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THE LAST POSTCARD

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In my small village of Johrapur, near the quiet, small dusty-path of Maharwada, there stood a tiny mud-thatched hut—dark, cracked, and always seeming to shiver in the cold winds that swept across the barren fields. Its thatched roof sagged like a tired old man’s drooping shoulders, and the mud walls bore long, jagged lines as if time itself had carved its sorrow into them. Stray goats often rubbed against the weak structure, threatening to topple it, and the small doorway hung crookedly, unable to fully close. Yet this fragile, almost forgotten dwelling was the only shelter for an old widow leper woman named Reubai.

To many in Johrapur, she was a figure wrapped in fear, superstition, and pity—someone people avoided instinctively, crossing to the other side of the path when she approached. But to anyone who paused long enough to truly look at her, to see the story etched in every crack of her skin and every tremble of her frail body, Reubai became unforgettable. There was something haunting in her presence: an unspoken history of suffering, resilience, and silent endurance that seemed to cling to her just as the winter dust clung to her tattered sari. Though fear kept most villagers away, compassion stirred deeply in the hearts of those who dared to step closer. Her life, like her fragile hut, stood on the edge of collapse—yet it held a quiet strength that refused to disappear.

Reubai’s appearance was painful to witness even from a distance. The villagers often said that life had carved its hardships onto her body, leaving no part untouched. Her hands had curled into claw-like shapes—stiff, bent, and almost lifeless—resembling dry, dead branches that had long fallen from a tree and lost all strength. Her fingers could barely hold anything; they trembled if she tried. Her feet, twisted and swollen, forced her to drag herself slowly across the uneven village paths, each step seeming like a small battle she fought with her own body.

Her skin was a map of suffering—pale, patchy, numb to touch, yet strangely sensitive to pain. Some patches were dull and white, stretched tight over her bones; others were reddish and inflamed, as if fire lived beneath them. Many areas were swollen, stiff, or raised like unwanted ridges on the surface of her frail frame. And then there were the cracks—deep, painful fissures that split open like parched earth in a harsh summer. In winter, these cracks worsened, bleeding at times, burning at others.

During the cold months, her suffering reached a cruelty that words could barely describe. Her old, wrinkled face would dry up till it felt like a cracked clay pot left too long in the sun. The skin around her lips and eyes would split, leaving thin red lines that stung with every movement. She often wrapped her face with the torn corner of her sari, but even that gave little relief.

Night after night, from her small hut, one could hear her faint moans—sounds of pain she tried to hide, whispers of agony that rose despite her attempts to remain strong. Sometimes, she pressed her hands against her chest, rocking slowly as if trying to cradle her own suffering. Yet, even in the depths of her pain, there was something strikingly human about her—an unspoken endurance, a silent plea for kindness, and a strength that came not from the body but from a heart that had learned to bear more than any person should.



Not many paused to see this. Many looked away out of fear or discomfort. But those who truly noticed her—those who dared to meet her eyes—could see the story of a lifetime etched into her fragile frame.

Yet behind that broken body lived a woman who had once loved, worked, laughed, and raised children with the same hopes as any mother. There was a time when Reubai moved through life with strength in her back and warmth in her voice—when she cooked for her family, tended to her small courtyard, and waited eagerly for her children to return home at dusk. But those days belonged to a past that now felt like a distant dream.

Her husband, Bhaurao Wakade, had died many years ago, leaving her to navigate life alone with two sons—Deorao and Bhaurao—and a daughter, Dagadubai. All were married and settled far away. The two sons worked at the Mumbai docks, lifting heavy cargo under the scorching sun. They visited Joharapur only during Diwali, staying barely a day before rushing back to the city. They would leave behind a few rupees, a faded sari for their leper mother and vanish into the crowds of Mumbai once again. Sometimes, a money order would arrive, but even together with her meagre charity meals, it was never enough to brighten her days or soften her nights.

Hunger and loneliness slowly became her closest companions.

Inside her tiny hut, she owned only a handful of blackened, tarnished aluminium pots—some cracked at the edges, some stained by years of smoke and neglect. She could not use them. Her twisted fingers would not allow her to knead dough, make bhakris, or even lift a pot of water without pain. Cooking had become impossible long ago.

Sometimes, in the quiet afternoons, when hunger gnawed at her empty stomach, Reubai would drag her tired, twisted feet towards the Patils' houses in the village. Her gait was slow, almost painful to watch, each step echoing her years of sorrow. She did not beg with pride or force—only with a trembling hope that someone might show a shred of mercy.

Some kind-hearted villagers placed stale bhakris or leftover curry on the edge of their doorsteps, careful not to let their fingers brush hers. To them, charity was a duty, but distance was safety. Reubai accepted even these scraps with folded hands, whispering “God bless you” through lips cracked by cold and suffering. Hunger teaches humility far deeper than any sermon, and she knew it well.

But where kindness flickered, cruelty often roared louder. Children, too young to understand her pain but old enough to repeat the mockery of adults, shouted after her— “Leper! Don't come near!”

They ran around her like restless sparrows, throwing pebbles, imitating her limp, giggling at her misery. I had seen her many times, standing alone under the harsh midday sun, her eyes filled with tears that her numb skin could not even feel. She whispered curses—not of malice, but of helplessness—against those who tormented her. She cried not just from the pain of disease but from the deeper wound of being unwanted in the very village where she had once lived as a wife, a mother, a woman with dreams.

Her neighbours in Maharwada were no kinder. Some scolded her for sitting near their houses; some pushed away her water pots; some looked at her as though she carried all the sins of the world on her frail, broken shoulders. Even silence hurt her—those cold, judging stares that said, You are not one of us. You are a burden.

As a child, I could not understand why the world was so unkind to one woman. As an adult, I understood it even less.

But there was one person who never kept away—my mother, Santubai. In a village that kept its distance from the suffering woman in the hut, my mother alone crossed that invisible line of fear and prejudice. Every few days, carrying a small brass plate covered with a cloth, she walked towards Reubai's home with warm bhakri and bhaji. And every single time, the moment



Reubai caught sight of her, her dull, tired eyes suddenly brightened—not fully, but just enough to show the spark of hope that still lived inside her beaten-down body. It was a look mixed with gratitude, disbelief, and a longing for simple human kindness.

One bitter winter morning, when the cold winds cut through the village like a knife, Reubai whispered in a trembling voice, “Santubai... bathe me today, please. My body is burning and freezing at the same time.”

Her voice had the fragility of dry leaves rubbing against each other.

My mother nodded gently. She knew Reubai’s winters were torture—the cracked skin, the stiff limbs, the numb patches that refused to heal. She gathered a few sticks, lit the chulha outside the hut, and placed a blackened pot of water over the flames. The fire crackled and the smoke curled into the cold air as the water slowly warmed.

Reubai, shivering uncontrollably, sat on the old flat stone used for washing clothes. Her frail body looked like a bundle of bones draped in a thin, worn-out sari. Deep cracks lined her arms, her legs, and her face—each crack telling the story of a life that had known too much suffering. She cringed at the slightest touch, not out of pain alone, but also out of the shock of being touched with care.

My mother poured warm water over her shoulders and began to scrub her gently, as tenderly as one would bathe a helpless child. The steam rose around them like a protective cloud. Slowly, a sigh escaped Reubai’s lips—a sigh filled with relief, comfort, and a moment of forgotten dignity.

When the bath was done and my mother wrapped a clean sari around her, Reubai closed her eyes and whispered her blessings in a voice that shook with emotion: “May your children rise high in life... may they get all the education. God will repay your kindness, Santubai.”

In her cracked, trembling voice, those blessings felt like ancient prayers rising from a wounded soul—blessings that came from the deepest place in her heart, the place where pain and love lived side by side.

No one else touched her—not only because she suffered from leprosy, but also because she carried the lifelong burden of belonging to an “untouchable” caste. It was a double isolation, a cruel punishment for sins she had never committed. In the long, silent hours of the day, she often sat outside her hut, staring at the empty road as though waiting for someone who would never come. In all that loneliness, my mother’s touch was the only warmth she received, the only proof that she still belonged to the world of the living.

I was a young boy then, studying in the sixth or seventh standard may be in the year 1966 or 1967. My legs were thin, my uniform often dusty from play, but my heart understood her sorrow even at that age. Whenever she spotted me from afar, she would straighten herself with difficulty and call out in a trembling, hopeful voice:

“Arjun... come here, bala. Please come.”

I always obeyed her, because something in her voice made it impossible to ignore. Her claw-like fingers struggled inside the small cloth purse tied around her waist. With great effort, she would take out a few coins—five paise, sometimes ten paise—and place them in my palm with the greatest care, lest her fingers might drop them.

“Go to the post office and bring a postcard. I want to write to my son Deorao.”

I would run at once, dust rising around my feet, and return with the postcard held proudly like a treasure. Then I sat beside her in the small courtyard smeared with cow dung, the air heavy with the smell of damp mud and smoke.

She dictated slowly, her voice cracked like her skin:

My dear son Deorao,



I pray to God that He may keep you all happy. I am alive by God's grace and still breathing in this world of pain. Winter has become very cruel this year. The cold bites into my bones, and my skin burns and breaks. I cannot sleep at night. I cover myself with the old quilt you gave last Diwali, but it has torn in many places now. Still, I hold it close because it reminds me of you.

My legs have become weak, baba. I cannot walk much now. Even going to the community well for water or to the neighbour's house for food has become difficult. Some days I remain hungry, but I tell myself that God will help me, just as He helped me raise you.

If possible, send some money, even a little. I need oil for my white hair, tea-powder and jaggery. I know life in Bombay is hard, and your work at the docks must be tiring, but remember your mother is alone here. Your brother does not write, and your sister is far away in her husband's home at Bhagur.

Still, I do not complain. I only pray that you remain safe and in the pink. A mother's heart remembers her children even when they forget her. Your mother remembers you every day, every hour, every moment. When the pain becomes unbearable, I whisper your name to give myself courage.

Consider this letter as a telegram and send me some money at the earliest.

Your loving mother, Reubai"

While I was writing, she paused, swallowed hard, and wiped her eyes with the corner of her torn sari. I pretended not to notice so as not to hurt her further.

When the letter was finished, I raced back to the post office, feeling oddly proud to be her messenger.

On other days, she gave me small tasks:

"Bring a little jaggery... just a small piece, baba."

"Get me that 5 paisewalla tea powder the grocer sells... the one in the small paper packet."

"See if he has coconut oil... only for two annas."

I would run to the Namdeo Devade's only grocer's shop and return with whatever she needed, placing it gently in her deformed hands. And every time, her blessings flowed like a soft, warm river:

"Arjun, may God give you good brains. May your education lift you higher than the sky. You will become somebody one day... I can see it."

Those blessings stayed with me—powerful, gentle, unforgettable—long after I left Joharapur for high school in Shevgaon, and later for college in Ahmednagar. Whenever I returned home for holidays, I visited her without fail.

Her eyes, weak and watery, always searched for me the moment she heard footsteps.

"Arjun, you came...? They told me you went to the city to study." Then, looking at me curiously with her dim eyes, she would say: "You must become great now... don't be like my sons. Life is hard for people who remain uneducated."

Sometimes, she smiled through tears, the kind of smile that hides more pain than it reveals. At times, she simply held my hand as though drawing strength from my presence. Even in her deepest suffering, she never forgot me.

But life does not wait for anyone—not even for those who have already suffered more than enough.

One afternoon, when I was in the final year of college, a postcard arrived from my elder brother Rambhau. His handwriting was hurried, almost trembling, as though he too had struggled while writing. I started reading carefully—but the moment my eyes fell on the words, my fingers froze.

"Reubai is no more."



The world around me seemed to stop. The Maratha Boarding room, the books on my table, the noise from the corridor—everything faded into a distant hum. All I could hear was the pounding of my own heart. My hands shook, and the postcard slipped slightly from my grip.

For a long time, I just stared at those four words, unable to accept them. They looked too small to carry the weight of a life. Too simple to describe a woman who had suffered so silently, so deeply.

My chest tightened painfully. In that moment, her frail figure rose before my eyes, as clearly as if she stood in front of me. I saw her wrapped in her torn quilt, shivering in the winter winds. I saw her calling out my name in that trembling voice—

“Arjun... come here, baba.”

I remembered the way she would push coins into my palm with her bent, claw-like fingers. I remembered how her clouded eyes shone with pride when she heard of my studies, how she blessed me with a sincerity I had never seen again.

She had so little, yet gave so much.

Her affection was heavy with longing, her blessings heavy with dreams she herself would never live to see.

I walked outside the hostel, unable to stay within those walls. The late afternoon sun was sinking behind the neem trees, casting long shadows across the ground. I sat on a stone bench, my mind numb, my heart aching with a strange mixture of sorrow and guilt.

After a while, I bowed my head and whispered softly, almost choking on my own voice:

“May your soul find the peace this world never gave you, Reubai.”

The breeze that passed me felt strangely comforting, as if carrying her spirit somewhere where pain no longer existed.

In the mud alleys of Johrapur, where people remembered only gossip, not kindness, her memory slipped away quietly, like smoke disappearing into the wind. There were no garlands, no rituals, no tears—only silence. A life forgotten the moment it ended.

But inside me, she remained—not as the leper woman the village feared, but as the gentle soul who blessed a young boy and believed in him when no one else did.

She lives in every act of kindness I offer, in every moment I choose compassion over convenience. She taught me, without ever meaning to, how much humanity can survive even inside the most broken body.

And sometimes, even today, in the quiet hours of night, I still hear her voice—soft, trembling, full of love and longing—

“Arjun... come here, baba.”

It echoes not just in my ears, but deep in my heart.

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