The Rupee That Stayed

How a boy with nothing learned what money actually is

SUBASH

CHAPTER 1

The Twenty-Rupee Note

The first thing I understood about money, I understood at seven, standing in a shop I was not tall enough to see the counter of.

My mother had given me a twenty-rupee note and a list of three things. Kerosene was not on the list, because kerosene came on Thursdays. On the list were: one packet of salt, one small bar of washing soap, and — if there was anything left — a matchbox.

I want you to notice the shape of that sentence, because I have thought about it for thirty years.

If there was anything left.

She had not said "and a matchbox." She had said "and if there is anything left, a matchbox." My mother, who had studied up to the eighth standard in a Tamil-medium school in a village that no longer has a school, had done in her head the thing that I would later pay a business school forty thousand rupees to be taught with a chart: she had ranked her wants, she had funded them in order, and she had made the last one conditional.

Salt, first. You cannot eat without salt.

Soap, second. You cannot send children to a government school in clothes that smell.

Matchbox, third. There were still nine matches in the old box, and nine matches was two days if nobody was careless.

I bought the salt. I bought the soap. I had one rupee and fifty paise left, and a matchbox cost one rupee, and I stood there with the coins hot in my fist and did something that I have watched grown men with salaries do in front of a brokerage screen.

I bought a lemon sweet.

* * *

It cost fifty paise. It was the yellow kind, wrapped in a twist of cellophane, and it was the size of the last joint of my thumb, and I ate it before I reached the end of the lane so that there would be no evidence.

Then I gave my mother the matchbox and the change, and the change was fifty paise instead of one rupee, and she looked at the coin in her palm for slightly longer than a person needs to look at a coin.

The story continues.

Twenty-three chapters and an epilogue. 97 pages.

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