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## A TASTE OF THE BROKEN

The rivers of compassion exist within us, but only if we don't let the dunes submerge them.

It was two days since I joined the Government Higher Secondary School on a Maternity Leave vacancy. My dad and mom, both agricultural officers, were against the idea of their son, a recent St. Stephen's graduate no less, joining the neighbourhood Government school as a teacher on an ad hoc post. But I was writing my Ph.D. on ELT and wanted more hands-on experience, and they grudgingly agreed that this six-month period would be inconsequential in the scheme of things.

On that second day, after the preliminary introductions, I started with the eighth graders as their class teacher. The class comprised of a bright bunch of boys and girls and I knew immediately that I had them under my grip. We were assigned to discuss "The Chimney Sweeper" by William Blake and I was confident of leading them through the labyrinth of Romantic Literature. One of my mentors at college used to say that the attention span of students was ten minutes, and after that, some diversion was essential, if one wanted to loop them in. A surge of pride washed over me. My class today was a hit! I had them completely enraptured.

Half an hour through the first hour, Daisy *teacher* came to the class. I stepped out with a smile.

"Head is calling Deepika. Please send her immediately."

"Sure teacher," I replied.

"Deepika," I called into the class.

The kids were seated in rows of six or seven, huddled against one another like birds roosting. Upon hearing the name, all heads turned towards a lone girl sitting at the back. I was sure, I had not registered her presence till now, but there towards the wall, almost camouflaged, stood a broken desk and a single occupant. The girl slowly stood up, her head unreasonably bent down, as if she dreaded the call.

"Deepika, the Headmistress is calling you. Please go," I said smartly.

She nodded her head.

I took a while to notice the pointed looks and the sly nudges between the kids. I could even hear a muffled snigger. This girl must be up to no good, I assumed. Anyways, as her class teacher, I would have to know what the issue with her was. Well, slowly. That could wait.

As I walked out after the class, the Headmistress came down the corridor with a half-inch wide stick in her hand. She gave me an affable smile.

“How was the first day Danny? These children here can be quite notorious.”

The last bit was delivered in a conspirational tone. I looked at her and she nodded, raising the bamboo stick in her hand. A piece of self-explanatory evidence. I smiled, happy to be recognized. As she walked away, Kunjappu *chetan* came running down the corridor to ring the bell. “Already?” I thought aloud, partially to remind myself that time needed to be more judiciously spent.

There were just a couple of teachers at the Department. Daisy *teacher* was busy looking at the computer screen in front of her and Sanuja *teacher*’s hands were flicking over the mountainous pile of answer scripts stacked in front of her. My chair was near the door and I walked in briskly, not sure if I should break the silence of the room or just get back to my seat. Daisy *teacher* brought my confusion to rest, looked at me.

“Well, someone has the noisy eighth graders on their toes. You know Sanuja, when I went to call that girl, the whole class was in *rapt* attention.” She gave a shifty smile.

“Oh yes, they would have been tired of old dames like us. Danny sir would be a breath of fresh air.”

I smiled politely for want of anything better to say and sank into my seat.

“Teacher, are you free? I need to ask you about the class.”

“Oh sure, Danny. I was their Class Teacher last year so I guess I could help ... Brightest students – Riya, Sahil, Fida, and Gopu. The weakest would be those boys sitting on the first bench. All six of them. They are forbidden to shift seats. Strict orders of HM. The others are average.”

“Right. Anything else I should know about them?”

“A couple of students who have issues at home. Alcoholic fathers – Dinesh who sits on the fourth bench is the son of one. But he is a good one. Sent him for some counselling and now he is okay.”

“Thank you, teacher.”

“Any time Danny.”

She resumed work.

I sat for a while and looked at the attendance register of the class. There were a couple of regular absentees. I would need to check on them.

It was almost towards the end of the second hour when I saw a silhouette at the door. It was the same girl I had sent out of the class. Her body was hunched as if in front of an invisible master. She saw me watching her and reluctantly brought her folded palms to indicate that she needed to talk to Daisy *teacher*.

“*Teacher*,” I called aloud to gather her attention.

Daisy *teacher* looked up and nodded at her. The minute she stepped in, a disgusting, acrid smell of cheap lemongrass lotion emanated from around her. My curiosity piqued, and I pretended to study the register in front of me, all the while listening to her monologue. The girl was stooping even more, her eyes cast down, body crumpled like paper.

“Do the downstairs one first girl, and then upstairs. The teacher’s room can wait.”

She must have nodded silently for I did not hear of any further exchange between them. The pungent odour receded with her, slowly. When I looked up from the book, some time after so I would not be caught eavesdropping, the girl had already reached the further corner of the corridor.

During the third hour I had my second class with the eighth graders again. This was after the ten-minute break and students were slowly piling back in. Some still had their snack boxes open when I walked in. A pony-tailed girl sitting in the second row offered me *kumbilappam*, a traditional sweet dish made of steamed rice, jaggery, and jackfruit. I joined the friendly banter and indulged in humouring them by answering their queries about my personal life.

After ten minutes, the class was in full swing and we were talking about the winter Blake was trying to recreate in his lines. To the kids here in central Kerala, winter was merely the chill they felt during the confluence of November and December. I told them to visualize the mighty Himalayas, layered in sheets of snow, and then downsize it to the streets of London to think of how cold the little chimney sweeper would have felt in those days. Little food, little rest, and terrible cold. In no time I was able to generate sympathy for the little orphan boy in Blake’s poem.

Just as I was building up the setting of the poem, the girl who I saw at the Department came back to the door. She was mostly wet now and asked faintly, “Can I... may I... come in sir?” For three hours she was not there. Perhaps, my annoyance was unmasked as I waved her in. The same acrid smell followed her. I could see visible “Urghhs” on the faces of the kids. Noses curled up, lips pursed, they looked at her in disgust. She stooped even more and went to her seat.

Her intrusion had interrupted my rendering of Blake, so I started dictating notes instead. I asked everyone to take out their notebooks and

walked around to have a quick peep at their notebooks to assess their writings. Neat work from the second bench girls. Finicky writing from some of the boys. I reached the girl at the back. She was rubbing her hands on a newspaper bit. I took the newspaper-wrapped notebook from her. She stood up quickly.

“What happened?”

“Nn-Nothing sir”

“Pen not working?”

“Its... “

She did not complete the sentence. I could see that the pen was leaky. Her hands were smeared with blotches of ink. It was a cheap five-rupee pen, the sort one got for free at events and conferences.

“Throw it out. Take another,” I said. “It’s ruining your work.”

She stood quietly, head still down.

“Don’t you have another?”

She nodded her head... slowly.

“Do you or do you *not* have another pen?”

“I... I don’t have sir.”

Goodness, was she crying? Her voice quivered as she spoke.

By now the general banter of the class had risen, so I had to give the rest of the class my attention. I searched for my pen and then realized that I had left it in the staff room. I asked aloud, “Would anyone have a spare pen? Our friend here has a leaky one.”

None of the kids spoke. Not one offered their pens.

I saw them looking at each other and duck their heads, suddenly pretending to write, pretending to be busy, trying their best not to catch my gaze. Why was this social distancing happening? Something was amiss.

When the bell rang, I called the girl outside. She stood away from me, her wide eyes downcast as seemed her manner. I bent down and looked into her eyes. Frightened eyes.

“S-sorry sir.. I am sorry *sar*.. I am very sorry *sar*.”

“Please stop... why? What did you do?”

Silence.

“You are Deepika aren’t you?”

I got a gentle nod as an answer.

“Where do you come from?”

“Thiruvārppu sir.” The reply took time and came quietly. Her eyes darted quickly as if someone was lurking behind me to take from her something she guarded with her life.

“Parents?”

Silence.

“What are your parents?” I asked affably.

“I... I...” She stammered.

Trrrrringg ... The shrill bell reeled us both. I hadn't realised that an invisible melancholy was circling itself like a bird around me, waiting to perch. The bell saved me. So did Simon sir's appearance as he walked to me from the next class.

I looked at Deepika. She dipped her head and walked inside.

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Post-lunch sessions as a student had always been difficult. Now as a teacher, I realised I dreaded it more, feeling morally responsible for the sweaty faces in the dingy classroom under slow groaning fans.

By the time the class trooped out at 3pm, I had what I could call a successful first day. The morning episode with Deepika had sunken somewhere in my mind under platitudes of "this happens everywhere – too bad" and I berated myself for already finding fault with systems around me. Must be the elitist in me. Must be the near normalcy that repetitions of such stories provided. I could always have an excuse for shifting the gear of my mood swings from this end to that. Well, today had been such a day, new colleagues to get to know, and new committees where I could already share my voice. The bonhomie was so cordial that I already shared the group selfie we took of us at the Staffroom as my WhatsApp status. Now all I needed to do was to drop off a file at the HM's house and head back home to watch a movie.

Most of the students stood around talking and drifted out. I had asked them to request their parents to let them stay back tomorrow for half an hour after class. There was a short film that the NSS was screening and I was informed that attendance was compulsory. I had asked if this inconvenienced anyone and a few stood up. Two kids had their bus leaving at 3.30 from the stand, so I permitted them to leave. Deepika stood quivering as I walked near her.

"Sir, please ... I can't," she whispered.

"You have to. It's compulsory."

"Please, *sar* ... I ... I'm not allowed to stay back."

There was something in her voice that stopped me from pushing it further. Something that touched a chord in my heart. An utter helplessness. I looked into her muddled eyes. In it, I saw only one emotion ... fear ... pure fear. There was no mistaking it. This girl was not faking it. I let her go.

"She doesn't speak to *any* of us, sir." Amaya came near me, her bag dangling behind her back. "No one speaks to her too. If we ask her something at all she starts crying."

I was a little unsure of the ethics of discussing issues of one classmate with another. But out came the words before I could stop it myself.

“Tell me Amaya, why did the class snigger when Deepika walked in?”

“That ... sir ... “I could see the girl fumbling. I had caught her off guard. She had to answer my direct question.

“She is called to clean toilets.”

“What? ... Where?”

“At school ... some students have seen her washing the toilets.”

“*Toilets?*”

“Yes sir ... boys and girls and teachers too.”

“But ... why?”

“I don’t know sir ... Please don’t tell anyone I said this ... ”

Amaya cowered and ran away quickly.

I stood there astounded at the implication of the statement. A girl in my class gets called away during class times to clean school toilets? What sort of parents would let her do that? Let alone, what sort of teachers would allow such a proposition? I started the engine of the car and decided that I would have to look more into the matter. As I turned around the corner at Thiruvārppu, I slowed down the car and asked at the grocery store for directions to the Head Mistress’s house. The man pointed to an open gate and a double-storied house that stood over a mount. I drove in.

The garden was well maintained, and the yard was swept. Everything was spick and span just like the HM’s office appeared to be. I had no misgivings that she was a hard taskmistress, and had sly reports insidiously thrown in by her colleagues about her lack of tolerance when work was not met on time, particularly during review meetings or monthly visits from flying squads. But to me she had been nothing but polite and gracious, even inviting me home for a cup of coffee over this file I needed to get her signature on.

I rang the calling bell twice and turned, hearing a muffled sound near the jackfruit tree. With her hand clutching a broom, and her head bent doubly down, Deepika stood there wearing a faded salwar. I climbed down the steps of the porch.

“Deepika, I didn’t expect you to be *here*.” I tried covering my surprise with a smile. She stood silent.

“*Sar* ... Madam hasn’t come *sar* ... She and *Kochu* Madam (little madam) have gone out.”

“It’s okay Deepika. I will wait here. She knows I am coming.”

She nodded quickly.

I walked into the porch and sat on one of the basket chairs. She kept standing there looking distressed. Was it my sudden presence? Or was it

something else? Questions foamed within me, but words lingered and I pretended to scan the surroundings to buy time.

“Sar ... *Chai edukkatte sar*? (Shall I bring tea?)

She asked softly, dipping her body even more. It suddenly occurred to me why this body language of hers was an anomaly. This was not how the kids of her age behaved. Their zest for life, their pride, which would lead them to have an arrogant demeanor seemed to be lost in this girl. She seemed terribly alone in this vast wide world.

I called her inside the porch and asked her to sit. She refused by nodding her head vigorously, fearfully, and stood outside the porch, near the wall. I could only partially see her cowed-down head.

“Do you live nearby Deepika?”

Silence.

“Are your parents okay with you working?”

Silence.

I could see a swift hand going to her mouth.

“Is there anything you want to tell me? I can help.”

Silence.

“Deepika?”

Even more silence. After an uneasy silence, she whispered back.

“Maid here sir ... I ... I don’t have anybody *sar* ... Please sir ... ”

Did she mean to say, “Please stop asking me more questions?”

The evening rays of the summer sun slanted languidly into the wide portico through the old mango tree in the courtyard. I felt a shiver trickling down my spine. This girl’s pain was so livid that it begged to engulf me to drown along with her. Yet this was impossible. Nonsense. Not at this time and this place! Where were our hallowed systems of protection? All the Panglossian theories of justice that I had read over the years fell apart in front of her fear.

“Please *sar* ... ”

I shot up from my chair, held her hand, and forced her to look at me.

“Why? Why are you so frightened? Do they hurt you?”

I saw her freeze. Deep down her palms lay welts from the past, some dark shadows of torture. How many more did the frayed dress hide?

“I ... I’m maid *sar* ... have no one *sar* ... Madam helped me, sir. Else I would have no place to go, sir. I don’t have anyone sir.” She was shaking again.

I think the hypocrisy of the educated upper class revealed itself to me then. So much for the progressive middle class! After days of consistent and clandestine probing, I would learn that Deepika had worked at the HM’s house since childhood. No one knew who her parents were or how she came to the Manganattu house. Sandhya *Chechi*, the sweeper at school



became my closest ally. From her, over cups of hot chai, I managed to excavate Deepika's story.

“*Kashtam ente sire*” ( too bad, sir), Sandhya Chechi would keep her hand over her hips and start. “Fate! That too at birth. Her birth killed both father and mother ... sad! Some lives have to bear the penance. What to do!”

I was slowly getting the picture. This girl had lived and worked at the teacher's house ever since she was able to do chores. Everyone told her that it was her ill-luck that she had no one. Nobody would ever want her. Nobody would care if anything happened to her. Her life, as her death, was immaterial. They would make her sit and watch them have meals, all four of them, and throw down morsels on the floor. Doormat. That was her place. The elder children of Manganattu house would have their classmates over and make her polish their shoes. Some mischief makers would pull her braid, and set their dogs on her. She was strictly ordered not to talk to anybody in class. The HM personally would come in between classes to humiliate her in public by mocking her. The step-by-step denigration was to isolate her in the class, so the torture inflicted on her at home would not be shared with anyone. The toilet cleaning was a purposeful mandate too. Whenever the ayah took leave, the girl would spend her time cleaning toilets. None of the staff thought anything wrong with it, for the story shared among everyone was how the benevolent Usha teacher took in an orphan girl and sponsored her. Even if they had qualms, or spoke about her over muffled telephone calls, they were too weary of their designations to mess with the internal affairs of their superior. The government policy of compulsory education had given Deepika the chance of being brought to the outside world at least for a namesake education. Else Deepika or her story would have long back sunk into oblivion.

I pondered long at the rationale of my action, and the trouble it might create when the other teachers, particularly the HM, realised the implication of my doings. My services might be terminated. I could stir up a lot of bad blood. But the moment when I decided to go forward, multiple domains changed within me.

What I did was my act of courage. A sieve from which I would draw courage and resilience even years later. Without knowing it, Deepika would play a part in my memory, just as I had played a part in hers.

I couldn't take on the HM directly or rely on the other staff to support me. But what I could do was to change the attitude of the class. The eighth grade students, all twenty-nine of them, needed to know the reality. The next day in class I started by asking them what they knew about child labour and introduced them to the 1986 Child Labour Prohibition Act of the Government of India. I had done my homework thoroughly and was sure the clippings I showed hit the spot. I could see their faces cringe at



the pictures of young children being forced to work in matchbox manufacturing units and restaurants. A couple of teary eyes here and there and I knew I was on the right track. I looked at Deepika, sitting with head bent as always, and spoke to the class about how child labour was a crime and how everyone irrespective of the stories of their past deserved better. No one had the right to tell us we were born bad or wrong or unlucky.

The day Deepika went back early I told the class her story. How she started working for as little as ten rupees a day to feed herself. How right before their eyes, stood a girl who stayed hungry every snack break and lunch break and was too afraid to share her hunger with anybody else. The story of a girl who had been continuously shattered that nothing was left in her person, save a stooping, devastated shadow. All these many years of ideological apparatus drilling into her brain that she was worthless, fit only to substitute for the toilet cleaning lady. A stench-filled pile. I spoke to them of her lack of clothes, her lack of food, and of her rigorous punishments. They were quiet. Each one of them. No murmur arose. No smart comments flew across. They were silent and ashamed of themselves.

I have tried thinking of the colour of shame. The effect of transferring shame from one person to another. The class trooped out in silence, each burdened with the guilt of their actions. It varied as I understood from some confessions – not lending her notebooks to copy from on days she went to clean, to pouring water on her seat to see if she would sit anywhere else, to calling her “*thottikari*” (shit cleaner). They went home burdened.

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The next day I borrowed the first class for the eighth graders. I needed to make sure Deepika was there. Did she know by now that her classmates knew about her? How would she take it? The class was quiet when I walked in. Amine and Riya requested me to step outside. I nodded, looking over my shoulder to see hunched up Deepika in her usual place, head down.

When we walked back in, the whole class had turned towards Deepika. This time, they all stood up. One by one they surrounded her as Amine spoke to her on behalf of them.

“Deepika ... we are sorry we were mean to you. If only you had opened up to us before, we would have tried to understand you. Please don’t worry. Now, this class of thirty will be here for you and each other.”

One by one they came from their seats, shook her hands, hugged her, lifted her tearful face, patted her hair. They had also brought little gifts of appeasement, a chocolate bar, a few pens, some pencils, a packet of chips,

one or two notebooks, a couple of hairbands, one or two old dresses. Almost everyone kept their goods on her table, and Sarah called out proudly, her mom said she will pack two lunch boxes every day and raised them for all to see. Everyone laughed aloud.

I thought Deepika lifted her head a tiny bit. A little higher than normal. Slowly, we will sow a smile here I decided, as I went forward and patted her cheek.

A battle won. The war would soon follow.