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Cards

Shweta

Pritam lit a candle and the glow of the fire suddenly crowded the wall of his bedroom with the shadows of the past. The wall was full of photographs of his wife and daughter laughing as Pritam's lips betrayed just a faint smile. Before throwing away the burnt matchstick, he held it close enough to his nose to get the whiff. The smoke of the matchstick reminded him of the gang of boys he used to hang with ten years ago. His gang. The anti-jam squad! The gang was called the anti-jam squad by other traffic boys as they could easily disperse even the most crooked traffic jams.

The famous four gang -- Lachman, Rotlu, Munna -- were the only ones Pritam could call family at that time. He always felt that the bond of family was something more than just the bond of blood. Blood was a mere physical tie that had ceased to exist for Pritam when at the age of ten his mother's last cry of hunger barely escaped her parched lips. The cloth she had tied to her shrunken stomach was later used by his father to wipe his vomit covered face, which made him not only angry but also repulsive of the life spent among the honking of the cars and the bickering of his alcoholic father.

However, when Pritam looked back at those memories, he also felt a strong desire to go back to those moments when his gang sat down under the streetlight to play cards. The only time of the day he loved as a 13-year-old boy was when the street lamps would light up and bring joy to his dreary routine of a traffic signal boy. Mornings were like a nightmare – the turmoil of the road also invaded the life of those who made a living on road. Father used to beat him up for bringing less money and not selling enough tissue paper at the traffic signal. Pritam hated tissue papers because they always reminded him of that day when he had lost his mother and his father used her cloth to wipe his vomit. The road was a cruel master as it dictated people to its own terms but also provided a living.

The backbreaking work in the heat of the day and the constant noise of the traffic would only end at nine. The boys would gather near the street lamp, their pockets full of cards – their only entertainment in a life full of drudgery, toil and smoke of the inhumane four-clawed machines that raided the earth like a swarm of flies. They were no ordinary cards that children play with! They didn't have fancy cartoons on them or the name of cricketers. Yet they were cards out of the ordinary! They were the cards of creativity.

It was Munna, the eldest of the group who suggested that they should have something to play with. Since they could not purchase marbles with their meagre income, they had to make their own cards. Rotlu, whose father used to sell books at the traffic signal, suggested that they make cards of their own. But to make cards they needed paper. At night when Pritam's father threw an empty match box in the corner of the road which he used to imagine as their bedroom. An idea struck him at once. From that day on they would collect all the empty match boxes and cut the front and the back portions to form their own playing cards!

Playing with the matchbox cards soon became a habit. The boys also collected cards of the bigger sized matchboxes which attached greater value. For the boys the empty matchboxes became a treasure as they hunted for matchboxes even while going about

their work. Sometimes they would ask for matchboxes from the people in the cars, and many a times they would visit the dump.

These memories flashed in front of Pritam. Yet, he deeply regretted the fact that he had left the gang behind to study and get out of the life on the road. His savior was a lady whom he had met on the road while selling tissues. She told him that he could earn far better if he got education and he could get better and real cards which would be much better than his matchbox cards. He jumped at the opportunity but he had to leave his gang! He left them two o'clock one day. His father had already died last year. The other gang members stayed behind with the matchbox cards as Pritam promised to meet them frequently.

Months passed and some years, Pritam's quest to hide from his old life was never so strong. The gang became a thing of the past. It was only in the moments of extreme despair that Pritam thought of his old life, his gang of boys and their beloved matchbox cards. But now as the gate of memory opened Pritam felt homesick. He wanted to eagerly go back to the place which he had left far behind. He had tried finding Monnu, Rotlu and Lachman but they had vanished somewhere in the deep recesses of the city roads.

"Papa why do you stand alone with a candle every day in the room?" said his daughter, opening the door of his room.

Pritam pulled her daughter's cheek and said, "My little angel, I was just playing a game which I used to play as a child. Would you like to play with me?"

"Yes papa" replied little angel.

Pritam produced a tiny pack of cards and handed it over to her daughter. She looked confused and asked, "But papa these are not real cards. They are just fake cards made of matchboxes."

"Yes," said Pritam wondering what to say to his 4 year old daughter who could hardly fathom that apart from lighting the candle, these cards had also lighted his life long ago...



BIO-NOTE

Shweta is a research scholar in the Department of English at University of Delhi. Her area of research is fanfiction and young adult fiction. Apart from reading she also likes writing short stories.

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