

What
made me

“What

I am”

I opened up the notebook and started, the date 08/11/1991 at the top left corner, the chapter name in the middle and then, on the top right corner CW (*short form for class work*). I was happy, not because the next day was my 6th

birthday but because it's a Friday. So, what's new? Friday comes every week, Right?

It's eighteen months now since I was admitted to this school (*Standard 1st*). I had seen a couple of my class mates celebrating their birthdays and distributing toffees, wearing new clothes and getting a lot of birthday presents (*a new pencil box with soft plastic covering and goofy painted on it, those glass pencils with beautiful flower images around them, that new pencil sharpener with a glass cap; I always wished to have a blue one but never bought, a new school bag with Mickey Mouse cartoons, that two storey lunch box in the shape of a cake, a drawing book with crayons or water colors or a set of sketch colors, new lighting shoes from action, toys, electronic gadgets and many more to describe*).

The coming Sunday was special because that meant; I will be at home on my birthday. Wow! I never thought of this, was so relieving. Relieved of the fear which I piled up, every time someone celebrated his/her birthday. Relieved of the pressure which I developed worrying, distributing toffees in my class and to the teachers all over the school. Relieved of the tension of telling lies to friends asking, where is the birthday present? Now nobody will even come to know that it was my birthday and everything will just fade off without any problems. Also I don't think anybody in the class remembers my birthday, but what if it is in the teacher's attendance register? So I was relieved of all these worries.

I didn't have new clothes to wear, no relatives and neighbors there to give me any sought of birthday present, no

toffees to distribute as I was scared of asking my grandpa for getting me some toffee packets and a new pair of dress and no one to wish either. But I was still happy for the fact that I don't have to face my friends with all these things as it's a holiday.

I remember one day when it was Vinod's birthday and he cut a cake in the class, his parents came in the lunch break and presented him the cake and every one of us was clapping and singing the Happy Birthday song. After the ceremony his parents asked him to call some of his good friends to their place where they were going to celebrate the birthday party in the evening and, they left. I was very happy, Vinod and I were very good friends and I will be going to his birthday party; I started deciding upon what I will wear and who will drop me and pick me up from his home. At the next moment another thought struck me and that was about the birthday present. Oh! What birthday present should I give him, will grandpa agree to buy that for him, how costly it could be. I knew a shop in our locality which was a very good gift shop. I thought I will ask grandpa, he will definitely agree to buy me one. Now I was just waiting for Vinod to come and invite me to his birthday party. I used to sit at the second last bench and he, on the first bench. The bell rang and the school got over, I didn't rush to the gate that day, was walking with him till the gate and to his car. He left waving his hand, saying bye, I too waved my hand. He never asked me for the party! I was still waiting, looking at his car to stop; he might come and invite me. But he didn't. That evening I asked grandpa if I could have that white cake from the nearest bakery for my birthday. I was very sure that he will smile and ask me which cake and will ask me get it on the birthday. So I just wanted to make it sure before my birthday. After a while,

*staring at me, through his glasses, he replied in a harsh tone, "We don't celebrate birthdays". He didn't even bother to know the date. And the hopes of cutting a birthday cake, people clapping for me and presenting me gifts just blew off. What I saw in the class and what I dreamt for me was totally different than my reality. There was nothing left to imagine, nothing to think and nothing to wish even. The question I was sure to end up in a positive response ended up badly. I was still expecting that he will gift me the cake on my birthday he might be angry for some other reason. That taught me, **"The thing which is most likely to pass, always fails"**.*

The school got over and I ran out of the class with all my friends, I just went out of the school gate (*It was a huge gate, with three frames, painted brown in color, in one of the frames there was a mini gate for small kids. Only during celebrations the whole gate was kept open*). Moving my hand in my pocket and searching for that 50 paisa coin which I saved last day. Ah! Here it is; I found it in the other pocket. Four of us went to the Aaloo Kabli (*a type of snack made with boiled potatoes and grams and onions*) stall, it was a big basket, on an iron table at the other side of the road and a man standing with his lungi (*piece of cloth tied around his waist*). We paid him 2Rs (*50 paisa each*) and got four small paper cups full of it. Generally it used to be a rush around his stall, we started walking to the rickshaw stand where I used to wait for my grandpa, Vinod used to go in his car and other two by their rickshaw (*a three wheeler men driven passenger vehicle*). All the three left, most of the rickshaws were gone. Even the Aaloo kabli vendor lifted his

stall, but I had to wait. The only person who used to stay in the school was the security guard sitting at the gate. I was doing my regular task, standing on the roadside and counting all the scooters and cars passing by and waving my hand to them, to tell them good bye. The waiting time was not too long but standing alone in the shade of the Seesam tree and waiting for someone that too after a whole long day at school. It was not a good feeling. I lived that almost for a year. Why don't, I go in a rickshaw. I know that rickshaw driver who lives near my house. Why don't, my grandpa comes early. Why don't, I go and study in a school where my mom can come to take me home and I can be free for the rest of the day. A lot of thoughts came at once and occupied my mind, I forgot about my birthday too. Grandpa was standing in front of me, he just lifted me with his hands and I sat on the small seat fixed on the front beam of the bicycle. He asked me about what all happened in the school that day, how was the day, did I get my homework checked etc. I just nodded my head answering everything to a yes or no. The school used to get over at 1:30 and grandpa used to come at 2:00 or sometimes 2:15. I had clear instructions from him that I should not leave the rickshaw stand at any cost till he comes. *(He worked in a mechanical firm, Jessop Company, It manufactures trains)*. This used to be his lunch time 1:45 to 2:45, in which he managed to, pick me up from school and drop me home and rush back to office. He was a foreman there *(Now I don't have any idea what a foreman is)*.

He dropped me back at the shop and asked me to have that regular lunch. One of the nightmares for me was that lunch *(plain boiled rice, dal i.e. yellow pulses boiled with some turmeric and salt and if lucky then chokha which is boiled*

mashed potato with some salt). Except for few Saturdays and Sundays I used to have this every afternoon, throughout the year with no exceptions. It was a tea shop (A room, with big wooden doors which could be folded on both the sides, when opened. A verandah, enough to place a table with few jars of local biscuits, a cash box, a water jug and few small tea glasses, at one side and a big earthen chulah; a big heater kind of arrangement in which coal and wood is fed with some jute to ignite fire and food can be cooked, on the other side of the verandah. It also consisted of two wooden benches inside the room, a wooden bed and wooden platforms fixed to the wall on all the sides where one can sit and have lunch and a wooden platform around two feet lower than the ceiling, It was kind of another ceiling for us where we used to store things which are rarely used). Just as in old restaurants in Kolkata. Our shop used to be close at from 8AM to 4PM on week days. Next to our shop was a Paan(*betel*) shop cum tea stall, also they used to sell cold drinks. The structure was much or less similar as of our shop. I loved those colorful cold drink bottles (*Gold Spot, Thumps Up, Campa Cola and Limca*) and always wanted to drink one. The guy at the shop was a good friend although he was grown up but he used to treat me like a friend.

I was walking towards our shop and was just thinking, what to do with the food which was waiting for me. No, not again, yesterday only I had that horrible food, even if it was the coins fault I paid by digesting that. That unlucky coin, I will never ever toss with a 5 paisa coin now. I was standing under the huge banyan tree where there was a road side cloth shop, a

barber shop, another tea stall and a rickshaw stand too. It was a crowded place and everyone there knew me very well. It was so crowded because it was next to one of the gates of the company. On the other side of the road was our shop, I crossed the road after waiting for few minutes and observing the traffic. There was enough open space in front of all the shops to keep benches for people to sit in the evening. I just reached the door and unlocked it, folded just one frame of the door and entered in. I closed it from inside; it was dark as usual with some rays of sunlight creeping inside from the joints of the different frames. I switched on the bulb and there was enough light to see things and eat. Opening the bowl's covers one by one I discovered the same regular dishes with the same smell, cooked right at 7AM in the morning. The rice was hard and the dal was cold enough, even the chokha was hardened. The million dollar question again arose, what to do with it? Waited for a while and thought of not eating the food.

(In past I faced bad consequences for not having the lunch, I have been scolded or sometimes even slapped for leaving food in the utensils and at the worst I was not served a fresh dinner but was compelled to finish the left over first).

I took out a coin from the cash box; that 10 paisa coin made of aluminum, in shape of a flower; I swung it in air and left it to fall on the ground. All that time when the coin was in the air I didn't open my eyes and just prayed god for a tail. Thank God it was a tail, and the fate of the food was decided. The rice has to go on the wooden ceiling, the dal in the drain and the chokha to some cow. I could have given everything to the cows but I was scared, if by chance anyone sees me

throwing food they will complain my grandpa and then my life will be miserable for that evening. Utmost precaution was taken to throw that dal; first I poured some water into the water jug, then the dal and diluted it by stirring. Then opened the same frame of the door and came out of the shop with the jug in one hand and stood like, I don't know anything, I am innocent. I saw that nobody is noticing me and I just poured the dilute dal in the dirty drain flowing in front of our shop. I went inside, threw the rice on the wooden ceiling and wrapped the chokha in a paper, came out, locked the shop and headed to our residence.

I was on top of the world, very happy, full of joy that I successfully disposed the food and no one saw me. I was jumping, singing and what not. For me it was like winning a battle.