

Downpour

Adiv's entire body flooded with anxiety as he peeped out of the keyhole at the barren walls and darkened concrete. He knew he could not sit in the dingy cupboard forever and he could hear their distance calls getting closer. He gazed at the single light bulb dangling from the ceiling and focused his attention on the gentle sway to calm himself. The rain was pouring softly outside, and he could hear the low rumbles of the storm coming from afar. Every time the thunder boomed around him, he covered his ears, trying to stop his eardrums from exploding. He crouched further into the tight corner of cobwebs and hugged his knees, hoping he would never be found.

"Adiv!" Talin called.

Adiv hugged his knees tighter and tucked his head between his forearms. He had run to the cellar as soon as he heard Sohit call for him, knowing that they needed someone to blame. He was always their escape goat. He knew this time would be no different and eventually, he would have to suffer for a crime he did not commit. As always, the small chance of remaining innocent drove him to run and hide in the cupboard. He rested his forehead on his arms, sweat beading down his face, and listened to the water dripping from the roof. Slowly, he took a deep, long breath to stop the tears from rolling down his dirty cheek.

"Adiv!" Sohit called, now standing right outside of the room. "Get out here."

"Yeah, Papa is looking for you Adiv! Come out!"

He could hear the smugness in Sohit's and Talin's voices, picturing them smiling with pride as they pretended to be concerned. He was tired of always covering for them. Every time he did, his mom would lose her pay for that day. In silence, she would continue to labor in the scorching heat to only go home to an empty plate. The Malik family claimed to go by discipline and not cruel

punishment but taking away the means to buy food was worse than any physical punishment in Adiv's mind.

Without any warning, the dim light fell into his safe place, and Adiv's head snapped up at two hefty boys in front of him. Before he could call out, Sohith grabbed him by the collar and threw him onto the hot ground. Adiv took a sharp intake and slowly rose from the floor accepting his defeat. Sohith immediately pushed him onto the nearest wall with his forearm pressed against his neck.

"Did you really think you were the only one who knew where the cellar was?" Sohith's sniggered. "You should have left the rug over the door instead of folding it over, idiot."

Adiv gasped for air. "N-No, I j-just..."

"Papa is calling you. Tell him it was you who took the money out of the dresser." Sohith said, letting go of Adiv's neck.

"You stole money?" Adiv was shocked as he rubbed his neck, knowing there would be bruises the next day. "Why would you need money? I'm not covering you for that." Adiv knew theft was unforgivable.

Sohith walked towards Adiv, once again forcing him back against the wall. "You will cover it. I used the money to pay off my teacher for better marks. And some other stuff that you don't need to worry about." He shrugged.

"What other stuff?"

Talin looked at Sohith with a mixture of concern and surprise, "You stole money?"

Sohith glared at them. "It's none of your business."

Adiv looked at Talin with dismay, knowing he would never need to pay off his teachers with as smart as he was. Talin was only there so he could be audience to Sohith's vile games. Adiv

missed the days when they use to play cricket outside, before Sohita manipulated Talin to hate Adiv. This left Adiv completely alone. He didn't have the luxury of going to school to make any friends nor did he live in a place where kids could roam around outside. The slums were unsafe, and children were often charged with earning money too. So, Adiv worked silently with his mother every day, cleaning after the two brothers and assisting with miniscule tasks.

"He'll ask me to give the money back. And I have no money to give." Adiv had covered for them a lot throughout the years- shattered vases, stolen food, dirty hallways, broken toys—but this was serious. "I don't even know where the dresser is!"

"Tell him you already used the money for food or something." Sohita shrugged. "Tell him that you stole the money by taking the key from the office, from the top drawer, and then going to the big dresser by the window." He finished, pulling out a tennis ball from his pocket and tossed it up in the air.

"No, Sohita Bhai please, Malik Sab will be angry." Adiv pleaded, knowing the consequences of this act would be worse than not getting one day of pay. "Talin, please help Sohita understand."

"You've done this so many times Adiv. Don't be a baby." Sohita said pushing him with one hand. Talin looked at Adiv for a moment and then looked the other way.

Adiv looked at him with disbelief, "Why don't you go take the blame then Talin? You didn't pay off your teachers. It's not my fault Sohita Bhai is stupid..."

Adiv didn't have time to react. The blow to his left eye caused him to fall to the ground. The pain was excruciating. He groaned in agony as he clasped his hand around his eye and slammed his hand on the ground. Hot tears rolled down his cheek.

Sohita walked over and picked up the tennis ball as Talin said quietly, "Sohita bhai maybe you should lay off."

Sohit ignored him, “You’re pissing me off Adiv. If you don’t want to do it, fine. I’ll just tell Papa that your mom took the money.” Sohit backed away and walked into the hallway. “Papa! I don’t think it was Adiv...”

“Wait!” Adiv called after Sohit standing up and ignoring the dull throb in his eye. “I’ll do it.”

Adiv walked out into the courtyard with Sohit and Talin trailing behind him as if they were his prison guards. He saw Malik Sab standing in front of his workers, his face contorted in anger. Adiv’s mother was among the workers, her head was bowed like the others, staring at the dirt that covered her feet.

The clouds were disgruntled, and Adiv winced at the loud sounds, stopping to look up at the darkness that was falling over them. The downpour was coming and Adiv knew there was nothing he could do to prevent it. Sohit pushed him forward; Talin now trailed further behind, his head hanging low.

“Malik Sab?” Adiv said quietly. Malik Sab looked down at Adiv with an irate expression. He was a large man, with a curved mustache and charcoal, beanie eyes. He never wore anything except a black coat and a thin, white cane embellished with gold markings. Adiv stared at him boldly, trying to not let the fear show on his face.

“Come Adiv, you finally stopped hiding.” He spoke calmly but there was a slight shaking in his voice. “How many times will you disappoint your mother?”

Adiv turned to look at his mom who was now looking at him, standing helpless with tears streaming down her cheeks. She knew that he didn’t take the money; Adiv saw it in her eyes. He felt angry and he turned back at Malik Sab with his brow furrowed.

“I took the money for food.” Adit stated. “I stole the key from the office, the top drawer, and then went to the big dresser by the window and took the money and spent it on food,” repeating exactly what Sohit had told him.

He knew Udit Malik had a temper. He claimed his punishments were lenient, but really, they were a cruel way of reminding his workers that they could not survive without him. Adiv straightened his back to look taller.

“Sena!” Malik called fiercely, still eyeing Adiv.

A slender woman stepped up. “Yes Malik Sab?”

“Is the money I give you not enough?”

“No Malik Sab, it’s enough,” She whimpered.

“Then why is your boy stealing money?”

“He is just a boy. He may have gotten hungry. He doesn’t understand.” Sena’s voice was now barely audible over the growing thunder.

“He isn’t a boy anymore Sena! I have been accepting his pathetic apologies for years now! But this? No. I won’t be forgiving this time.”

Adiv looked over his shoulder at Sohit and Talin. Sohit looked pleased with himself whilst Talin eyed Adiv somberly. Adiv hated them. He wanted them to suffer as he did every day.

“Please, Malik Sab. It won’t happen again. He won’t step foot ever in this house again.”

“No, no. That is too easy.” A smile crept onto Malik’s face. “He stole money from me. I need to set an example so this doesn’t happen again.” He paced for a moment and then said, “You will work until all of the money he stole is repaid, and then you are fired.”

Adiv interrupted, “But Malik Sab! She didn’t do anything; I will work and repay it myself! Please, I am sorry. Please don’t do that!”

Malik Sab's strike to Adiv's face was not as painful as the tennis ball however, he was able to contain his tears this time. His cheek stung but he held his ground glowering back at Malik Sab. His body was now shaking from the growling skies above.

"You are old enough to be punished like an adult Adiv. You and your mom will repay me for the money you stole and then you will leave here."

Sena shook her head incredulously. She opened her mouth to beg but Malik cut her off.

"Do not argue with me Sena, I can do much worse than merely taking away your job."

Sena tears were masked by the soft rain and she closed her eyes for a moment and then nodded at Adiv to come to her. There was nothing left to say. She took his hand and they walked out of the three-story stone bungalow and onto the dirt road that stretched two miles to home.

The thunder violently continued through the night. The shanty's roof shuddered from the deluge of rain. The buckets scattered across the cramped room slowly filled with drinking and bathing water for the next few days. Adiv tossed and turned on his cot, slapping mosquitoes off his arms and legs. His mother had asked what had happened to his eye and neck, and as soon as Adiv had said "Sohit" she understood everything and said nothing else.

Adiv was restless. He stood up and walked outside letting himself become drenched in cold water. He finally broke. The tears streamed down his face at the same pace as the rain, and he finally let his anger and frustration take over. He looked at his decrepit home and made the decision. He quickly went back in and grabbed a wool sack from the corner post and ran as fast as he could, every blast of thunder driving him to go faster.

He stopped at the front gate of the dark Malik bungalow. He walked over to the back and climbed through the gap he and Talin use to sneak out of. Over the years, Adiv had learned every

inch of the mansion. He crept through the dark foyer and climbed the marble stairs to the second floor. He walked past Sohit's room and pushed open the door to Malik Sab's office. Remembering his lie, he went straight to the top drawer and pulled it open and grabbed the single gold key that lay inside.

Adiv stared at the key, contemplating for a minute. He didn't care what was right or wrong anymore. He was tired of being walked all over, tired of never having money. This was his only chance to escape. He grabbed the key, noticing that it felt heavier than it looked. He saw the russet dresser by the window, small and dusty. Its shadow made it look four times larger than it was. He knelt in front of it, inserted the key into the bottom cabinet and turned until he heard a click.

Stacks of rupee bills overflowed the drawer. Adiv had never seen so much money in one place. He stuffed as many stacks as he could into his wool sack stopping every few moments to listen for footsteps. He grabbed two extra stacks of rupees and then locked it, placed the key back into its place and walked out into the hallway. Instead of heading for the front door, he went into Sohit's room. Adiv saw him sleeping peacefully on a bed with fine cotton sheets. Adiv didn't stop the jealousy from taking over as he knelt beside the foot of the bed, and carefully slid loose bills under the mattress. Sohit shifted his weight and Adiv froze. He waited until the deep breathing resumed and then continued to place an entire stack of rupees underneath, knowing the maids would flip the mattress the next day.

Feeling satisfied, he quietly stood up and made his way for Talin's room.

"Adiv?"

Adiv stopped and turned to his left to see Talin standing next to him, hair ruffled, a glass of water in hand. They stared at each other. Adiv's heart raced and his hand trembled over the bag of cash. Talin eyed the sack and rupees in his hand. They stood there staring at each other silently

for a few long seconds and only the sounds of their panting breaths and the thumping rain could be heard. Talin looked down at his hand and then back towards Adiv lifting the glass of water towards him. Adiv paused and then slowly took the glass and drank the water in one gulp. He looked back down at the stack of rupees in his hand, bent down and placed it on the floor between them. The thunder was growing loud again and Adiv backed away from Talin before turning to go back down the stairs.

Adiv crawled through the fence and turned to look at the dark house again. The thunder blared around him, but he no longer cowered. He felt his shoulders relax as he turned away and walked on the damp soil that was now becoming visible in the early morning. A tired smile formed on his face and he slowed his pace to take in his moment of victory. He no longer feared his fate, as he no longer feared the thunder.