

HOPE THOMPSON

Lost and Found

It was the month of March, the first day of Vasant Ritu. After harrowing days of winter, marked by the harshness of the cold breeze that swept through the plains day and night, the warmth of a bright sun and the delightful freshness in the air were welcoming. Gulmohar painted the blooming canopies a bright red and the fields were ripe with the scent of mustard. For miles at a stretch, tracts of land were swept a pale yellow, the pallor reminiscent of melting gold. The spring had just arrived.

Not far from these fields, at the market square of a village, a crowd had begun to form. People stepped out of their homes, small cottages huddled up in wintry sallowness, their paint eroding at odd points. The fair was a mark of celebration of the beginning of the most beautiful season of the year and of the flourishing harvest. Women wore the brightest of saris and men the whitest of pants coupled with the crispiest of shirts. Bangles dangled and clanked, the sound of glass against glass mixing with that of the jingles of heavy anklets and bells hung against dainty ankles that ran through the dusty lanes. Laughter and chatter were resplendent in the golden light, and as a wind blew, the coolness of the breeze spelt prickly shivers down bared brown backs. Life reigned as the eagerness to shed the gloom of the past few months overtook the lethargy from the same.

A little boy of nine stood next to his parents, his small hand held by the wrist by a bigger one covered with henna designs of elaborate flowers. Dark, luminescent eyes peered out of the small

dusky face, their attention arrested by the toys in a small cart next to him. The hand was let free as the parents walked on, and the boy rushed to the store to admire the objects of his interest at closer proximity. Dolls hung from the ceiling of the store and so did bags full of balls made to resemble cricket balls, by the stitches of red and black in crooked lines dividing them into halves. At the back of the store stood models of trains, aeroplanes and cars, their wooden counterparts adorning the shelves to the right. Memories of the last train ride came forth and the roar of the vehicle, the way it had rumbled beneath his hands and the way the wind had gushed in through his hair from the window were all enlivened in that moment. As he stood admiring the toy model, the polish of the cheap paint now seemed spectacularly similar to the gleam of the real engines and the chimney at its head seemed ready to blow off hot smoke. He imagined himself with the train in his hand, the joy of possessing the beautiful piece and spending long hours in the playground driving it with his hands as its wheels would crush the grass underneath. Subsequently, his parents called out.

“Ramesh, come along, child,” cooed the mother.

His feet obeyed the pleas, though his eyes lingered on the receding train and its counterparts. Reaching them, he looked up at his mother who was busy readjusting the end of her sari that went over her head. The desire to become the proud owner of the beautiful train made it difficult to suppress, though experience pointed otherwise. Overcome by the desire, he mustered up the courage and tugged at the sari.

The mother peered down at her offspring.

Ramesh spluttered thus: “I want that train,” and pointing in the direction of the receding store, proceeded to pull her there.

The father who had until then been studying the crowd and looking around with the sweet freedom of satisfaction and happiness brimming in his eyes, now looked down at his son, red-eyed, and bellowed, “No.”

The conversation having thus ended, the trio moved on through the crowd, the mother cajoling the son’s sullen sobs away, drawing his attention to the beauty of nature and the snake that danced to the tunes of the charmer. Yet, for all the beauty of the yellow fields

and the magical splendour of the snake's moves in the air, the faint disgust of his unfulfilled desire and that evoked by the fear of his father failed to fade out and the smile was traded by an irreplaceable grimace.

Every step was a pain as he dragged himself through the crowd. But when a sweetmeat seller hawked, "Rasgulla, Gulab Jamun, Burfi," in vociferous tones, the hurt was forgotten, instantly replaced by a strange yearning which made his stomach rumble. Leaving his parents behind, he ran towards the stall, his eyes tracing the smooth roundness of milky white balls of jaggery, finding their way to the triangular edges of cashew sweets. His favourites lay at the edge of the display, small, brown balls immersed in sugary syrup making his mouth water. And as he stood admiring his beloved sweets, a group of children suddenly crowded the shop, demanding the same brown balls. He stood in a corner, watching helplessly as the sweets reduced to only a handful in number. The children chattered and gobbled, the spheres disappearing into their mouths quickly. Their eyes sparkled even brighter, and they mumbled in satisfaction. The sweets were indeed as good as they seemed. Subsequently, his father called.

"Ramesh, come along now, child. We must go."

The child turned to leave, though his heart simmered with jealousy, watching the children's enjoyment. Resolving to achieve what he wanted this time, he walked up to his parents where they stood beneath a banyan tree, admiring a couple of parrots. His resolve seemed to slip away as he drew closer, yet he stubbornly held on to it, and reaching them, tugged at his mother's orange drapes yet again.

The mother turned towards him, concerned.

"I want that Gulab Jamun," he mumbled, half afraid, half angry as he watched the play of emotions on his mother's face.

"We shall have it later on, my boy," she half whispered to him.

"But," he began, clearly in a state of vexation. "Those children are having them, then why can't I?"

The mother, vainly trying to coax his attention away to the pair of doves, replied, "Now, dear, you are my good boy, aren't you? Will you torment your mother thus?"

But Ramesh could not bear the refusal now. "I want that," he began but became silent when he saw his father staring down at him, angry and very furious now.

"No," his papa quietened his pleas with one syllable and moved on.

The family proceeded, the mother patting his head lovingly as she babbled to him of all the wonderful things there were to see and all the wonderful sights he was missing. But the child would have none of it, and slapped his hands over his cheeks, wiping away the tears furiously as soon as they left. His thoughts, now heavy with sadness, took another route and he asked himself as to why he was the one who was refused everything. Recalling his grandmother's advice in these hours of distress, he tried to reason the cause of the injustice he faced. Grandma always said that the maximum pain is felt by those who have caused the same to others whose deeds are dirty, whose actions are evil. He pondered on all of his own actions, his misgivings and had never found them to be more than justly vile. He had stolen a five rupee note from Papa's pocket once for there was a new sweet in the village that no one let him have. He had also once stolen a book from the local library, as he had loved the pictures which he knew they could never afford. And these were the vilest of the vile deeds he had committed. Of course, he had felt immense remorse after each, to an extent when he threw away the prized book, dumping it into the river when there was no one on the bridge.

As Ramesh looked about himself, his newfound attention was diverted to the colourful bunch of balloons that wavered in the light breeze. Blood red, crystal blue, yummy yellows and oranges: the euphoria of colours was enough to entrance him to an extent where he forgot the world and having exited the realm of thoughts, entered reality with all its myriad temptations. Watching them dangle from one point from a long stick to which they were tied, he was overwhelmed by the desire to possess them all. But he must ask father first and his heart sank as immediately as it had risen. Maybe, he could persuade mother for this once. And so, with this breeze of thought adding wings to his dying hope, he turned about to ask them. But they were not there.

Like the young leaflet of a tree that shrivels up as soon as cut from the branch, Ramesh's face fell, and he looked to his sides. They were not there. He looked in other directions but in vain. Overcome now with the wildest forms of fear he had ever experienced, before he knew it his legs began running of their own accord through the crowds, threading his way through one set of legs to another till he could not make out one direction from another.

Deeply horrified and even more scared, a sob escaped his dry lips, the dryness of the throat rasping from the pain of the screams that now came from it. His face flushed, tears ran down his cheeks in endless torrents and he stood more remorseful than ever. Why did he not stay with them when they were there? Why did he allow himself to be tempted to an extent where he lost them? The white of his pants had grown a dusty brown and the cloth at the knees had turned as brown as the mud that lay beneath him. His kurta had grown crumpled and wet with perspiration.

Through those dewy eyes, he stared at the crowd that now intermingled all around him, still trying his best to make out his parents. But though a thousand or more legs criss-crossed or stood motionless, the peculiar orange and that thick white pair of legs were not to be found.

Spotting a flash of a familiar shade of orange, he ran in its direction ending up near a stall selling idols of gods and goddesses. The crowd was intense here, since the idols were as beautiful as the stall keeper was suave and people, huge and burly with big, wide arms and murderous eyes, stood stooping above him, bargaining mercilessly. As he tried his best to escape from the suffocation, he slipped and fell headlong and would have almost got trampled under the heavy feet had he not shrieked at the top of his voice and a gentleman had heard his plea and lifted him up in his arms.

The man was the burliest of them all, with an even bushier, grey moustache and wide flashing eyes that grew warm at the sight of the crying child.

"Who are you, my boy? What is your name? Who are your parents, my child?" he asked, brushing a strand of hair from the boy's forehead.

Hearing such affectionate tones reminded him of his mother,

and he replied with a howl of sorrow, only two words escaping his lips as he cried, inconsolable.

“Mummy, Papa”.

The old man, in a desperate attempt to soothe the child, strode to the balloon seller standing close by and asked the child, “My boy, won’t you like some balloons? Look, how pretty this red one is! Oh, look how amazing this blue one looks.”

But the child only closed his eyes shut and howled even harder, “I want my Dada, Ma, back.”

The scent of the sweets from the stall nearby made the man ask in an attempt to calm the child, “My dear child, won’t you like these sweets? Oh look, at those sweet balls of jaggery. That brown one, dear. Wouldn’t you like it?”

To which Ramesh only replied with a greater howl, turning his face away from the display.

Exasperated and worried at his attempts to calm the child having failed, the elderly man now turned the face of the child to himself and studied his features. The strong forehead, the close placement of the nose to the lips and the mark on his neck all indicated the heritage of only two or three men of the village.

Walking a few metres away to a clearing, he approached the men standing there and whispered something into their ears. They rushed into the crowd immediately.

The child having seen partially and understood nothing now sobbed furiously, his heart beating fast in his chest with every sob. The view from the man’s shoulders allowed a better view and his eyes danced frantically, searching for his beloved parents as his heart yearned for a single glimpse.

A few minutes later, when he had almost begun to lose hope and to cry even harder, his eyes caught a flash of a familiar orange in the crowd and wide eyed, his breathing stopped momentarily. There was the sari.... And yes, as clear as daylight, there was his papa in his crisp white pants.

Ramesh wiped his eyes furiously, desperate to get a better view of his parents as they came closer. The mother was as worried as the child, her face streaked with tears and the father’s hands shook as he took the child in his arms. His eyes, brimming with unshed tears, he

hugged the child fiercely to his chest, cradling him with all the love and affection he could bestow. The child climbed up into his arms vanishing completely.

Passing the child down to the mother, who sobbed as much as the child now, the father thanked the old man and they moved on into the fair, ready to go back to their house.

The child laid his head against the mother's shoulders, an orange end wrapped around his head through which the blue skies seemed white. The warmth of her hand over his head felt endearing and so did the rosy scent of her sari. The familiar fragrance of sweets wafted past and he felt the mother halt. The voice of his father whispered into his exposed ear, "My son, would you like some sweets? See, he has some gulab jamuns, your favourite."

Ramesh buried his nose into his mother's shoulders and shook his head furiously.

They proceeded to the toy seller, where the trio paused again and the father knelt again to persuade the child into accepting a toy train. The child, for a reply, turned his head away and murmured, "I want to go home."

Thus, the family exited the fair.