

A Child Like Mine

Rudra Sinha, an eight-year-old boy, defies expectations. His name suggests an obedient child, but as his mother, I can attest to his mischievous nature. Returning from school, his bag lands carelessly on the sofa, shoes are launched into the air, often finding their mark on the dinner table or washing machine – each day a new target. He immediately settles in front of the television. A daily inspection of his bag inevitably reveals one or two snacks procured from the nearby grocery shop. "Mom told me to get these," he'd claim, despite my never granting such permission. My evening walks in the neighborhood include a regular conversation with the grocer, requesting he refuse Rudra's requests. The upcoming Diwali vacation offers a welcome respite.

"No, the painter hasn't arrived yet," I said to Vineet over the phone.

Just then, the doorbell rang. Rudra's face lights up at the sound; he always hopes it's Vineet returning from work. I ended the call as he raced to the door.

"Oh, no, it's not Papa," he'd usually say upon encountering a stranger.

I reached the door to find the painter, a cloth bag slung over his shoulder. He smiled gently at Rudra and offered him a candy. I hesitated to intervene.

"One more?" Rudra asked.

"Sorry, just one," the painter replied, still smiling.

I directed him to the storeroom where the painting supplies were kept. This Diwali would be our first away from our hometown, Patna. Vineet wanted to maintain our familiar traditions.

Rudra, instead of retreating to his cartoons, followed the painter.

"Would you like some tea?" I asked the painter.

"Certainly, if it's no trouble," he replied politely.

I went to the kitchen, Rudra trailing behind. "Who is he?" he asked.

"Your friend," I teased.

Rudra entered the storeroom, observing the painter in his work clothes: a checked shirt splattered with paint and a white cloth covering his head.

He rushed back to me. "Mom, the man has changed!"

I followed him back to the storeroom, carrying a cup of tea. "Rudra, he's here to paint our home."

I gave the tea to the painter. "Please start with Rudra's room."

After his tea, the painter entered Rudra's room. Rudra, surprisingly quiet, watched him work.

"What class are you in?" the painter asked.

"Second grade. I'm a big boy now," Rudra replied.

The painter offered him another candy. "Take it, but don't tell your mother."

Rudra smiled and pocketed the treat.

The next day, Rudra again flew to the door when the bell rang. "Mom, it's the painter uncle!" he exclaimed, his excitement palpable. This time, there was no disappointment.

The painter smiled warmly at Rudra and greeted me with a respectful "Namaste."

"Welcome," I said. "What's the plan for today?" Rudra watched intently.

"I applied the primer yesterday. Today, I'll start with the color," he explained.

"Understood." I went to the kitchen.

The painter discreetly gave a handful of candies to Rudra.

As I observed his work, I remarked, "Please ensure the color is applied evenly."

"Of course," he replied.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"Nalanda," he said.

"We're also from Bihar, Patna," I replied.

I returned to the kitchen. Rudra remained with the painter, drawn to him perhaps by the promise of sweets.

"Do you play sports?" the painter asked.

"I play, but I don't enjoy it," Rudra confessed.

"Why not?" asked the painter.

"I always fail. I never win," he said sadly.

"You never fail; you learn," the painter countered.

Rudra looked at him, captivated.

"What did I say?" the painter asked, gently pinching Rudra's cheek.

"You learn," Rudra repeated, smiling.

The painter then produced another handful of candies.

The following days unfolded similarly. Rudra greeted the painter with enthusiasm, receiving his daily candy. The painter worked diligently, and Rudra was his constant shadow, fascinated by the brushstrokes.

One day, I discovered a stash of candies hidden under Rudra's bed.

"Where did you get all these, Rudra?" I demanded. "That grocer! I've told him repeatedly not to give you anything." I moved towards him, but he tried to escape. I grabbed his ear.

The painter intervened, gently pulling Rudra away. "I gave him these," he admitted.

"Please, don't spoil him," I pleaded. "He's already quite indulged."

"I understand, but let him enjoy these little pleasures," the painter insisted.

I relented.

The next morning, Vineet was preparing for work. "Avantika, where's my wallet?"

"It should be in the drawer." I went to check.

"Here it is," I said, handing it to him.

As I closed the wardrobe, I noticed my savings, accumulated over the past year, were missing.

"Vineet, did you take the money from here?" I asked.

"No," he replied.

My mind raced. Who could have taken it? The painter!

"Maybe it was the painter!" I exclaimed.

"How can you be sure?" Vineet questioned.

"He was in this room all day yesterday," I reasoned.

Just then, the doorbell rang. Rudra, as always, rushed to answer it. "Mom, it's the painter uncle!"

Vineet and I went to the living room. The painter stood there.

"Did you take the money from the room?" Vineet asked directly.

"No, sir. Why would I do that?" the painter defended himself.

"I don't want to argue," Vineet said firmly. "You can leave."

The painter didn't protest. He offered Rudra some candies, but Vineet stopped him.

In the following days, a series of robberies plagued the neighborhood. Many residents filed police reports. The investigation revealed that a gang of four was responsible, including the theft from our home. They confessed to the police.

Vineet and I felt a deep sense of guilt and tried to contact the painter, but we didn't have his number. We had only encountered him through his work in our locality.

Five years passed. We never saw the painter again. Rudra had blossomed into a responsible and studious young man, a top student and captain of his school's basketball team. This year, they won the inter-school championship.

The doorbell rang. Rudra, engrossed in his studies, was closer to the door. "Rudra, could you get that? I'm busy in the kitchen," I called.

Rudra opened the door to find a man with a white beard and a familiar cloth bag.

"Yes, who is it?" Rudra asked.

"Where is the child?" the man inquired.

"I'm not sure I understand," Rudra replied.

I came to the door. "Who is it, Rudra?"

Rudra looked at me, puzzled. "I don't know."

I recognized the man. The cloth bag... I'd seen it before. "Are you... the painter?" I asked.

"Yes, ma'am," he confirmed.

I invited him in. As he entered, he reached into his pocket and pulled out some candies. "Where is your child?"

I gestured towards Rudra. "He's right here."

"Oh, he's grown so much!" the painter exclaimed. "Did you finally start winning at sports?" he asked Rudra, offering him the candies. Rudra took them automatically.

"He doesn't seem to recognize you," I said gently.

The painter's gaze fell upon the living room wall, now adorned with Rudra's medals and certificates.

"All these medals?" he asked.

"They're all Rudra's," I said proudly.

"So, he finally started winning..." the painter smiled at Rudra. "Well, I should be going."

As he turned to leave, his wallet fell from his pocket.

"Your wallet!" I called.

I picked it up and checked inside. There was a photograph of a young boy. He turned back. "Oh, thank goodness!"

"Who is this child?" I asked.

"My son," he said affectionately. "I haven't seen him in five years."

"Why?" I asked.

"I can't afford to go back. The irregular work and low pay...." Tears welled up in his eyes. "And I can't bring my family here; it's too expensive," he added, his voice thick with emotion. .

"How do you manage?" I asked.

"I send most of my earnings home," he replied, tears now streaming down his face. "My son would be about Rudra's age now. When I first came here, I saw a reflection of him in Rudra."

"We're so sorry," I apologized, the guilt washing over me. "We wrongly accused you of the robbery."

"It doesn't matter," he said, a hint of weariness in his voice.

I went to my room, retrieved some money, and returned to him. "Please, take this," I said, pressing the bills into his hand.

He hesitated, then accepted, offering a warm, albeit sad, smile towards Rudra before turning to leave. As he walked away, I felt a profound mix of gratitude and sorrow for this man who had touched our lives in ways we hadn't fully understood.

