The Liquid Miscreant

*Introduction to the narrative:*

*Alcoholism is a social issue that can not be undermined in today’s setting. This work aims to plunge readers into the plight of the direct and indirect victims of alcohol abuse.*

In the second year of medical college, I began my clinical postings. The posting that has had the biggest impact for me thus far was my psychiatry posting. In the course of just one week, I had lent my ears to myriad stories, each one more soul-stirring than its predecessor.

One Tuesday morning, the second day of our posting, I peeped into ward after ward, looking for a patient to speak to. The sole inhabitant of one of the wards was a plump little boy. Wrought with curiosity, I thought about taking his history, but dismissed the thought at once- he was only a little boy and I wasn’t entirely sure how I would go about talking to him. Just as I made my way to the next ward, a cheery voice called out, ‘Doctor!’ I peeped into the ward again, and the boy beckoned to me. His grandmother was sitting with him on the bed and chided, ‘Don’t trouble *akka*, she must be busy!’ The little boy smiled. ‘He was just bored. Sorry for disturbing you,’ she said to me. ‘No that’s alright,’ I said. I almost told her that as medical students, we had nothing to be busy with in the wards, and that I was glad to finally have something to do; instead, I just smiled at the two of them.

‘What’s your name?’ I asked him. ‘My name is Mahesh,’ he said brightly. He chattered on happily for some time about nothing in particular. As soon as his mother entered the room, in a fraction of a second, his demeanor transformed. The smile was now replaced by a frown and he stopped talking. His mother sat down. I introduced myself to his mother and asked her why he had been brought to the hospital. ‘He’s a nuisance,’ she said expressionlessly. ‘He disturbs the class, doesn’t study and doesn’t let anybody else study. His marks are pathetic and he’s quite useless. The doctors have diagnosed him with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.’ Mahesh was quiet, obviously listening to his mother’s words. ‘It’s such a pain for me. I have to come here before going to work to bring his food and it’s so far away.’ She sounded exhausted. She went on to scold him for something, in response to which he called her a ‘*dummi’*, or a ‘fat person’. His mother left in the next few minutes. The moment she left, he was lively and cheerful again.

‘He doesn’t get along with his mother,’ his grandmother explained. ‘Mahesh, you shouldn’t call your mother a *dummi*, that’s not a good habit,’ I said to him. ‘I don’t like her,’ he said curtly. ‘Can I talk to him outside for a while?’ I asked his grandmother and she obliged without a second thought. As we walked out of the ward, I asked him why he didn’t like his mother. ‘She is always saying bad things about me. After my father comes home and beats her, she becomes sad and she cries and if I ask her anything, she beats me. She makes me eat dinner very early- at 6pm and she makes me eat really fast, before my father gets home. If I ask for more, or if I tell her I’m hungry later, she yells at me.’ He spoke with a maturity that was sadly beyond his years.

‘Why does your father beat your mother?’ I asked softly. ‘After he drinks, he loses his mind. He takes all the money at home and buys alcohol with it- that’s why we are so poor. And when he comes back home, he beats my mother. He has been doing it for many years. One time, my mother could not take it anymore and she left home. When she left, she took only my younger brother with her and just left me. She came back after a month. I could never look at her the same way after she abandoned me.’ I felt a tear coming to my eye, but forced it to disappear.

‘How old are you?’ ‘I’m nine years old,’ he said. He continued without any further prompting, ‘My brother is very smart. He studies very well and always comes first in his class. But he is too small to understand what is happening at home. I get very angry with my father when he beats my mother, but if I try to stop him, he beats me also. I can’t study in my house because there is always so much noise. That’s why I don’t get good marks in school like my brother. My father got in an accident once, after he drank and then rode his bike. He had a head injury and he barely survived; we all thought he would stop drinking after that. But he didn’t. He continued even after that…’ At that moment, Mahesh did not seem like a nine- year-old. This little boy’s childhood had been robbed by alcohol and its sequelae- an addicted father, an abused mother who took out her frustrations on him, and an unhappy, crumbling home.

After this, I began to realize that so many of their stories had the recurring theme of alcoholism. The schizophrenic 20-year old who began to hear voices months after she discovered that her alcoholic father beats her mother, the 60-year old paranoid man who had delusions of persecution as he recovered from delirium tremens, the depressed 17-year-old whose father never came back home from the local bar, the recovering alcoholic who now suffers from social isolation… Directly or indirectly, alcoholism is sowing the seeds for a whole range of mental health issues.

In view of the physical and psychological costs of alcoholism, there needs to be a higher degree of social awareness and consciousness towards this problem. The growing plague of addiction is something that even modern health care is not entirely equipped to combat. Alcoholism as a medical problem is not taken as seriously as it should be. As a member of the health fraternity, this frustrates me because despite the existence of treatment that actually works, a large proportion of the afflicted are not receiving it. Stereotyping and social stigma have gone a long way, not only in making people reluctant about seeking treatment, but also hindering the effective delivery of health care for the same. Social awareness about this issue is essential to put and end to the stigma; thereon, tools like screening for alcohol use disorders can be developed, to nip alcoholism at its root.

Society- both society in general and specifically, the medical society, must begin to recognize alcoholism as an actual disease, as opposed to an ‘immoral’ habit. The first step towards solving a problem is acknowledging that there is, indeed, a problem. If not for the sake of the alcoholic who desires recovery, we must do it at least to put an end to the heart-wrenching screams of the physically and mentally abused or to rescue a childhood that is fast becoming endangered. The liquid miscreant must be punished; not its victims and their victims.

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