

# GUILT

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“I’ll come tomorrow morning!!” Arun shouted as he closed the door.

Cool winter evening breeze hit him on the face, ruffling his hair. Pushing his chin deeper into the warmth of his muffler and pulling his jacket tighter around himself, he walked out of the house, and down the street. He took out a piece of paper from his pocket. Ah, the shopping list. Cold winds stung him, somehow managing to reach to his body between the jacket and muffler. He crossed the road hurriedly, and jogged towards the general store.

He had been visiting Mr. Behl, fondly called Dada, an old neighbor, paralyzed from waist below. All day Dada sat on his cot, alone, except when Arun used to visit him. Arun tried to come as often as possible, not out of sympathy, but because he got from Dada what he didn’t get at home, patience. He would tell Dada all that happens in school, the blue eyed girl, the football match, the lunch period, everything. And Dada would listen, and smile. Before leaving they would hug each other warmly, a daily reminder of their friendship. At home, nobody had time. Father was too busy in his business and mother in her house keeping. All they asked about was homework, and money. Money seemed to be foremost in their minds... where was the ten-rupee note... was an ice cream absolutely necessary in winter... why candies instead of change... money money money. And if he lost money, he would be in BIG trouble.

He had reached the general store. He decided to take out his money before going in. His hand went in his rear pocket and froze. It was empty.

Oh shit, he thought. Third time he had lost his wallet this week. Last two times Father had been very angry, had even brought out the cane, but mother had stopped him. Last two times he had been forgiven, maybe because he had lost only about twenty rupees each time. But this time he had a hundred rupee note in his wallet!! They would never forgive him.

Arun hurried back the way he had come, staring down on the road, seeking desperately for his brown coloured wallet. He saw none. Face pale with dread and fear, he walked up and down the road, again and again, till tears made it difficult to see. He sat down on the edge of the pavement, wondering what to do.

Suddenly, a thought struck him. Dada had a servant who used to make food for Dada and change clothes. Except him and Arun, nobody visited Dada. Thus Dada had no fear of thievery and thus was very careless with his money. They used to lay around here and there, ten or twenty rupee notes, sometimes fifty, lying on the table, fridge, TV. Arun could just go in and take them. But was it right? The picture of his Father with the cane came to his mind, and he stopped thinking about the right or wrongness of the plan. Standing up, he pushed his hands deep into his pockets, twirling the shopping list. He started towards Dada’s house.

*Click.*

“Who is it?” came the hoarse voice of Dada, followed by violent coughs.

“It’s me,” Arun said. “I forgot my watch in the kitchen.”

Five minutes later he was running towards the general store.

Later in the evening, as he lay on his bed, he thought of what he had done. To escape a punishment he rightly deserved for losing three wallets, he had *stolen* from a helpless old man, who had only a few more years to live. Dada had always been nice to him, listening, giving sound advice, scolding lovingly when Arun was bad. Hugging whenever he came, and before he left. He felt cared for by Dada, and it was him he was cheating. He stifled his tears and tried to sleep.

The whole night he was haunted by nightmares, Dada dying and he laughing, Dada sleeping and he stealing the whole house, he becoming a great thief, he stealing gold, and he getting hung. He woke up, sweaty and hot. It was morning; cool winds greeted him again, leaving him feeling cold, more so because of the sweat. He started getting ready for school.

He left a bit early, and made his way towards Dada’s house. He had decided. He would go to Dada and tell him all. He would weep and cry forgiveness. He would promise never to steal again and mean it. After deciding this, he felt much better. Almost smiling he opened Dada’s door.

*Click.* No sound.

“Dada?” None again.

Dada was usually up early. He made his way to Dada’s room, ready for the big hug. He saw Dada, half sitting-half lying on his cot, his hands on his lap, sunlight streaming through a window. Dada looked pale.

“Dada, I’ve got to tell you something.”

Arun sat down next to Dada, and gently shook him. Dada felt very cold. Shaking did not help. He realized what had happened.

“DADA!! Don’t leave me DADA. I have to tell you something. DADA!!!” he shrieked madly, tears streaming down his face. He shook Dada violently, pleading him to come back, to listen to what he had to say and then go. But Dada didn’t come back. He had gone.

Crying very softly now, looking away, Arun moved away from Dada. As he moved his hand away, Dada’s hand fell back from his legs, baring his lap. Arun stared at where Dada’s hands had been.

Dada’s lap contained the three wallets he had lost.