character.