

OF FAMILY DEBTS AND A MANGO

Dinoo looked up hopefully at the door of the ICU every single time it swung open. He had been constantly doing that for a few days now, although he had very little strength left. The tube running from his nose to his stomach, the oxygen tube to his nostrils, tube draining fluid from his abdomen, the port for chemotherapy through his neck, the monitors attached to his chest and hands, the urinary catheter; all combined to tether his frail ten-year old body to the bed. The only thing he COULD move was his head and his eyes.

A sliver of daylight was visible through the glass window at the far end of the ICU. His gaze was yearningly turned to it most of the time. After weeks in the hospital, ten-year old Dinoo just wanted to be free; free to walk on the grass, play marbles or 'viti-daandu' with his buddies, climb trees, swim in the muddy river behind his home.

But most of all, he wanted to meet his mother and sister. It was not that they were not allowed here in the ICU; for a child as sick as Dinoo, exceptions would be made. It was more than that. His mother and sister were not here in the city. Dinoo had come to the city over seven weeks back for treatment of 'swelling-in-abdomen' with his father. His mother and sister had been left behind, working for the landholder 'Zamindar' back in the village.

Dr. Bala Subramaniam or Mani (as he liked to be called) was well aware of every nuance of Dinoo's condition. Indeed, as the resident doctor posted in the ICU, it was his job to do so. Besides the vital parameters, latest electrolyte reports and blood cell count that he reeled off thrice a day on his boss's rounds, he was also keenly attuned to the fact that Dinoo was waiting for something or someone. Normally, Mani stayed determinedly aloof from terminal cases like Dinoo's, because getting personally involved would repeatedly court

depression and heartbreak. But the dignified despair with which Dinoo's father held himself, struck a chord with Mani. It reminded him of his own father. "The poor have no option but to be stoic." had been the favorite saying of Appa, Mani's father. Appa had refused to be operated for a cardiac bypass surgery at the age of forty-two years because he could not afford the one lakh rupees fee of the cardiac surgeon. After suffering for four years, when Appa had died owing a large sum of money to various people, Mani had been just sixteen years old. Mani's mother had taken more loans to get Mani's sister married off with the requisite dowry and pomp expected by her in-laws.

Unfortunately for Mani's family, he had chosen to learn medicine, a profession with a long period of study and tricklingly delayed returns. After graduation, Mani was brilliant enough to specialize further and bag a coveted seat as a trainee in a municipal hospital in Mumbai. Sadly, training programs for post-graduate degrees in municipal-run hospitals in India netted a moderate stipend till he qualified. So the Debt was still multiplying. He could have married any rich Iyengar girl netting himself a big, fat dowry and thus solved all his problems in a jiffy, but hated the idea of selling himself to the highest bidder. Thus it was that Mani boarded his train to Mumbai, bringing with him his own ambition, his mother's hopes and the burden of His Family Debt.

Coming from a small town, Mani had an initial difficult period of adjustment in Mumbai. The constant need for speed, the lack of greenery, the crowded public places, the prices of everything, including food was a shocker as also the impersonal, almost callous attitude of his colleagues. For weeks, he was addressed as B.S (short for Bala Subramaniam) by his colleagues with a sneering chuckle, and it took him a while to realize that BS also stood for bull-shit! In response, he had since then stubbornly refused to answer to

any other name except Mani. In time, he earned the respect of his colleagues for his quiet dignity as well hard work and clinical acumen.

But the scars of this initial hazing never quite healed and were not forgotten by Mani. The sense of being alien was compounded by the life-style of his fellow-doctors. What they spent on a meal or a movie was a sum that Mani thought astronomical. Their sense of humor (cruel), their moral compass (lax) and their view of life's reality (deluded) were as foreign to Mani as say, a Chinaman's. Consequently, he held himself aloof from his colleagues and never considered confiding in them or asking for their help. For anything. Even in dire situations. Because Mani had a secret problem. Every month, to ensure that the moneylenders did not harass his mother, the bulk of Mani's stipend would be sent home with some money set aside for his mother to subsist on. The money left with Mani was needed for buying his medical text-books (in installments), conference registrations (discounted ones only) and unwarranted expenses like a birthday cake for a colleague (the cost of which could have fed his mother back home for month and Mani in Mumbai for a week).

In short, daily expenses for Mani were a stretch. Ever conscious that appearing neat and clean was important, a finicky Mani hand-washed and ironed his own clothes daily, but hardly ever bought new ones, even wearing the same slippers after mending them at a road-side cobbler's shack multiple times. But food was the biggest problem, more so as the month drew to an end. After a while, Mani figured out that the cheapest dish on the cafeteria menu, and which more importantly, would also stave off malnourishment, was made of eggs.

Thus, it came about that an Iyengar boy brought up to be a strict vegetarian had to eat eggs in order to survive. Everyday, at about three in the afternoon (the approximate middle of his working day), he would consume his main meal of

the day; a double egg-bhurji – a dish made of onions, eggs and tomatoes (a double was slightly cheaper than two singles) and eight slices of bread. He would then eat slowly, dousing the dish with tomato ketchup to disguise the eggy smell, initially hating it, but later relishing the dish (wondering if he would ever confess to his mother about this 'sin' of eating non-veg).

Bananas (bought cheap by the dozen and always finished, even the ripe black ones), tea and cheap 'Glucos' biscuits were his staples for subsisting for the rest of the day. There were of course some weeks when he had the luxury of a second meal, but on the whole, this had become his routine. Obviously, Mani's colleagues were in the dark about this. He preferred retaining his self-respect rather than risk their bafflement, indifference, or worse, contempt.

It was hardly surprising, therefore, that every time Dr. Mani encountered Dinoo's care-worn father, he felt an obvious connection. The empathy of one man limited by financial circumstances for another. The stoic mask held as a proud barrier against the world's savage opportunism and cruel apathy was a familiar one.

The inevitability of his son's prognosis had been delivered to Dinoo's father by the doctor. Taking him aside, the senior oncologist had explained that the disease was terminal and inoperable. Dinoo had very few days left to live and their efforts would be concentrated on making him comfortable and 'fulfilling his wishes'. Hearing the news with a wooden expression, the father, had folded his hands in supplication and then, with great composure, retreated to the corner, resuming that peculiar squatting posture typical of villagers. That evening, outside the ICU, Mani noticed that Dinoo's father had his face turned to the wall and was crying quietly. Mani stood there for a few seconds fighting his inevitable connection with this man, the figure of a helpless father silhouetted against the red Paan stains in the corner

left by generations of callous passers-by.

Unable to withstand it any longer, Mani put aside his own rules about impersonal dealings with patients and put his hand on the father's shoulder.

"Could we talk for a few minutes?" he requested.

The father stood up and mutely followed Mani to the lobby. He was a lean man, wiry in built, his face wizened by years of hard labour in the hot sun, barefoot and clad in a dhoti and tattered shirt, with a turban around his head.

"We have done everything to help him, but it is now beyond us." said Mani in a gentle voice.

The father nodded and wiped away his tears.

"Is there anything he particularly wishes for?" Mani asked.

"He is waiting to meet his mother and sister. But how will they come? I have no money. My land is already completely mortgaged. To bring Dinoo here, I had to borrow more money from the Zamindar (landlord). and my wife and daughter had to promise to work in his fields till it is paid off. When it is paid, he will lend them money for the bus ticket to come here. Till then, they are to work for him."

Mani was aghast. "But what if..."

It was too terrible to say out loud. He could not imagine a child on his death-bed unable to meet his family. Mani knew all about debts. But this was worse. It was quite possible for a zamindar's debt in rural India to be passed on for many generations. Dinoo's father was perhaps paying a debt from his own father or grandfather and it would have passed on to Dinoo had he been capable of surviving this illness.

Turning away, he bent his head and closed his eyes trying to imagine not being with his Appa and Amma at such a time, or

with his sister for that matter.

The father's resigned acceptance of his life, grief and fate ignited something fierce inside Mani.

"How much needs to be paid? For the Zamindar to allow them to come here? And how much for their bus-fare?" he asked bravely, knowing what the solution

had to be. Dinoo's father looked up with a dawning light of hope. He did a calculation on his callused fingers and looked up.

"It is a lot of money, twent three thousand eight hundred rupees.", he said hesitantly.

"Wait here." Said Mani. Now that his decision was made, Mani found that he was running to his room with some urgency.

He returned in a few minutes, clutching an envelope.

"This contains twenty four thousand rupees", he said breathlessly, adding, "Tell them to come on the next bus."

For the next few minutes, he had to hold away the poor father as he fell at Mani's feet in gratitude.

Watching Dinoo's father leave for the post-office to wire the money, Mani had a moment of epiphany. "'But for the grace of God, there go I'." Mani thought.

Mani now had just enough money for eating on alternate days, as the envelope he had handed to Dinoo's father had wiped out his rainy-day money. Sighing to himself, he wondered if he could take a refund for the conference that he had registered for. He fervently hoped some discharged patient would get a packet of sweets or something in the next few days.

Two evenings later, he was rewarded by the sight of Dinoo's smile, as he entered the ICU. A tired and weather-beaten

woman, clutching the arm of a little girl stood next to Dinoo. The ICU nurses, sensitive to Dinoo's plight had ignored the no-children-allowed rule and smuggled in the sister. They had partitioned off Dinoo's bed with a curtain to grant privacy. The mother was holding in her emotions with some difficulty. The girl, however, had no such compunctions. Her joy at seeing her brother had overcome her wariness of her surroundings and she was chattering away. Relating some escapade, she was eliciting a broad smile from Dinoo, an awesome feat, considering the pain he was in. By evening, Dinoo was critical and was talking very little. He was listening avidly, though, as his sister managed to pack in weeks of news into a day's recounting. Mani noticed that Dinoo was clutching a ripe, yellow mango in his hand.

He asked Dinoo's father, "What is this?" "Every year, Dinoo and Chingee (he gathered that was the sister's name) work in our neighbor's orchard in summer to pluck mangoes. At the end, the owner lets them takes a few. This year, because she was also busy working in the fields with her mother, she could get only two and has been waiting to share it with her brother." he smiled sadly.

Mani nodded, feeling decidedly light-headed today, having reduced his diet to only bread and bananas for the past two days.

"How will I get through the day?" he wondered. Although he had always resisted taking loans from colleagues for the sake of his self-respect, as well as the dislike of being tangled in more debt, however small.... today his gnawing hunger made him wonder if he should swallow his pride and borrow a small sum.

Exiting the ICU later, he noticed that Dinoo's father and sister were waiting outside.

As he came up to them, they both touched his feet, ignoring his fervent protests.

The father said, "Doctor-saheb. Chingee has something for you."

Chingee, a six or seven year old thin girl with sparkling dark eyes smiled.

"Doctor Dada, (older brother), this is for you." She handed over a mango to Mani. "This is MY mango, which I plucked from our village orchard. Thank-you." She said the last in English, shyly, in a typical rural accent.

Her father said with bitter-sweet pride, "My Chingee and Dinoo are both learning English words in school."

Mani was too overwhelmed to say anything. And too hungry to refuse! After a diet of tea, biscuits and bread, this mango seemed like a gift from heaven! He cut the mango and had it for two meals, dinner and breakfast.

By the next day, Dinoo's condition had worsened, but he tightly clutched the fruit next to him, refusing to be parted from it. Chingee's chatter had subsided into a sad silence, but her eyes followed the ICU staff around with fascinated curiosity. By then, the nurses were letting her visit only for a few minutes every hour.

Dinoo and Chingee had very little time left with each other. When Dinoo slipped into a coma, his hand was still placed on the fruit by the side like it was a lucky talisman, a connection to a happier time.

Mani, by some good fortune, got enough food to keep body and soul together till his next paycheck was docked. A box of sweets from a discharged patient, a colleague's birthday party, 'prasad' from some pooja; all kept him from fainting in the ward.

When Dinoo died two days later, the family returned to their village. But amidst their grief, they did not forget to get

Dr. Mani's address scribbled on a scrap of paper, promising to return the money, despite Mani's heartfelt and sincere protests. He felt that the mango that had saved him and his pride, was repayment enough. Nevertheless, every year for the next ten years, on the anniversary of Dinoo's death, a money-order would arrive at his home. In the initial years, it was a few hundred rupees, and in later years it was a little more, until it was all paid off. Any entreaty from Mani that he did not need the money was ignored. "Only the poor honor their debts", mused Dr. Mani, recalling another of his father's sayings.

On the eleventh anniversary, a letter in Marathi written in a beautiful hand arrived.

'Doctor Dada (big brother)' it said, 'I was very affected by what happened to my Dinoo dada. We remember the help given by all of you in our time of need. I have decided to follow your example and help people. I do not have the money to be a doctor, but I have decided to become a nurse. I have enrolled in the local Nursing Institute. I hope that I will be privileged to work with you some day. Please give me your blessings. – Your little sister, Chingee.'

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