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THE LESSON OF FOUR ANNA

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It was the year 1966, a year etched in the grey soil and simple rhythms of Joharapur. I was in the 5th or 6th standard at Jeevan Shikshan Mandir, our humble, tiled-roofed- school whose walls carried more dust than paint, but whose corridors carried dreams far bigger than its size. The village itself was a world where people measured wealth in goodwill, where children wore innocence like a second skin, and where a single rupee could feed a family.

When the last bell rang that evening, it didn't just mark the end of school—it released a roomful of little boys who ran out like birds suddenly freed from a cage. My friend Tarachand and I sprinted down the dusty path, our thin legs leaving tiny clouds behind us. We laughed for no reason, as hungry village boys often do to forget the gnawing in their stomachs.

But the moment I stepped inside my house, the laughter died. Hunger tightened around my stomach like a rope being pulled by invisible hands.
I rushed to the dilapidated bamboo basket near the corner—our little family vault of leftovers. I opened it with the same hope with which we opened exam papers.
It was empty.

For a second, everything inside me went still.
Mother must have gone to the fields early… maybe she left something else, I reasoned.
So I searched—
the clay pots,
the wooden boxes,
the earthen jars,
even the tiny spice containers that usually held nothing but stubborn traces of turmeric.
But there wasn't a grain in sight.

Hunger is a strange teacher.
It sharpens the mind… but sometimes points it in the wrong direction.
That was when my eye landed on the small, greasy black tin on the wooden shelf. A tin my mother always opened with care, as though it held her past, present and future. When I lifted the lid, four silver-edged anna lay quietly inside—innocent, unaware of the sin they were about to witness.

A whisper rose within me, half hunger, half fear:
"Take it. Mother won't know. Just buy some roasted gram… just today…"
And in that moment, I surrendered. Not to temptation… but to emptiness.

I slipped the coins into my breast pocket and dashed to Namdev Devade's shop—the only one in our village. Namdev kaka looked at me with the affection shopkeepers reserve for familiar, mischievous children.

The shop owner was a lean, sun-browned man whose quiet authority felt as old and familiar as the dusty lanes of Joharapur itself. His faded black cap always sat slightly askew, and his round spectacles magnified his eyes in such a way that he seemed to examine every passer-by like a schoolmaster catching mischief before it happened. A thin, wiry moustache twitched whenever he spoke, and a Charminar cigarette often rested behind his ear like a spare tool he might summon when the day demanded thought rather than haste. He smoked with an unhurried rhythm, each drag slow and meditative, as if he were sorting the village's worries into neat little piles in his mind.

His attire matched his temperament—simple, steady, unmistakably his. A crisply folded white dhoti, wrapped so precisely that not a single pleat dared to wander, paired with a faded Nehru shirt whose once-proud cream had softened into the weary shade of cotton washed a hundred times in the village well. The collar was slightly frayed, the sleeves always rolled to his elbows, ready for the small rituals of his shop—measuring peanuts, tying biscuit packets with jute string, or adjusting those ever-slipping spectacles. He carried with him the gentle smell of kerosene, tobacco, and shop dust—a scent that hovered around him like an invisible introduction—and both children and adults found comfort in his calm.

Namdev's shop stood like a small, stubborn landmark at the centre of the village with its thick stony walls. Inside, the air was a jumble of scents: kerosene, jaggery, roasted gram, turmeric, and the faint trace of tobacco. Uneven wooden shelves held an odd assortment of treasures—biscuit-bottles, tin- drums filled with peanuts, matchboxes, bindis, kerosene and soaps. It was a cramped space, cluttered and chaotic, yet warm and inviting—a place where every child felt welcome and every story of the village seemed to pass through at least once.

"What do you want, baal?" The shop-owner asked.
"Roasted gram… and peanuts," I muttered, my voice unsteady.
He weighed them on his rusty-balance-scale, its pans blackened by years of oil, sweat, and monsoon dust. He poured the mix into my cotton cap—the same cap my teacher said made me look 'studious', though my stomach didn't agree.

The evening sky had begun to turn saffron. Birds were returning to their nests. Smoke coils rose from distant hearths. Mothers were calling out to children.
And I… I hid behind the old Maruti temple near the school, sitting on the stone ledge of the dry village well—our well of secrets.
I opened the cap and began to eat.
But the gram stuck in my throat. My mouth was dry. My hands trembled.
The food refused to go down.

Because it wasn't hunger I was feeding.
It was guilt.

Each bite tasted like betrayal—towards Mother's labour, towards our poverty,
towards the little boy I thought I was.

I couldn't finish even half of it.
In a helpless attempt to hide my wrongdoing, I tossed the remaining gram and peanuts
into the dry well.

When I returned home, I remembered the chores Mother had assigned:

Sweep the courtyard, gather firewood and keep it in front of chulla , fill the large earthen jar with water drawn from the community well.

I did everything perfectly—faster than usual, neatly, fearfully. I was not trying to impress her; I was trying to bargain with my own conscience.

Soon, Mother appeared—silhouette framed by twilight—carrying a huge bundle of firewood. The lines on her forehead were deeper today; the fields had not spared her. She dropped the bundle with her familiar thud, wiped her forehead, and smiled faintly at the tidy courtyard.

But my heart was thudding so loudly I feared she might hear it.
After washing her face, hands and feet, she lit the chulla and started preparing bhakri.
The aroma of roasting jowar filled the air. Then she reached for the small oil bottle to make curry.
She tilted it.
Nothing came out.
Calmly—too calmly—she said, “Arjun, take four anna coin from that tin and get some oil from the shop.”
Everything inside me turned to stone.
My legs refused to move. My throat closed. My breath vanished.
“A… Aai… I… I didn’t steal it!” I cried, and in that very denial, confessed everything.

She opened the tin.
Empty.
Her face hardened. The day’s exhaustion turned into a mother’s wounded fury. She picked up the thick wooden twig lying near the chulla.
The first blow landed on my back.
The second on my arm. The third on my pride.
“You stole from me?” she shouted. “You took money I earned under the burning sun?”
Her voice cracked in pain—not anger.
That hurt me more than the blows.

The women from nearby houses in Maharwada gathered at the door.

Rahibai, a tender-hearted woman yelled, “Santu Mami, why so much beating? He’s just a boy!”
Mother snapped, her voice trembling: “He stole the four anna I kept for oil! Four anna of my sweat!”
Another blow fell. And another.
“Will you steal again?” she cried.
“No, Aai! Never… never again!” I sobbed.

I burst into loud sobs.

I tore away from her hands and ran to the school ground, tears mixing with dust. My friends were playing aatya-patya. I joined them, pretending nothing had happened. But guilt clung to me like a second skin.

Night arrived quietly.
At home, I ate bhakri and safflower (kardai) bhaji in silence.
Mother didn’t look at me.

She wasn’t angry anymore—
but she was hurt.
And perhaps ashamed that hunger had forced her son into sin.

That night, lying on the rough gunny sack, staring at the dark ceiling, I folded my hands and whispered a vow:
“I will never steal again. Not for hunger. Not for desire. Not for anything.”

I realized something profound:
The food I bought with dishonesty never fed me.
The mother who punished me didn’t hurt me—
my actions did.
The four anna I stole gave me something far more valuable than food:
the unshakeable wealth of honesty.
A wealth no poverty can take away.
A wealth no shop sells.
A wealth a mother unknowingly plants—through love, through pain, through four anna worth of truth.
From that night onwards, I carried one belief like a lamp in the darkest lanes of life:
Hunger can be endured.
Dishonesty cannot.
That four anna was not a coin.
It was a lifelong lesson—
stamped not in silver,
but in conscience.

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