

# ...for our children

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It was a regular Wednesday. I was sitting in an auto-rickshaw, feeling like I was being roasted under the Dhaka sun, waiting for the traffic to get moving. Mum had been on my back all week about not having meals at home because of the long shifts I was pulling at the hospital. I had tried explaining to her that it was simply not feasible for me to travel to and from work for lunch, even if my break was long enough to allow it, because of the relentless traffic that plagued Farmgate at this hour. However, she was not to be convinced. Being an only son, I had to be considerate towards her, especially since Dad had passed. I surrendered after several attempts, and so here I was, in an auto-rickshaw on my way back to the clinic, dreading what my supervisor would say if I got in late.

The auto-rickshaw I was in was one of my sole comforts. It was the same one that I used to frequent throughout my years at med school. The driver, Jalil Bhai, used to live in a slum next to my housing society when I first met him, six years ago. He was a talker. That year his son was supposed to have completed his Intermediate exams. Jalil Bhai had been hoping that his son's high school completion might mean an end to his years of driving the auto-rickshaw. Alas, on the day of his exams, the boy was nowhere to be found. He had run away from home, only to return two months later, and declare that he would no longer continue his studies. What's more, he had a wife in tow. Jalil Bhai had realised that day that his son was good for nothing, and he would have to continue providing full-time for his family, perhaps till the day he died.

Jalil Bhai told me all of that during my first ever ride in his auto. Like I said, he was a talker. Now, I wasn't someone who took pity on people easily. However, somehow the man had felt genuine to me. Having no money of my own at that point, it wasn't like I could really help him out. So I asked him if he would have a cup of tea and some *shingaras* with me. The man must have been hungry, for he accepted immediately.

The next day when I left home to go to my college, his rickshaw was waiting outside my house. Just like that, I had my own auto-rickshaw for trips to and from school. If I was ever stuck in the area, I'd just call up Jalil Bhai, and he always came to my aid, without fail. Our *shingaras* and tea at the stall nearest my hospital became part of my routine. Sometimes we had meals at the *khichuri* restaurant across the road, especially on days when I realised that the man hadn't been able to afford any food all day.

Now on my way to the hospital, in this sweltering heat, Jalil Bhai was entertaining me with his granddaughter's latest antics. He said she was the only good thing that his son had ever given him, and yet I had never heard him say he would kick his son out of the house. Jalil Bhai was a curious man.

As he continued with his story, an old woman approached our vehicle. She looked miserable and begged for money while pointing at her neck. The gesturing was redundant because it was clear as day that she was suffering from severe goitre. An endocrine surgery would take care of her condition, and we did those free of charge at the hospital for people who couldn't afford it. These were the times when I felt glad to be in a position to

really help people.

I asked the woman to get in the auto-rickshaw and come with me to the hospital. I would have her condition taken care of and she would no longer need to live with this distress. Suddenly her entire demeanour changed. She stood up straighter and her eyes became very round. She backed away from the auto-rickshaw and was about to scurry away from us when Jalil Bhai managed to grab onto her wrist.

He ensured her I was a doctor, and that I would really help her. She didn't have to be scared of me. However, she kept resisting. He inquired as to why she didn't want to come along, but she kept shaking her head. With more strength than I had thought she could muster, the woman broke free of Jalil Bhai's grip and scampered away. Her behaviour made no sense to me whatsoever, but the traffic had just let up, and so I had little time to ponder over it before going into work.

It was past 8 PM when I was finally done with my shift. As usual, Jalil Bhai's auto was casually waiting where he had dropped me off. We walked towards our usual tea stall with Asif, a friend of mine who frequently joined us for tea. As we were about to sit down, I spotted the woman from earlier in the day sitting a little further down the footpath, counting some change. Jalil Bhai noticed her too.

"I don't understand what this woman did today at all," I said, as we took our seats. Asif was curious as to what I was referring to, so I elaborated on the day's events. Rafiq, a teenage boy who worked at the tea store had come with our tea by then. He listened to my retelling of the story as well.

"Huh, that's really weird. You told her

you'd do the surgery for free right?" asked Asif once I'd finished.

"Of course," I said, "but I don't think the money was the issue. She was afraid for some reason. She practically fled from us as though we were threatening her instead of offering help."

At this Rafiq smirked, while he continued to wipe the table with his dirty rag.

"Why are you laughing? Do you know something about this?" I asked the boy.

"Bhaiya, you people won't understand Buri Amma's behaviour. My boss says she has made enough money over the years to pay for this treatment herself" revealed Rafiq.

"But then why doesn't she get it treated?" I asked, perplexed.

"Why will she? She has five children. Her older children have abandoned her. Now only the two little ones are with her. Both are schoolgoing children. If you cure her illness you're taking away her income source. Then who will pay for their schooling, you?" asked Rafiq mockingly.

For a moment we were all left a little dumbfounded.

"She may suffer from an illness, but it's better than the suffering of watching her children starve," said Rafiq sagely, before moving on to the next customers.

"I can't believe that he's telling the truth. Who would want a life like that?" exclaimed Asif.

"You never know. Circumstances make fools of the best of planners," said Jalil Bhai.

I'm sure the bitterness in his tone went unnoticed by Asif.

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