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Class-XII

English

Flamingo

Chapter-2

Lost Spring

Stories of Stolen Childhood

Part - 1



Anees Jung

Neha Rajvanshi

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encounter : मिलना
scrounging : तलाश करना
garbage : कचरा
dumps : ढ़ेर
neighbourhood: पड़ोस



'Sometimes I find a Rupee in the garbage'

"Why do you do this?" I ask Saheb whom I encounter every morning scrounging for gold in the garbage dumps of my neighbourhood. Saheb left his home long ago. Set amidst the green fields of Dhaka, his home is not even a distant memory.

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mutters: धीरे से बोलना
glibly: बिना सोचे / लापरवाही से

There were many storms that swept away their fields and homes, his mother tells him. That's why they left, looking for gold in the big city where he now lives.

"I have nothing else to do," he mutters, looking away.

"Go to school," I say glibly, realising immediately how hollow the advice must sound.

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"There is no school in my neighbourhood. When they build one, I will go."

"If I start a school, will you come?" I ask, half-joking.

"Yes," he says, smiling broadly.

A few days later I see him running up to me. "Is your school ready?"

"It takes longer to build a school,"

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embarrassed : शर्म आना
bleak : निराशापूर्ण
abound : बड़ी संख्या में होना

I say, embarrassed at having made a promise that was not meant. But promises like mine abound in every corner of his bleak world. After months of knowing him, I ask him his name.

"Saheb-e-Alam," he announces. He does not know what it means. If he knew its meaning — lord of the universe —

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roams : भटकना



he would have a hard time believing it. Unaware of what his name represents, he roams the streets with his friends, an army of barefoot boys who appear like the morning birds and disappear at noon. Over the months, I have come to recognise each of them.

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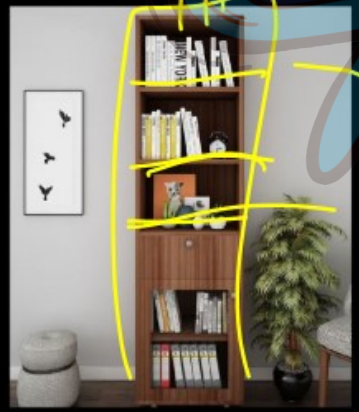

"Why aren't you wearing chappals?" I ask one.

"My mother did not bring them down from the shelf," he answers simply.

"Even if she did he will throw them off," adds another who is wearing shoes that do not match. When I comment on it, he shuffles his feet and says nothing.

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perpetual : लम्बे समय से चली आ रही

"I want shoes," says a third boy who has never owned a pair all his life. Travelling across the country I have seen children walking barefoot, in cities, on village roads. It is not lack of money but a tradition to stay barefoot, is one explanation. I wonder if this is only an excuse to explain away a perpetual state of poverty.

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desolation: वीरान

I remember a story a man from Udipi once told me. As a young boy he would go to school past an old temple, where his father was a priest. He would stop briefly at the temple and pray for a pair of shoes. Thirty years later I visited his town and the temple, which was now drowned in an air of desolation.

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In the backyard, where lived the new priest, there were red and white plastic chairs. A young boy dressed in a grey uniform, wearing socks and shoes, arrived panting and threw his school bag on a folding bed. Looking at the boy, I remembered the prayer another boy had made to the goddess when he had finally got a pair of shoes, "Let me never lose them."

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The goddess had granted his prayer. Young boys like the son of the priest now wore shoes. But many others like the ragpickers in my neighbourhood remain shoeless.

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acquaintance : पहचान
periphery : बाहरी क्षेत्र
metaphorically : प्रतीकात्मक रूप में
squatters : अवैध रूप से रहने वाला
wilderness : जंगल/बंजर



My acquaintance with the barefoot ragpickers leads me to Seemapuri, a place on the periphery of Delhi yet miles away from it, metaphorically. Those who live here are squatters who came from Bangladesh back in 1971. Saheb's family is among them. Seemapuri was then a wilderness.

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It still is, but it is no longer empty. In structures of mud, with roofs of tin and tarpaulin, devoid of sewage, drainage or running water, live 10,000 ragpickers. They have lived here for more than thirty years without an identity, without permits but with ration cards that get their names on voters' lists and enable them to buy grain.

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tattered : फटी पुरानी

Food is more important for survival than an identity. "If at the end of the day we can feed our families and go to bed without an aching stomach, we would rather live here than in the fields that gave us no grain," say a group of women in tattered saris when I ask them why they left their beautiful land of green fields and rivers.