

ENGLISH



LOST SPRING

(Stories of Stolen Childhood)

~Summary~

-by Anees Jung

Sometimes I Find a Rupee in the Garbage

Saheb: The Ragpicker

Every morning the author meets Saheb and his friends scrounging for 'gold' in the garbage dumps of her neighbourhood. Saheb and his family hail from Bangladesh, but they have left their home a long time ago. Storms washed away their fields and homes, reducing them to a state of abject poverty, which they left behind in the hope of finding a better life. That is why they came to this city looking for 'gold'.

The author asks Saheb why he does ragpicking and does not go to school. To this, he replies that there is no school in his neighbourhood. The author jokingly promises to open a school. After a few days, Saheb asks if the author has opened the school. The author is very embarrassed at having made a promise that was not meant to be fulfilled.

Nevertheless, she realises that such promises are made to these children almost every day.

Saheb-e-Alam: Lord of the Universe

After some months of knowing him, the author asks Saheb his full name. The author notices the irony in Saheb's name, 'Saheb-e-Alam,' which means Lord of the Universe. She feels that Saheb would not believe what his name means. Unaware of the meaning of his name, Saheb roams with his gang, barefoot, on the streets. The author curiously asks why they don't wear slippers. One replies that his mother does not bring them down from the shelf. Another says he wants shoes.

Moving across the country, the author has seen many children walking barefoot. One of the explanations is that it is a tradition and not lack of money. Anees wonders if this is just an excuse to explain away a perpetual state of poverty.

Author Pained by the Fact that Ragpickers are Still Barefoot

The author remembers a man from Udupi who, as a young boy, would pass a temple where his father was a priest and pray for a pair of shoes. Thirty years later the author visited his town.

Behind the temple there was the house of a new priest. Anees noticed the young boy of the priest, who arrived panting. He was wearing shoes. The writer was reminded of the boy who prayed that he should never lose his shoes. The goddess had granted his prayer, as most of the young boys there now have shoes to wear. As against this, the ragpickers in the author's neighbourhood still remain barefoot.

Garbage is Gold

The author's acquaintance with the barefoot ragpickers takes her to Seemapuri. Seemapuri is a place on the periphery of Delhi, yet miles away from it metaphorically. The place is home to 10000 other shoeless ragpickers like Saheb. They are all Bangladeshi refugees who came here back in 1971. They live in very poor conditions in mud structures with roofs of tin and tarpaulin.

The place has no running water facility and no drainage. The ragpickers have lived here for the past 30 years, some even more, without identity, yet they have valid ration cards. Not having an identity does not bother them, if at the end of the day they don't sleep with empty stomachs. They prefer to live here rather than in the fields at home which give them no grain.

They, who once lived in the beautiful land of green fields and rivers, are now compelled to pitch their tents wherever they find food.

Children are born in them and become partners in survival. And survival in Seemapuri means ragpicking. Over the years, ragpicking has become an art. Garbage is gold to these ragpickers. It is their only support and means of income. Saheb tells the author that sometimes he finds a rupee, even a ten-rupee note.

Anees realises that garbage holds a different meaning to both parents and children. For parents it is the source of their livelihood, providing them with food and shelter; for children, it is wrapped in wonder.

Lost Spring

One winter morning, the author sees Saheb outside the fenced gate of the neighbourhood club. He is watching a game of tennis. Saheb seems to be fascinated by the game. He tells the author that sometimes the guard lets him in and then he can ride the swing.

The author notices that Saheb is wearing tennis shoes. Saheb tells her that someone gave them to him. The fact that some rich boy discarded the shoes because there was a hole in one of them does not bother him. For Saheb, who has walked his whole life barefoot, it is like a dream come true.

Saheb No Longer his Own Master

One morning the author sees Saheb on his way to the milk booth. He is carrying a steel canister. He informs the author that now he works at the tea stall and is paid ₹ 800 and all his meals.

But the author feels that Saheb is not happy. His face has lost its carefree look. The steel canister seems heavier than the plastic bag. The bag was his, but the canister belongs to the owner of the tea stall. Saheb is no longer his own master.

I Want to Drive a Car

Mukesh Wants to be his Own Master

Here begins the second story. In Firozabad, the author meets Mukesh, who insists on being his own master. He wishes to be a motor mechanic. Anees asks him if he knows anything about cars. Mukesh replies that he wants to learn to drive a car.

The author feels that his dream is like a mirage amidst the dusty streets of Firozabad. Every second family in Firozabad is engaged in the business of bangle-making. Firozabad is the centre of India's glass-blowing industry, where generations after generations have been involved in this business.

Another Encounter with Poverty

The people of Firozabad involve their children in the bangle-making industry without knowing that it is illegal for children to work in the glass furnaces with high temperatures, in dingy cells without air and light. If the law is enforced, almost 20000 children would be out of the hot furnaces, where they work day and night, often losing the brightness of their eyes.

Mukesh proudly announces that his house is being rebuilt, and volunteers to take the author home. They walk down stinking lanes choked with garbage, past houses that are small and dirty constructions with wobbly doors and with no windows, where families of humans and animals co-exist in a primitive state.

They enter a half-built shack, one part of which is thatched with dead grass, where a frail young woman is cooking the evening meal for the whole family. She is the wife of Mukesh's elder brother. Though not much older in years, she has the respect of a bahu. She veils her face when Mukesh's father enters.

The God-given Lineage

Mukesh's father has toiled hard all his life, first as a tailor and then as a bangle-maker. Still the poor fellow has been unable to renovate his house or send his two sons to school.

All he could manage to do was to teach them what he knows about the art of bangle-making. Mukesh's grandmother has seen her husband go blind with the dust from polishing the glass bangles. She believes in destiny. "Can a God-given lineage ever be broken?" she implies. Born in the caste of bangle-makers, they have seen nothing but bangles-bangles of various colours.

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In dark hutments, next to lines of flames of flickering oil lamps, sit boys and girls with their fathers and mothers, welding pieces of coloured glass into circles of bangles. Their eyes are more adjusted to the dark than to the light outside. They often end up losing their eyesight before they become adults. The author notices a young girl, Savita, in a drab pink dress, sitting beside an elderly woman, helping in making bangles. Her hands move like a machine.

Anees wonders if she understands the sanctity of the bangles for Indian women. The sad irony will suddenly dawn upon her. She will become a bride like the old woman sitting beside her. In a voice drained of joy, the old lady tells the author that she has not enjoyed even one full meal in her entire lifetime.

Daring, Not a Part of Growing Up

One wonders if Mukesh's father has achieved what many have failed to achieve in their lifetime. He has a roof over his head. The cry of not having money can be heard in every household of Firozabad. Nothing has changed over the years. Years of hardship have killed all hopes and dreams.

The author asks a group of young men to organise themselves in a cooperative. She learns the horrific truth that even if they get organised, they are taken to jail for doing something illegal and are beaten up. There is no leader among them.

The author finds two distinct worlds in Firozabad. One is the exploited family caught in a vortex of poverty and the stigma of the caste in which they were born. The other is a vicious circle of those who exploit them, the sahukars, the middlemen, the politicians, the lawmakers, the policemen and the bureaucrats. These have created such a burden that a child accepts this as naturally as its father did. To do something else would mean to dare. And daring is not a part of growing up.

A Ray of Hope

The author is filled with joy when she finds that Mukesh thinks differently. The boy is filled with hope. His dream of being a motor-mechanic is still alive in his eyes.

He is willing to dare. Anees asks Mukesh if he also dreams of flying a plane. Mukesh replies in the negative. He is content to dream of cars, as few planes fly over Firozabad.

Conclusion of Lost Spring

Lost Spring summary gives us an analysis of the impoverished condition faced by many children that condemn them to a life of pain, oppression, and lack of education.