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The Little God

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Arbaaz rushed to the mound of trash with a twig to scour it. He kept poking it vigorously, each time with greater enthusiasm till he discovered the stub of a cigarette. A sense of achievement pervaded his being as he dusted the stub, and flickered it with the old lighter. The fire reflected the gleam in his eyes.

Arbaaz was seven years old, the son of a nomad, an artist who sculpted the best figures for the festivals and sold it as artefacts. The hutments of the nomads lay nestled between the tall buildings in the popular Nakhane Chowk, a square at Rahatani in Pune, India. At the entrance of Nakhane Chowk, just before the path that led to the hutments there lay a magnificent broken sculpture of Lord Ganapathi, the Indian God worshipped symbolically as an abolisher of obstacles. The colours of the Ganapathi had drained away in the rain and had faded in the sun yet, it remains at the gateway as a custodian. The place must have been a landfill as one could see people dragging their trash to dump it here, the place is strewn with onion peels, egg shells, paper wastes, vegetable wastes and animal wastes. Stray dogs and human beings lived akin with their strong bond. The nomads had built their tiny huts on the land, the hut was actually a shanty with a single room and adjacent walls. The material varied from tinned roof to thatched coconut leaves and torn clothes. The trash often lay unattended till the municipal authorities cleaned the place. The sordid place proved to be hellish with flies sitting everywhere and the trash rotting. Foul smell mingled with the aroma of the savouries from the tall buildings and the sweet shops across the road wafted into hutments.

Arbaaz belonged to a large Muslim family, the name is popular in Islam religion and means an Eagle. The name befitted little Arbaaz as he had the potential to soar high in life. He had three younger brothers and two sisters who were older than him. He was good-looking despite his poverty, his gleaming brown eyes matched his dark brown silky hair in spite of his unkempt appearance. He was tall for seven but wasn't skinny like others. His torn clothes were bad yet gave Arbaaz an appearance befitting any well to do person. Arbaaz's mother Amina was a petite hard working lady who had inculcated the basics of hygiene that she could...The twigs of Neem from the large tree at the end of the hutments added a sparkle to the teeth in their

family. The shanty in which they lived was insufficient, Arbaaz would often sleep on the large sandy earth with mosquitoes buzzing in his ears.

There were bandicoots which dug deep tunnels in the landfill, Arbaaz would often fall into these while walking. Nothing frightened Arbaaz as he was used to these sights right from his childhood, but these days he was physically tired and mentally weak, sleep never evaded his anaemic body. Arbaaz loved to smoke, he would often rush to the nearby Panwallah and search for cigarette stubs, he would pick the trampled stubs and light it with a strip of paper in the kindle of fire meant for the gentlemen who visited the place. The first puff followed by a second, third and fourth helped Arbaaz relish the tobacco, each time he would inhale deeper and felt energetic. "Arbaaz, I will inform Amina" growled Madan the Panwallah...Arbaaz would give a quick glance and smile sheepishly as he picked a few more stubs lying near the kindle. Arbaaz would run to the huge Neem tree and enjoy smoking the stubs. A few of the stubs had a low glow, unstamped and unmarked. One day, Arbaaz discovered a whitener pen in the trash mound while he was searching for the cigarette stubs. It was half full but had had an enticing smell. He took it near his nose and smelt it numerous times as it left a tranquil feeling. Very soon he discovered that the sniffs of the whitening liquid in the white coloured pens kept him happy. Unknowingly, Arbaaz had got into the habit of smoking and was addicted to drugs. At times he had pouches that smelt good from Madan. "Give me money and take the pouch," said Madan. He felt Arbaaz led the life of an animal just as the dogs that roamed about and slept near the hutments. A loss of such a life would make no difference to the world, but Mr Manoj Wanjari was on the lookout for such children.

Manoj Wanjari belonged to the nomadic tribal community in Karnataka. His parents understood the need to live steadily at a place and educate children. They left their Bohemian way of life and settled down in Pune. At the age of fourteen, Manoj Wanjari was influenced by the thoughts of Baba Amte for the Adivasi tribes in India. He found solace in working with Prakash Amte who followed his father Baba Amte's philosophy of life. As Manoj Wanjari gained an education, his desire to lead the nomadic community to a life of normalcy motivated him to begin the Janseva Foundation in Pune. Wanjari found a stable job in Pune, got married and led a life like any other normal human being and not that of a nomad. It also helped him empathize with the nomads and their children. He began to groom the nomadic children but the

environs and the extreme poverty brought him a poor response from the children. He began a school under the aegis of Janseva foundation named 'Mayachi Shala' or 'the School of Love' which gave importance to emotional growth and hygiene along with knowledge. The children of the nomadic tribes in the hutments would accompany their parents or take care of their younger brothers and sisters. Though the water was plenty at the construction sites and nearby, these children remained dirty, unwashed and sunbathed. Their hair had turned stiff and brownish, the comb stood uselessly in these barbed wires, their protruding stomach, lean limbs, chapped lips and cracked skin were signs of deep malnutrition. Arbaaz did not have any signs of these, and he never bothered to play with anyone. He either worked or remained in trance under the influence of the tiny packets of drugs.

One of the days, a rich childless couple named Neeru and Vivek visited the community at Nakhane Chowk with Manoj Wanjari after calling on the Janseva Foundation. It was festival time, the Ganesh festival to be specific and the nomads were busy sculpting Lord Ganesha as every home in Pune wanted the Lord's blessings. Neeru and Vivek planned a unique consecration of taking a nomadic child home just as the earthen Ganapathi and perform the rituals of Ganesh festival in the most unique way. They fell in love with little Arbaaz whose twinkling eyes and upturned nose were symbolic of Lord Ganesha. Amina said, 'Take him if you can give him food clothes and an education'. The couple promised the community to educate little Arbaaz.

On the day of the festival, Neeru and Vivek came early in the morning to give Arbaaz the ritualistic bath, sweet-smelling talcum powders were liberally sprinkled till Arbaaz smelt good, he was adorned expensive traditional Dhoti and Kurta with a shawl of gold tissue. A crown was placed on his head and a vermilion mark was drawn with grains of rice and turmeric stuck on it. People played the drums loudly, everyone far and near witnessed the scene in awe. The other nomadic children considered Arbaaz lucky, they feared to touch his hands or hugging him. All of a sudden they understood how good it was to be clean and sweet smelling. The press reporters made it a news when the red cloth was tied covering Arbaaz's face to hoodwink the lord just as we do it according to the rituals, he was then made to sit on short flat wooden stool decorated with flowers and loud chants of 'Ganpati Bappa Morya, Purja varshi Lavkar ye' rendered in the air.

Arbaaz smiled as the procession reached a huge mansion, the trees lining the courtyard seemed to be bowing in salutation for the little God. Neeru led Arbaaz to the Pooja house where he was made to sit near the idol of Lord Ganapathi and amongst all the noise and uproar a long prayer ceremony was conducted. Arbaaz was then set free to explore the house and enjoy himself.

He found a separate room filled with clothes of his size. There were toys that he had dreamt of at Nakhane Chowk. He ran to touch the toys with a flutter in his heart. He picked the aeroplane and toyed with it feeling sad. The aeroplane reminded him of Amina and his family. He had riches yet he missed his kith and kin. For eleven days Arbaaz was worshipped like Lord Ganapathi. He forgot home in the first three days. The comforts, the attention and the sweet smelling home with the aroma of food wafting in made him forget his roots. Neeru and Vivek's act of celebrating the Ganesh festivals in a unique way attracted celebrities to their home. Loud praises by the celebrities and the newspaper articles circulated far and near.

The eleventh day happened to be the day of immersion when the devotees gather to take out a procession with rolling drums and submerge Lord Ganapathi's idol in the nearby river. For Arbaaz, it also meant new schooling and education and deviation from the role of the lord. Arbaaz was dressed in the best silk and there was exuberance everywhere. Special sweetmeats were distributed and he was carried in a chariot to the Pavana Riverbank. He was given a final salutation through prayers and chants and taken to the river. People picked him and bent him thrice in water till he was submerged in the river water. He was then taken home and given normal shorts and shirts.....

The next day morning Neeru and Vivek woke up early and told Arbaaz that they are going to meet his kith and kin. Amina was surprised to see Arbaaz in Nakhane Chowk. She would not have recognised him had he not called out 'Ammi'. Amina, Arbaaz and his brothers and sisters were engrossed in talking to each other. All the children from the hutments came to meet Arbaaz. When their talk seemed to go on endlessly, Arbaaz turned his head to see Neeru and Vivek but they were not in the vicinity. Hours passed into days. Arbaaz understood the harsh reality of life. He had been used to gain popularity. No longer did the children come to play with him. He went back to his old ways of smoking and whiffing drugs. This accompanied the deceit and disappointment experienced. When Manoj Wanjari came to know of the dismal

fact, he called upon the Janseva foundation's 'Mayachi Shala'. He sent Arbaaz to the school located at Talegaon which was away. He felt this could help Arbaaz forget the miserable incident. The Janseva teachers took care of Arbaaz, they gave him a summer crew cut hairstyle and a clean new uniform. Arbaaz was soon involved in an education related to his skills and needs. He quickly got into the schedule and forgot the bad habits due to his kind teacher Padma. He confessed about his bad habits to his teacher who patiently asked him to tackle one day at a time, she said, 'Say no to drugs today' ...each day it was the same till Arbaaz told her, 'I say no to drugs and smoking forever'. It was considered a Visarjan for everyone, an immersion of evils, and spring of new dreams....new goals

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