

Short Story **Gift Shop Blues**

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We had moved a few paces up and had to turn back due to my wife's suddenly stirred wisdom and a timely awakening of her uncanny shopping instincts. I pulled the car in front of the gift shop and started looking for parking; a big challenge at any other time of the day, in a place like Raja Park - usually bursting with women haggling with hapless shopkeepers. On a hot summer day like that, however - with Sun blazing down on all cylinders - finding a parking slot even in Raja Park wasn't much of a bother. From this perspective, hot summer afternoons turned out to be pretty cool. Not many ventured out flexing their shopping muscles. So, I drove briefly towards an arc and taking a U-turn over an illegal sprawling ramp in front of a shoe showroom, parked our old and rusty Alto safely between a sparkingly purple-coloured Honda City and a brand-new dark tan Chevrolet.

Compared to the colourful variety of cars parked in its front, this *gift shop* appeared ostensibly off its sheen. Wedged between a dauntingly spectacular *Outlaw Charlie* showroom on the right, and the aromatically alluring *Ahuja Sweets* to its left, the gift shop emitted a fragile sense of being. Named *Satguru Gift Corner* in faded colours on a dusty-looking billboard, this gift shop hardly seemed to be capable of living up to the connoisseur spirit of a customer that my wife had. Shrugging my shoulders suggesting *this one* to her, I searched for certitude in her unflinching eyes. An assuring smile on her

face told me that she was well and truly aware of what she was doing. That way, she always managed to know what she was doing.

As we began to step onto the brief lap of stairs that connected the shop to the road, I again started feeling vague about her choice. There was no door with a trademark push or *pull* sign. A mere iron shutter seemed to be serving the purpose of its closure at night. Since it was daytime, there stood only a rickety counter on the threshold demarcating the seller from the buyer.

An accomplished shopper that my wife had been, she never preferred such shops. *The shops that cannot take care of themselves, would not be able to take care of its customers*, she often would quip. *A well-kept, properly decorated shop only would offer you variety*, she always emphasized. And yet, today she was getting into a shop that was neither well kept nor decorated. Worn-out colours on the frazzled-looking hoarding as well as the narrow staircase further emphasized its bedraggled state.

Despite all such discouraging signs, however, she strode on and I - backing her uncanny skill in choosing appropriate sites for her shopping expeditions - followed her looking for a gift for the three year old kid of a relative.

At the final frontier of the gift shop, however, there were more discouraging signals to put us off. It was a woman standing at the counter. My wife did not prefer such shops as she was convinced

that women wrangled more vigorously than men did. Avoiding shops run by women, therefore, was a strategy she had unerringly followed. Today, however, she seemed to have missed the mark and we found ourselves before a counter on the other side of which was a frail-looking, middle-aged woman. What startled me, even more, was her action. Standing at the shopping counter, she seemed to be doing something that bordered on being preposterous. She was crying!

Bewildered, I looked at my wife. If not equally baffled, she too seemed sufficiently intrigued. By now, however, we had reached a point of no return. Standing right in front of the counter, we had made an unequivocal announcement of our shopping intent to the person on the other side. So, there was no getting away from the sight of a crying woman on the other side of the counter.

Alarmed at our sudden appearance, she sniffled and, holding onto one end of her *dupatta* between trembling fingers, mopped off hurriedly the tears from her face and eyes. Perplexed by her heaving frame and the bizarre crying feast at the shopping counter, we stood speechless for a while.

Though my wife seemed a little flummoxed, she kept looking around the shop. Not knowing what to do in matters such as these, I, however, stayed back holding onto my anxiety. Finding herself close to facing a stranger in my wife, the frail woman at the counter seemed unsure of how to respond.

Accomplished in easing off such pent-up anxieties, it was enough for my wife to get a foothold into the woman's space. Greeting the woman with a usually animated, "Namaste Didi!" she made an admirable attempt at making the woman feel normal despite her own confused state of mind.

This, I knew, was her off-used arsenal – scratching acquaintances out of strangers. *Didi* and *Bhaiya*, she used these

innocuous-looking epithets with a staggering range of their applicability. So, small-time acquaintances, auto drivers, mechanics, shopkeepers, even complete strangers, and everyone else who couldn't fit into any other category, ended up being either a *Didi* or a *Bhaiya* in her nomenclature. Understandably, therefore, the woman who doled out a crying feast to us fell seamlessly into the *Didi* bracket.

To my wife's animated greetings, this *Didi* responded with unsure looks and a feeble nod of her head. That she had been caught unawares was visible from the embarrassed, demure look on her face. Mopping off the last residues of tears from her eyes, she, however, mustered a diffident smile.

It was enough for my wife to let her customary juggernaut roll, "Didi, we want to buy some gift for a three year old boy...Please show us something nice..."

Gathering her fretted brittle self, she nodded meekly and walked with uncertain steps back to the different wooden racks set against the wall behind her. Not knowing what was where she began to haul up whatever types of toys she could lay her hands on. Within a couple of minutes, there materialized before us a handful of kid toys- cars, buses, tractors, trains, bicycles, drummer monkeys, rocking horses, elephants, ducks and birds of various sorts – a result of her several frantic visits to the wooden racks. In one sweeping gesture, however, my wife moved them away to the other side of the counter saying, "Not these types...something different."

It was enough to bewilder her further. Not knowing what that 'something different' was, the perplexed look deepened on her face. Quashing her perplexity, however, she quietly moved back and started pulling out several other articles meant for children's games, fun and entertainment. While doing this, however, her responses remained vague,

her steps unsure and her movement fidgety.

It seemed that she did not have much knowledge of what items were there or who it was meant for. Increasingly, she found it difficult to respond to the names *like snooker board, fun pack, mental muzzles, kid zone*, the toy titles my wife articulated with unquestionable virtuosity. In response, she stumbled, fumbled and stammered, trying to get something that could live up to her seasoned customer's expectations. Displaying frenzied perplexity both in her eyes and steps, she was turning out to be quite a naïve who had not heard of such terms before.

Wriggling desperately, however, she kept on making some more valiant but vain attempts at discovering and producing on the counter the item that could live up to our imagination. This went on for a while. However, when my wife asked for the *complete kid karishma* – a newly launched toy by Palcos, a leading manufacturer of toys and gifts for kids, she blinked inanely at us and went blank for a while. Recovering, she excused herself and picked up the phone and started speaking into it. She was speaking in Punjabi. Her voice trembled as she hastily told the listener that some customers had been waiting and asked the person on the other side to reach there as fast as he could.

She put the phone down and met our eyes with a crumbly smile of hers. As we had already gathered, she informed us that she had made the call to her husband who *would be reaching the shop in 5-10 minutes*. Finally, she had found a way to deal with the confusing customer queries launched at her. With a streaky sense of assurance and poise on her face, she requested us to wait and asked if we would be interested in having tea or anything cold.

We didn't like what we heard and did not want to wait for a long time. So, my wife protested the idea of having to wait. I could clearly discern a dint of displeasure

in her voice as she said, "Sorry Didi, but this is not the way. If you don't know anything about the shop, you shouldn't stand here." The woman's face turned ashen. The haunted look returned on her face, as she apologized profusely, "Sorry Madam...but he is on his way...just wait for some five minutes."

A plighted, plaintive appeal in the beseeching tone of the woman was clearly discernible, something that we could not overlook. So, after briefly shaking her head, my wife made up her mind and asked the woman if she could get us some water. "Oh yes, yes, of course!" said the woman readily and quickly disappeared behind the curtain hanging from the parapet on the wall to her right. Left to ourselves, I proposed that we move to some other shop while also adding, "I told you, this didn't look like a proper shop. I don't know why you chose this?" By now, however, she seemed to be beginning to see some blessing in disguise. So with an assuring smile, she spoke prophetically, "Don't worry, something must be good in this for us." With her having perched thus on an aphoristic platform of mystical wisdom, there was no way I could have continued my dissent against her decision.

Done with my brief tryst with dissent at her choice, I started looking for more negotiable options and stole a look around the shop. Just as its façade, its interior too did not seem to be in a robust state. The plaster on the walls had come off at a few places, exposing blue-coloured patches underneath the dusty white covering. The blades of the old Usha fan on the ceiling had not been cleaned for some time as streaks of dust had accumulated on its edges. It was obvious that the shop had neither been painted in some years nor dusted properly. Cobwebs were beginning to form in corners on the ceiling. Particles of dust also unabashedly embraced the gifts wrapped in colourful packs and lodged in the upper decks of the wooden racks set against walls. The shop needed

some professional resuscitation, it was screamingly evident.

Meanwhile, the woman emerged through the parted curtains. Held between her hands, was a tray with two steel glasses and a steel jug. With keen, pert steps and an assured smile on her face, she placed the tray on the counter and started pouring water into the glasses, saying, "Please Madam...Sir...! please have some water!" As ice cubes tumbled into the glasses with slight tingles, we could sense that it wasn't just water. She had brought us some lime juice. Burdened with such sudden expression of solicitude, both of us protested. "Why this...Madam?...only water was sufficient..." my wife pitched in with an emotive rejoinder, "Arrey...Didi!...you shouldn't have taken the trouble..." something that she later on rounded off with a warmed-up appreciation of her preparation, "Wah! Wonderful *Shinkanji!*"

Delighted at the reception of her drinks, she offered us another round which given the scorching heat outside - seemed irresistible. Somehow, *shinkanji* seemed to have washed down the curled-up agitation inside us. The woman too, hitherto fidgety and unsure of herself, now looked quite poised and certain of her moves. Looking at her assured sense of being, I realized that this was where she belonged. Seeing her get us *shinkanji* and serve it with all devotion and affection, there lurked in her a caring woman, a solicitous mother who was ever so keen to ply all her meagre offerings so that her kids ate and drank to their fill. And immediately I realized that she had been put in a wrong place. It was the cosy confines of the kitchen and not the competitive arenas of shop counters where her wriggly self could blossom. *What was it that had made this woman cry just a short while ago?* While I was looking for ways to figure it out, my wife pressed home the advantage of her intrepid self. Confronting the woman with a seemingly discourteous effrontery, "Didi, please don't mind

this...but we were really shocked when we saw you crying while we were entering," she proceeded to foray into the intricacies of someone whom we had barely known, "why were you so upset that time?"

The crestfallen look returned on her face as she stammered out haltingly how she had been robbed by a customer who caused such consternation in her that she ended up giving back to him both *the teddy bear and the five hundred rupee note - the price of the bear*. By the time she arrived at the end of her fractured narrative, her voice trailed off into muffled sobs. Her writhing, rickety self was beginning to overwhelm her again.

Desperately in a bid to keep her from falling into another crying spree, I blurted out into a harangue cursing the depravity prevalent among the people who gave primary focus to money and bothered not about the values such as honesty and truth that were much higher and far richer. *It is so pathetic. We live in an age that is really decadent! Make money somehow, if you can't earn it otherwise, swindle or cheat others by hoodwinking them!*

A startled look on the woman's face was enough to suggest that she wasn't used to such thought-provoking outbursts especially when they came from strangers. This sudden pillory of the hedonistic world by me seemed to have smothered her sobbing streak. In a quick rearguard attempt, she was left adjusting her dupatta drawn meticulously across her shoulders.

The other woman in the fray, my wife, too seemed sufficiently bemused. She smiled indulgently at me. The look on her face served to inform me that it was nice seeing me *offer voice to the voiceless*, but this was no place for such *intellectual discourse*.

Embarrassment hung in the air for a while, before all of us were hauled out of it by the vroom of an approaching Bajaj Chetak Scooter. The rattling, cacophonous sound bursting out of its cranky silencer startled all of us. Though raucously

unpleasant, it mercifully saved me from further blushes. Her husband had arrived.

He pulled the scooter near our parked car and moved into the shop with such urgency that it was clear to both of us that he was the man whom she had called up for help. Heavily set, he took step-stair with seemingly extra effort. His shoulders were somewhat bent and his body seemed to be rotund immediately below his chest. Despite his stout frame, he moved in with a sense of urgency in his steps and wasted no time in taking off his helmet. Beneath it, his hair seemed matted in sweat. Mopping beads of perspiration off his forehead, the man wished both of us in turn and apologized for keeping us waiting. Turning towards his wife, he asked her to get us some tea.

"No, no, we just had shikanji..." I blurted out suddenly.

"Oho...Ji! no problem! Now we can have tea..." said the man and turning to the woman added, "...Go, get in some tea..."

"Haanji, jaroor..." spoke the woman in all readiness and speedily disappeared again behind the curtain.

By now had come to realize that now we would have to make do with her husband. Unlike the woman, he seemed to be well versed in the art of selling. So, once he figured out what we wanted, he started bringing to us hosts of items in quick successions. All along, he kept highlighting the salient features of every item and its utility for the child. In just 15-20 minutes the man had placed in front of us nearly fifty articles and seemed to know the make, the material used, and durability of every item thus presented.

We had also known through him how *Kidmo India* made better motoring toys such as tiny cars, tractors, buses, trains, and bikes of various sizes than the Chinese *Shaang-fi*. He also went on to explain to us that *though Kidmo India products were slightly costlier but with a few extra bucks, the proud parents could get their kids more durable motor toys made in*

finely chiseled metals. He told us that armed with top quality sensors, Kidmo India toy cars moved with greater agility and took sharp turns at the advent of any object placed in their way. It was this feature of theirs that helped them from ramming into chair legs, or banging their headlights into the wall in front. An accomplished shopkeeper knows how to keep his customers engaged. And that's what he was doing. With consummate ease, the man kept us, at least me, hooked to his descriptions.

Presently, the curtains were parted again and the woman materialized with another tray - this time studded with three tea cups and two plates - one filled with biscuits and the other full of mixture *bhujia*.

"Oh...! Why all this? Only tea was required..." somehow, once again there was suddenness in my reaction which seemed to have surprised the woman while she placed the tray on the counter in front of us.

"Arrey...Didi...you have done so much!" said my wife, feeling somewhat wrong-footed in the wake of this unsolicited reception. *Such charades of hospitality often robbed you off a fair deal; you couldn't raise your wrangling contest to serious degrees, she often would infer.* So as shoppers, we always stayed wary of such enticing traps of warmth thrown at our direction by unctuous shopkeepers. But that day, it was slightly different. This shop-keeping woman was no unctuous, glib-talking salesperson. On the contrary, she had so far come across as a subdued, vulnerable and speechless creature. Therefore, it was difficult to decline such overtures of warmth, however unsolicited they might have been.

Still, my wife found a way to make things clear to the man and woman who were trying to play host to us, "See *Bhai Saab...Didi...you are offering us all this hospitality....But we may not get the item of*

our choice...We may not buy anything at all at the end."

"Arrey, Madamji! *Ki gal kardo ho?* This is your own shop...no problem...see as many items as you want...and there is no obligation...if you don't like anything, please don't buy...," the man spoke with urgency.

"It is nothing...it's merely a cup of tea! Please take..." added the woman with all simple affection of hers.

"Sir...Madam...please have your tea first... she makes great tea!" the man too went on to augment the solicitous air around us.

Encouraged by this endorsement, the woman readily took it on herself to start serving tea, raising the plates filled with snacks first to us both and then to her husband.

"What about you, Didi?" asked my wife.

"No, I just had..."

"But you didn't take shikanji also?" my wife almost protested. This sudden expression of her affection did not seem out of place.

With a faded blush, she smiled briefly in response, and with an expression of "May I?" on her face, she looked enquiringly towards her husband. His nod was the approval she was seeking as she quickly retreated behind the curtains again.

By now, this woman seemed to have become a bit of a mystery for us. The haunted expressions on her face caused in you unsolicited empathy, and her fidgety reclusive self aroused in you a curiosity to discern her better.

So, while we took our tea, my wife began her probing expedition, "*Bhai Saab*,...may I ask something, if you don't mind?"

"Yes, yes, Madam, sure..."

"You have good sales qualities, but Didi doesn't seem to know much of this job...I don't know...but..."

"Yes, you are right, Madam...yesterday also somebody fooled her..."

"Yesterday? But she told us that it happened today!" both of us were surprised.

"She told you!" It was now the man's turn to feel shocked.

"No.... we asked her...actually she was crying when came up...so we thought it happened today," once again, I blurted out.

The man stood dazed for a while, and upon recovery started slightly shaking his head in disapproval of his wife's action.

Notwithstanding the awkwardness that had caught up with me again, the man on the other side of the counter clarified, "No, it was yesterday that she was cheated."

"But then, Bhai Saab, why was she crying today?" asked my wife.

"What to say...? She cries all the time!"

"All the time!" both of us were now really confused.

"Yes..." the man added with a sigh, "She has become really vulnerable, ever since Vicky passed away."

"Vicky?"

"Our son..."

The stunned silence that followed seemed pretty long before my wife could muster "Oh! So sorry! How old was he?"

"Twenty three..." the man too looked crestfallen, with marks of grief, hitherto concealed underneath all his glib talking, popped up on his squatted face.

"Twenty three! Oh, God!...when...what happened to him?" I came out, this time stammering, "Was there any problem?"

Meanwhile, curtains were parted again. The woman came from behind. She caught all of us silent as she went about collecting the tea cups. Her hands froze, as the man continued answering our query.

"Nothing...he was all fine...one day he got fever...we took him to the

doctor...they tested him for dengue..." His voice choked as he added, "On the third day...he...", saying this, he heaved deeply and looked upwards, shaking his head inconsolably.

Unlike him, the woman was more overt in her expression of their loss. For some moments, she tried to force her grief down, fixing her glance on the tray in her hand. Soon, however, grief broke through the crumbling fortress of her visage. Quickly, her sobs assumed a more pronounced force and her body heaved, overwhelmed with the anguish of her separation from her son. My wife went to her and touched her on the shoulder. Her gaunt frame shook as another tide of grief went through her. In a broken voice and amidst hiccups, she shared with us *how handsome, tall and healthy her son was. And that he managed this very shop very efficiently. Such a promising boy and such as a sudden end! Just some fever and headache one night while returning from the shop. And...all gone...!*

As she couldn't speak further, it was left to the man to help us understand that it was the third day that he had bled from his nose. Alone at home, she rushed him with the help of their neighbours to the nearby hospital where he died even before the man could come back from his job.

By now, the woman's stifled sobs had now assumed a full-throated expression. Heaving with more pronounced convulsions without bothering about whatever impression she was gathering from us, she continued to sob, quake, and tremble. Nothing mattered to her now, she was a mother who remembered her deceased son and it was his memory that was making her cry so unabashedly.

Remaining dazed for a while, it was eventually my wife who helped her regain a semblance of composure, gather herself and disappear behind the curtains.

Left with the man, it was I, however, who resumed the dialogue, "So, you are in

a job?" For the first time, I happened to ask something without startling anyone.

"Yes, Sir...I am in JDA...when the phone call came, I was there. Vicky set up this shop...and I used to help."

"Now, it must be difficult for you..."

"Very difficult, I have to go to the office in the morning, and she has to manage in my absence..."

The husband went on to explain to us how his wife had become extremely vulnerable ever since they lost their Vicky. It took us several consolatory remarks and an enlightening trope down the 'brittle-bubble-like-human-existence' before we could eventually return to the original premise of buying a toy for a kid whose birthday fell on that day.

Between the three of us, however, the buying-selling proposition seemed to have undergone some drastic change. Speaking as the father who had lost a boy, the man dropped his sales pitch, something that had hitherto been successfully negotiated by my wife with her fake alarms at supposedly exorbitant pricing of items, her well-honed, chiselled replies and her incisive inquisitions into the products. Now, however, both of them seemed jaded in their approach.

Replacing the persuasive sales talk, lugubrious tedium had set in the man's voice. He went through the descriptions of the remaining items - which kept coming in our direction - in a monotone while my wife seemed lacklustre in her inquisition about them. Hagging, her quintessential arsenal while shopping, seemed to be missing from her repertoire altogether. She listened with divided attention, nodded briefly, and barely questioned the prices quoted by him.

Finally, the blasé customer in her ended up picking *Witkit- some kind of kid game - that not only merely entertained, but helped a child learn useful things in a funny way. Toys, many people give, but we being the educated ones, should also focus on child's learning as well.* I nodded readily

endorsing her choice. More than anything else, getting away from this situation was the only thing in my mind now. That, I believe was more or less the case with her as well now.

In fact, both my wife and the shopkeeper seemed to have jettisoned their archival positioning altogether. She went on to ask him in all innocuous solicitousness, "Please Bhai Saab, see to it that you also save something; we don't want you to incur losses on our account." The man too returned the sentiment in equal measure as he came up with folded hands, "No bhenji... you and Sir have been so kind to my wife; for making money all the rest of the world is there. Please keep coming, it's your own shop..."

With a queer feeling of sadness and affinity, we descended from the narrow stairs of the shop. Both of us felt numb for a while, looking at nothing and, for a while, speaking nothing either. Carrying the gift,

now covered in a colourful wrapper - dotted with baby elephants who all raised their tiny trunks in celebration of their unbridled jubilation - we walked slowly to our car in utter silence. The silence continued to prevail in the car as well while we drove back home, with both of us thinking all the while about the man, the woman and the enormous grief in their heart. I kept imagining the face of their son, his brief illness and his sudden departure from his grieving parents' life.

It was after a long while that I turned to my wife and asked if she was okay. Sadly, she smiled back at me and nodded. And as she set her eyes back on the road in front, a sigh of relief escaped her, probably at the thought that she was not the woman in the shop; that her son was not 23, but just 8 years old; and that he was not dead, but alive and was waiting for her at home.

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