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## Family

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Sridhar was the banker of our group . The most generous among all my friends, and perhaps the richest too. We were a group of three friends; I, Sridhar and Manoj. Whenever we needed something for which our parents refused to give money, he would take his purse out unhesitatingly and give more than needed, asking us to return it later. However, we never had enough money to return what we had borrowed and he never asked again.

We all were in the same school and in the same class. In the classroom, I sat next to Sridhar, and Manoj sat right behind us. But, Sridhar didn't come to school very often. He told me that he didn't like school. His parents were very liberal; they never forced him into anything. Sridhar's frequent absenteeism tried our patience at school. School never seemed too torturous with Sridhar, but the day he wouldn't come, I'd remain restless all the time and wait for the day to end. The thought of Sridhar playing cricket in the playground while I *was* in the classroom mugging history, and scratching my head over a sum caused me much unhappiness.

We played cricket at an unused plot of land behind my house. Adjacent to the plot where we played cricket, was another plot but the surrounding walls were too high to climb. While playing, the ball would occasionally land in the other plot. We'd be disappointed, but somehow Sridhar always had money to buy a new ball immediately.

There was a tall eucalyptus tree in the other plot. It was a big problem for us as our kites would get entangled in its branches, but it was *as* if we had a solution for every problem and it was Sridhar's money.

Sridhar had a cricket kit. His father had given him some money on his birthday and we had all gone together to the new sports store to buy it. After buying the cricket kit we all trooped down to his house, went upstairs to his room and opened it like some magic box. For me and Manoj it was a treasure but for Sridhar it was just another gift from his parents. We held the bat, pads and helmet and caressed those like the petals of flower.

It was Sridhar who had bought me my first bat. He had gifted it to me on my thirteenth birthday. I remember, I was still sleeping in bed when he'd come into my room and tickled my toe to rouse

me. The next moment he was singing “happy birthday” in a hoarse voice. Sridhar was only thirteen then, but he sounded like a man, a grave man. He gave me the bat, which he was hiding behind him all the time while he sang. I couldn’t refrain myself from screeching with joy. I caressed the bat for a while, and was unable to take my eyes off it.

“But from where did you get the money to buy a bat for me?” I asked him one day, and he told me that his parents gave him pocket money everyday.

Pocket money was not a real thing for me. I had heard my classmates talking about it but each time I mustered up the courage and asked my mother for it, she’d become furious. “Tell me what it is that you want and I’ll get it for you,” she would say. But she never gave me the things I wanted, and when I would tell her that she herself had promised me to give whatever I wanted, she would say, “I had said about important things, not just anything.”

Sadly, I never wanted anything “important” during those days. We were a poor family. Rich people’s need was a luxury for us. There were only two rooms in my house. One room was occupied by my grandfather and his numerous books and in the other room me, my mother, father and two sisters slept altogether, on one bed.

Sridhar had a big house. His father had an antique shop. He always remained busy on phone calls, clearing out deals. His mother too never talked much to Sridhar. I think she never cared to know more about us too. Sridhar’s parents remained quite indifferent about Sridhar’s friends.

There were fancy gold lights everywhere in Sridhar’s house. At night, his garden would be bathed in golden light. And, the distinct smell that wafted in his house still lingers in my mind, but I don’t think I can put it to words. It has crossed the boundaries of language and would never be back. During those days, very few houses had a cooler, but Sridhar’s room was air-conditioned. He had his own private room and there were several story books, lots of children’s magazines and comics on his book shelves. During summer vacations, Manoj and I would go to his house and spend the sweltering afternoons in his closed air-conditioned room reading stories. We ate mangoes that Sridhar plucked for us from the tree in his garden. Although, he himself was not allowed to pluck the mangoes; it was servants who did it for him. Sadly, we were all deprived of the fun of climbing trees, at his place.

Sridhar liked coming to my house. Although, in the beginning, I was embarrassed to take him to my house. How could I show my small house to a rich boy like him? What would he think of me? What if he broke our friendship and decided to make new friends who were rich like him? I thought it over and over again in my head and it was after many requests that I finally agreed.

He liked my house a lot. He liked the open windows of my bedroom unlike his which were never opened once in his life due to the air-conditioner. He loved looking out at the eucalyptus tree from the window and its inhabitants- squirrels, crows, nightingale. A cat with her five litters lived there in that unused plot, and as she would return with food in her mouth, kittens would come running towards her. Sridhar watched them, unblinkingly. He liked watching the fireflies coming out of the long grass in the yard. He liked that we all slept together in one bed. He adored my grandfather and his numerous old books. He liked the old black and white television set my grandfather had in his room. He loved watching cricket with my grandfather. And soon, he was always willing to be at my home with my family.

My father taught me each evening and Sridhar came to my house to study from my father. He hated his thin tutor who never shaved and never taught him anything, and mostly remained absent minded. He only gave Sridhar a few sums to do, and would start reading a novel which he brought along with him. There was no one *to* supervise as Sridhar's father came from work late in the night and his mother remained busy with her friends, and the old caretaker slept like a log. Sridhar once thought that he'd complain about his thin tutor to his mother, but when he reconsidered the idea in his mind, he found it better to let him *get* away with it.

My mother used to feed me with her hands, and when Sridhar saw that he disclosed his desire to me personally. He told me that he wanted to eat from my mother's hands. He ate alone on a huge dining table while his caretaker served him various dishes, but the meal lacked motherly love. His mother never prepared his tiffin. There were two cooks in his house, and his mother remained busy in her life. Unlike my mother, Sridhar's mother never came to the main door to see him off for school. My father dropped me at school daily on his bicycle but Sridhar came in a school bus with many strange faces around him. He remained nervous in the bus and never engaged with anyone. I and Manoj were his only friends.

One evening, Sridhar came to my house and asked me to stay at his place for a few hours as his parents were out for some important work, and were to return late. I thought we would play

cricket in his garden. We were not allowed to play in his garden as it would have destroyed the plants. I liked diving on the lush green grass. I took my parents' permission and went across the road to his place. But, he was in a different mood. He didn't talk about cricket, in fact, he wanted to show me something very personal.

We opened his large yellow gate that swung on its hinges with a loud creak, and we went upstairs straight to his room. As we entered his room, he latched the door from inside and walked up to his book shelf. He took a few books, kept them on the floor and brought out a bottle that was hidden behind the books. Then, he turned a few pages of one of the comics, and brought out a cigarette from the middle of the pages.

"You light it from one side and then put it between your lips and inhale," he said, and his bright eyes shone.

"But, Sridhar it's for adults," I said with fear.

"I'm a grown up now; I have a separate room of my own. You know what it is in the bottle? Alcohol!," he answered himself.

I was terrified to hold the bottle of alcohol. I had never seen a bottle of alcohol in my life before. My father didn't even chew beetle leaf. He was against any kind of addiction. He resented that people chewed beetle leaf and spat it on the road, and added to the dirtiness. He stayed away from the people who smoked and added to the pollution. He believed that if only people could spare themselves with such momentary pleasures and donate this money for a better cause, this world could be made a better place for the upcoming generation.

"But, alcohol is bad Sridhar. From where did you get it? Your parents would be very angry if they catch you with it," I said shivering with fear.

"It's my father's. My parents drink every night. I'm not allowed to go into their room when they drink, but I know. And, they wouldn't ever come to know about it. They're too busy to notice it. They never come to my room. Do you think a drunk person can tell whether the other person is drunk or not?"

"I can't say Sridhar, but it's wrong. Your parents would be hurt. They love you so much and they give you pocket money too. They provide you everything you want."

Sridhar broke down. I'd never seen him cry before. I didn't know what his pain was. I asked him about it again and again and he said, "For everything they give me money, money and money but they never teach me how to spend it."

"Can't my parents be like yours? I miss motherly love. I want my mother to feed me with her hands. I don't want to go to school in a bus. I want my father to drop me to school. I don't like my tutor; I want my father to teach me. I hate all the closed windows in my room. I suffocate in there, but I don't know how to open them," said Sridhar, in a single breath.

I remained silent for a few minutes. I had no answer. I didn't know how to resolve his problems. His problems seemed more grave than ours. I contemplated. Money alone wasn't his solution.