

Kindergarten Woes

Rohan, a small fellow of around three having frame of a one-&- half-year old, walked painfully slow to the water dispenser, making a screeching sound with his brown mock-leather shoes. He pulled a transparent plastic glass and pushed the faucet for water to fall in. He wore the expressions of a ninety year old, neither happy nor sad, plainly disengaged from the world as if waiting for the final verdict on his life's passage. Journey back to the classroom was even more indifferent.

It was second week at kindergarten after the much sentimental first week where parents accompany their little ones for first two days. For the next three days, they waved a tearful bye to them at the school gate. It was such a sore sight to watch crying and sometimes howling toddlers clutching at their parents' hands, not letting them go. Their first and perhaps most substantial step in the outside world ended up in teary eyes, running noses and fear-stricken hearts.

"Rohan, did you forgot your water bottle? You could have asked for mine!"

Soha, a cheerful little girl wearing a bright-colored frock and even brighter expressions met him as he sat down on the polished mini desk in the class. He looked back as if he had not understood what was meant by a water bottle but replied after a short pause.

"Mommy will get me a new one this weekend as that one belongs to my brother."

Soon Mrs. Anjali entered the class with a generous smile that exuded tremendous motherly affection likewise for all the children. Dressed impeccably in a deep maroon cotton Sari, her black hairs loosely tied, she was like a second mother to all of them. She radiated a kind of warm energy into the atmosphere that seemed to soothe the home-sick children. An invisible halo appeared over her head when she sang rhymes with twinkling eyes and swaying hands to catch the attention of the young ones.

By end of the second week, most of the kids had given up crying or so it appeared. Many like Soha, enjoyed every little moment, whether it was sharing lunch with others or raising hand to complete the jingle opened by Mrs. Anjali. Still few of them were stubborn enough not to give in at any cost. They kept bawling after regular intervals, reminding others of the brief separation from the parents.

Next week, Rohan certainly got a new water bottle as promised by his Mom. Yet in his eyes, it was way inferior than the Super-man imprinted bottle that belonged to his brother.

"It's nice, I like the yellow Pooh !"

Soha complimented with her usual effervescence stroking the shining sticker with the tip of a pink finger.

"I don't like it. I liked the one with the super-man on it."

"Why don't you exchange it with your brother then? My cousin Johnny once gave me his favorite color box." She went on non-stop like an experienced Radio Jockey.

"Mommy says he became an angel few months back."

There was a detachment in his voice as if the brother never belonged to him any day.

"Angel! I have never heard of one but if Mommy told you, it must be true." Soha exclaimed, battling her big eye-lashes at the newly revealed knowledge.

Their conversation was cut short as teacher showed a big paper ice-candy and asked everyone to identify it. As usual, Soha was one of the enthusiasts, willing to be the first one to answer.

"Ice-Candy!"

"Very Good Soha".

"Now Rohan, tell me quickly, what color is it?"

There was an inherent delay after which he replied.

"Orange."

"Just like the color of brother's room walls where I am not allowed to enter after he became an angel."

The latter one was said in a murmur intended for Soha's ears.

"My Mom takes me for an outing and let me have my favorite candy every weekend."

She replied back not concerning the agony of the boy sitting next to her.

Moments later, the school bell rang indicating the mid-day meal break. Colorful boxes adorned with different characters from several cartoon channels appeared on each desk. Soha opened the box to find her favorite cheese tomato sandwich inside.

"My Mom is the best cook in the world!"

She took a big bite and munched leisurely as if absorbing every nutrient present in the tiny triangles.

Rohan's box was also a similar vegetable sandwich but he seemed not to relish it like Soha.

He chewed lazily looking into the wall as if he was eating someone else's, probably his deceased brother's favorite food. It was hard to tell whether he was like this from the beginning or he became so after his older sibling's death. Not exactly that he was missing his brother, but the tragedy back home had invaded the delicate soul in a bigger manner.

Soha, on the other hand, was an amiable kid with a liking for everyone and everything. She was full of positive vibes 24 x 7, which were occasionally reflecting on Rohan now-a-days. He

seemed to have found an outlet for the things that he faltered to say at home. Moreover, his parents had been struggling to cope up the loss of an older child. They had been too engrossed to hear his trivial woes lately.

Amidst of all this, there was one more keen listener who would love to urge him to speak and share with her.

Mrs. Anjali, a beautiful woman in late thirties had found herself another world when she joined the kindergarten three years back. Anjali and her husband Jay were perfect couple barring the fact that they could not graduate into being parents someday. A trip to the scenic hills of Shimla had taken away the joy of multiplying the family when they had met with an accident. Although the couple recovered from the visible injuries in few weeks, Anjali suffered a major blow to her prospects of becoming a mother for the rest of the life.

A home- maker, who could only dream of becoming a stay- at- home Mom, she chose to join a school, thanks to the Nursery teacher training that she did during her pre-marriage days. Now she could be a mom to at least a dozen little kids, for those 3-4 hours of the day. She took utmost pleasure in nurturing the little saplings whose parents had put faith into her.

"Come on Rohan! Now it's your turn to share what you like most at home."

"I liked when Mom used to pick me up first and hug when brother and I raced earlier."

A pale smile evident of a lost sweet memory flashed across his lips.

Mrs. Anjali paused for a moment and brushed his straight hair. From whatsoever interaction she had with him in the last three weeks, she knew of the untold anguish that he expressed through those dry lips and droopy eyes.

She was about to say something when Soha spoke.

"You should like it more now as there is no one racing with you."

She never missed to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

"She picks me up when I come running but cries every time I do so. I don't like it."

He spurred out two sentences in a single breath, quite unlike his usual self.

"My Mommy also cries sometimes at night when I am in bed."

Soha said in an unfamiliar tone as if she borrowed it from Rohan.

"She thinks that I am sleeping while I am just lying with my eyes shut."

She returned back as herself, smiling mischievously.

Mrs. Anjali bent down to kiss them one by one, showering them with brimming affection. She moved onto other children, to deliver their share of bliss.

Most of the kids had settled in the kindergarten by now. They played, shared and fought with the fellow students. Class-room maid was having a hard time handling more than a dozen odd toddlers before Mrs. Anjali entered the class. It was a cacophony of high-pitched voices

produced collectively by the cluster. Strange enough, with her entry, everyone went into a hushed silence, broken by an occasional whisper.

They greeted her in a synchronized chorale like a trained troupe and she replied back with a cheerful face.

"Listen everyone! We are going to have summer vacations. To celebrate, there's a party in the class on Friday."

Party was supposed to be followed by the first parents-teacher meeting of the class. Children came dressed in bright floral attire for the summer Fiesta theme party. They sang, ate and danced together as a part of the celebrations.

Rohan's parents were amongst many others waiting for their turn. His mother, a petite woman with big but sunken eyes looked around the room bustling with the infinite energy of vividly dressed tots. She noticed Rohan standing amidst of the crowd yet noticeably isolated. Soha held up his hand and jumped up and down singing a rhyme. Intermittently, he too would mumble a word or two, smiled and hopped like her.

Finally it was their turn to talk to Mrs. Anjali. They sat before her after exchanging formal greetings.

"How is he doing in the class?"

"Honestly speaking, he is still trying to adjust to the new atmosphere."

"He is an introvert. He does not mingle easily with other kids."

"That's absolutely normal as long as he is comfortable with both of you at home. Sooner or later, he will be friendly with his class-mates too."

Rohan's mother hesitated for a moment and spoke after a pause.

"Actually he does not speak much to us too. He was not like this earlier but after his brother....." she almost choked and went on saying, "He misses his brother probably."

Mrs. Anjali had wanted to tell them that he missed his parents too but refrained. Something like that would have sounded too impolite to the already grieving couple.

A pretty lady looking like a grown-up Soha greeted Mrs. Anjali. Soha ran to her eagerly, clinging to her legs like a baby monkey.

"Hope she is not troubling anyone, she is too naughty."

"Absolutely not! She is such a sweet-heart!"

"She is so fond of you."

"Blessed are the parents who have such an adorable child."

A weak smile stretched across her Mom's lips. For a fraction of second, Mrs. Anjali felt as if she was looking at her own mirror image: Sparkling eyes with an endless longing for something.

As Soha's mother got up to leave, Mrs. Anjali spoke.

"One more thing; you should try to bring Soha's father in the PTM from next time."

Soha's Mom paused for a second and replied:

"I am a single mother."

Mrs. Anjali's looked back at her with a profound gaze.

"I am sorry. She must be terribly missing her father."

"It's fine; she has no memory of him." Soha's mother spoke blankly.

Mrs. Anjali's expressions were still the same. Soha's Mom paused for a moment and then as if she was answerable to Mrs. Anjali, she spoke again.

"We separated when I was seven-months pregnant."

She did not look back after having said those words.

When they reached the school gate, Rohan waved excitedly at Soha, strolling and swinging her little party bag. He lowered the window pane of the car and called her loudly. Rohan's

mother noticed the shine in his eyes and exuberance in his movements. A realization struck her at once as she watched a lively stranger in her child. She hugged him as a lone tear emerged from the corner of her eye only this time it was not out of bereavement.

"Can we plan a holiday during Rohan's summer vacation?" She addressed her husband.

Rohan kept waving till Soha disappeared out of his sight yet her impression was still there on his little face.