

## THE SNATCH

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It was 2 in the noon, the school had ended and the gate was a bottleneck. The road was full of buses, autos, cycles, and groups of students taking up half the lane. The cycles were matching the speed with the ones walking in a group, just to be in the conversation. And it was quite obvious why the time to school and from school was never equal. The bent knees were quite straight now, the ties were loose and the shoes were covered in dirt. It was finally the time of day when there were no rules until they reach home back. But this all was just a memorable past, to the seniors. They were not free from the responsibilities, expectations, and dreams they saw in childhood. They speeded up their cycle to beat the traffic and reached Bittu Bhaiya's home. Locking their cycles in the garage that was big enough to fit three cars they hurried to the top floor with heavy bags on their back.

Bhaiya's home is beside the railway track near Jagatpur Railway station, one of the oldest stations in the country. Jagatpur is home to thousands of employees working for Railways. The residents are either directly involved in rail or work in railway schools or hospitals or offices. They live in railway quarters, worked in the railway office, taught their kids in railway school and when sick, there is a railway hospital.

The students reached on the fourth floor where Bhaiya was waiting for them, seated on a white plastic chair with a crack on the front right leg. The class was big enough to have students of all talents and dreams, but not enough to hide from the sight of Bhaiya for a moment. His small eyes can detect any mute conversation going around. He knew every student personally, from their dreams to their family issues, and it is one of the reasons why he was called Bhaiya. He had a teaching experience of over 10 years and taught all the science subjects himself. The class resumed from where it was left the previous day. "In the absence of ligand," Bhaiya read and paused. It was time for Tej Express to pass. The children were still nowhere close to home and were crossing the railway tracks. Jumping over one rail to another, stretching their hand to balance on the rails, they were enjoying the open area full of granites. At the same time, their history teacher was taking the old, narrow and straight bridge to cross the tracks, for he had read that the train stops for none. Giving monotonous high pitched horn Tej Express was coming closer. It couldn't crush the children as its different from crushing their dreams and hopes. Children gave their way and the train passed by. "crystal field splitting does not occur and hence the substance is colorless." Bhaiya continued.

The next day was the same. After snoozing alarm three times in ten minutes, Ayaan's eyes were open, but he only knows if he was awake. He was the only child of his parents. His father was Accounts Assistant in Railway Office and mom looked after him and home. "You can't leave with an empty stomach," his mom told while giving a roll with stuffed bhujia. He took it and said, "I'll be late today, Bye." It was 7 in the morning, and Ayaan has been just on time in the school. The classes started, one after the other, with the passage of each period the next, seemed longer. The lunch period was shortened as the proof in mathematics class wasn't completed in time. The incomplete sleep was reflected in the class afterward, with half the class dozing off with open eyes. After eight infinitely long periods, the school got over and Ayaan cycled to Bhaiya's home.

Bhaiya's home was on a corner between a railway colony and a road connecting two National Highways, which ran parallel to the railway tracks. His grandfather owned the house and it wasn't under the railway as was the case with the quarters nearby. The road was busy throughout the day with buses and autos during the day and trucks at night. Being close to the Railway Station, honks of the trains and constant announcement of arriving and leaving trains was something which caused the feeling of being at home. People knew the schedule of most of the trains and could tell time just by listening to the announcements.

Ayaan reached the room full of benches and desks of different sizes, kept his bag and took his notebook out. Bhaiya wasn't there yet and not even half the room was filled. Soon Bhaiya arrived, unlike school, no one sang "Good Morning". But there was brief eye contact between Bhaiya and every student. This moment was enough for Bhaiya to know who was prepared for the class, who was tired and who hasn't completed the homework. "Today is the last day for this chapter," Bhaiya announced, "what about a test tomorrow?". To which most of the students agreed. About an hour later, the chapter ended and so the class. Ayaan was having some doubts and so waited for others to leave. He got his doubts cleared. "Solve the exercise questions, they are important," said Bhaiya to which Ayaan nodded his head with an affirmative "hmm" sound and left for home.

The first and second floor of the Bhaiya's home was divided into two flats each, given on rents. The ground floor had a big garage, being on a busy road small rooms beside the garage was also given on rent to retailers of grocery, stationery and a cycle repair mechanic. Bhaiya lived on the third floor with his retired father, mother and a young sister. His father was a diabetes patient and mother was struggling with arthritis, which was very common in people of such age. Being responsible, Bhaiya looked after every need and problem in the home himself. Though he wanted to have a very different life, he had compromised with his dreams and was having no regret for it. Teaching and interacting with young students was a passion for him now and he enjoyed it more than anything else he ever thought.

Months passed, the exams were over, and then came the day for which all the relatives and neighbors were waiting. The nervousness was at its peak, why it won't be. All the mischiefs, all the school fights and all the events of disobedience were either going to be engraved or forgotten forever. The neighbors had cleaned their balance scale, with all the previous records. The mobile network was full and the internet was as fast as advertised until the announced result time. Ayaan was trying his best to keep his emotions neutral, as the smile would mean that he is confident and being worried would attract sympathy. A single sheet of paper was going to decide his future. The website had crashed twice before the result was on the phone screen. Finally, the three digits he was never going to forget was in front of him. He was shocked to see how his best subjects had the least score balanced by the subjects he never liked. "84.6," he said to whomsoever it may concern. "Well done my son, proud of you." was the first reaction of his dad. The letters were enough for the ocean to spill out of the eye. Mom had a constant smile caused not by the happiness of the marks, but the satisfaction on Ayaan's face. The next person to know the result was no other than Bittu Bhaiya.

"Hello," said Ayaan as the Bhaiya received the call.

"Ya friend, what happened?" asked Bhaiya.

"78 each in Chemistry and Physics, 87 in Maths, 89 in English and 91 in Economics, overall 84.6"

"That's good, congratulations. Do you see it now?"

"See what?"

"Is your Economics better than Chemistry?"

"No, how it could be. I don't like it. I studied it just for the exams."

"So you see that you are not better than a person who might have got marks less than you. Marks take you to places Ayaan, but it never defines you."

"Very true Bhaiya. And all this time, I dreamed of nothing but marks."

"That's okay friend, this is how you were supposed to be. What now, what are your plans now?"

"I don't know. I don't know what I want."

“It’s quite normal. Whatever you decide now, listen to yourself. It was great to have a student like you Ayaan.”

“Thank you Bhaiya” said Ayaan and ended the call.

Within weeks the application portal of different universities opened, and Ayaan applied in all. After the entrances and interviews, he was accepted by some. Finally, he chose one considering the dreams of his parents and going against it. “You can’t leave with an empty stomach,” his mom told while giving him curd and sugar. He took it and hugged her Mom. He had no idea when he will be returning. Passing through the colonies, he wanted to capture every frame in his mind. The birds chirping he never noticed was bidding him goodbye. The speed breakers he ignored while getting late to school, wanted not to oppose him that day. He took his train from the Railway Station and passed through Bhaiya’s home, with a smiling face and honk of the train in the background.

Years passed, a lot of changes took place in Jagatpur. A new mall was opened, with leading brands’ outlets and a movie theatre. The private-owned areas were compact now. The buildings came closer, pushing the neighbors farther. People were now busier or pretended to be busy on their phones or laptops. With all these there was more traffic on the road, stations and where not. If you toss a coin high enough, it will land on someone’s head for sure. In spite of all these, life in railway colonies was about the same. The employees working under Railway didn’t increase and so the place had a constant density and so the garden was still bigger than the rooms combined.

Bittu Bhaiya became more popular with the achievements of their students. The parents wanted their children to be taught by him. The increase in competition for higher studies had brought some differences in the teaching of school and entrance exams of universities. With an increase in students, Bhaiya expanded his teaching room and attached waiting rooms for students to self-study. The desks and benches for the students were now of the same size, though Bhaiya’s chair was the same with faded color and the crack on it was repaired by some adhesive.

It was Monday afternoon, Bhaiya arrived late in class. After a brief eye-contact and making himself comfortable, he resumed the class where he had left the previous day. “In the absence of ligand,” Bhaiya read and paused. It wasn’t Tej Express this time, but his old keypad phone. The phone rang with the default tune as Bhaiya never bothered to change it. The number was new and after a failed brief attempt to recall the number he received it.

“Hello” Bhaiya said inquisitively.

“Good afternoon Bhaiya. It’s me, Ayaan.”

“Hey, how are you? I thought you forgot me.”

“No Bhaiya, it’s not possible. Everything is going well for me. How are you doing?”

“What will happen to me, I’m good. What are you doing these days?”

“I got a job in the Establishment Department in Railway last week.”

“That’s good to hear. Is it blood or train that runs in your nerves?” Bhaiya said jokingly.

“Bhaiya. I have bad news.” Ayaan replied on a serious note.

“What happened?” asked Bhaiya.

“Today I was going through the upcoming projects in the department. The Jagatpur Railway Station is adding two more platforms. The design is ready and the budget is already passed. Your home needs to be demolished. The land will be taken for an equal area of land about three miles from the current location and fifty lakh rupees will be given for the building. The official letter to you is dispatched and you’ll get it soon.” said Ayaan in a neutral voice.