

# The Three Innocents & Ors.

## Chughtai on Childhood

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“Where is Wasim Sahib?” asked the man who had just come and parked his bicycle.

“Shshsh ... don’t say his name out so loud ... he’s hiding inside because of the income tax officer,” Teetu said. “You didn’t see someone dangerous coming down the street, did you?”

“No...” The man grinned. “So Wasim Sahib is inside. Young man, will you please call him?”

“Go, Teetu, get him.”

“Arre wah, why should I go?” Teetu was concentrating on the mangoes.

“Belu, yaar, why don’t you go.” Kakku insisted.

“Arre, Wasim Bhai ...” Not wishing to budge, Belu yelled, “Wasim Bh...aa...iii...!”

Wasim Bhai appeared, looking even more flustered than before. On seeing the new man on the bicycle, his legs began to wobble.

“Adaab arz, Wasim Sahib, is everything all right?” The man smiled.

Wasim Bhai glared at the three boys, but couldn’t say anything.

“Tell Sikandar Zamani I’m going to the income tax office,” he said tearfully.

“Arre, Wasim Bhai...” Their jaws dropped and they watched helplessly as the income tax officer, a look of amusement flitting across his face, took Wasim Bhai with him and left. “Yaar, this is just awful, poor Wasim Bhai is in trouble now,” Belu said.

“Will he be shot with a bullet?” Teetu asked in a frightened voice.

“Come on yaar, don’t be silly, of course he won’t be shot, but poor Wasim Bhai will have to go through a lot.”

Teetu looked sad. “Why?” he asked foolishly.

“Because he hasn’t paid his income tax.”

“Unnh! I really can’t understand what this income tax is.”

“You’re a complete fool if you don’t even know what income tax is,” Kakku laughed derisively.

“Look, how old you are and you still have no idea what income tax is.”

Although Belu didn’t know anything about income tax either, he was certain that Kakku was merely pretending to impress them. He was sure Kakku didn’t really know, but he didn’t want to pick a

fight with him right now. If Kakku was annoyed, for some reason everyone created a front against the person who had upset him. Only yesterday Belu had drawn a new picture.

“Ah ha, I say, what a dreadful picture. Even a goat can draw a picture like this with its paw,” Kakku would say, his thin, pinched ears flapping as he spoke. And Belu’s heart would burn to a cinder. He would wish then that he could scratch out the drawing and throw it away.

“Oh ho, as if you really know what it is,” Teetu said self-consciously.

“Why, do you think I’m stupid like you all?”

“You don’t know anything, Kakku Sahib, you’re just pretending,” Belu said angrily.

Why not?” Kakku roared. “Didn’t Wasim Bhai just tell us that tax is when a penalty is imposed? If one doesn’t pay the penalty a policeman will come and make him pay.”

“Was that a policeman who just took Wasim Bhai with him?”

“Who else? Do you think he was a turnip?” Kakku ridiculed.

“But why wasn’t he wearing a uniform?” Belu tried to pull his leg.

“Why should he wear a uniform? He was a member of the secret police,” Kakku declared.

On hearing the word ‘secret’ Teetu immediately envisioned bandits wearing masks and dashing about wielding swords in his mind’s eye. Secret and mysterious things are very dangerous.

“But why isn’t a penalty imposed on Bi Amma?” Belu was afraid of saying anything intelligent in Kakku’s presence for fear he might take it as an insult.

“Why, have you seen Amma’s muscles? If someone tangles with her he will lose immediately,” Teetu informed him. “My dear, our Amma is so strong that even a member of the secret police would be terrified of her.” He thought Ammas, Daadis and Naanis are perennially bad-tempered which is why they constantly scold servants, children, hens, ducks, the cleaning women, wind, and storms. There is always a rebuke ready to land on someone’s head. Naturally, anyone who is the slightest bit clever wouldn’t want to tangle with her.

“No, it’s all wrong, Kakku Sahib, you know nothing, you’re just acting as if you do.” Teetu lost his cool.

“Teetu Sahib, if you continue to talk so rudely I’ll box your ears, all right!” Kakku threatened when he saw his authority being challenged.

“Arre wah! Box my ears? I’ll tell Amma that you threw a stone at Mujeeb Bhai’s dog.”

“Liar! When did I do that?”

“Liar yourself!”

But before the three were embroiled in a scuffle again Sofie Aala wandered in. They immediately quietened down, looking extremely well behaved. Sofie Aala couldn’t stand to see anyone quarrelling. The minute the three boys began to jostle each other, even in fun, she would order them to leave her room. Upsetting Sofie Aala meant relinquishing all the chocolates and toffees she

handed out freely all the time. The three always shed their silliness in her presence, immediately changed their strategy, and put on the meekest expressions.

“Sofie Aala, do you also have to pay a penalty?”

“What kind of a penalty?” Sofie Aala looked confused.

“For income tax?”

“Income tax? Oh, my dears, income tax is not a penalty.”

“What? But Sofie Aala ...” Teetu stuttered.

“You fool, income tax is not a penalty,” Kakku laughed. “Sofie Aala, Teetu is such an idiot.”

“What? Why am I an idiot? You’re an idiot yourself. Just now you were saying it’s a penalty and a policeman comes and takes you away.” Teetu said, very annoyed.

“Arre wah! I didn’t say anything like that! Teetu is lying. Look, Sofie Aala, don’t mind if I knock him down.” Kakku immediately became the accuser. “You were telling us this just now, isn’t that so, Belu?” Teetu flared his nostrils.

Belu knew that Kakku would deny it all. It was not a good idea to give evidence against him. He began to yawn then asked suddenly, “So, Sofie Aala, why did Wasim Bhai get so nervous when he saw the income tax fellow?”

“Well, he ... something must have happened, maybe he didn’t have the money,” Sofie Aala skirted the issue.

“And what about the person from the secret police?” Teetu asked.

“Oh ho, which person from the secret police?” Sofie Aala said, irritated, and turned to leave. “You boys are talking nonsense.”

“Dear Sofie Aala,” the three boys clung to her.

“Look, I have to study.”

“Oh, you’re always studying.” The boys didn’t understand why anyone could be fond of studying. If any decent fellow studied because he was afraid of Amma, Aala, or Mujeeb Bhai, that was one thing. But whoever heard of studying all the time just because you liked to?

“Look here boys, just as you have to pay rent to live in a house, you have to pay rent to live in a country.”

“Arre wah! We’re not going to live in any country, why should we pay rent for no reason? We’ll go and live in Taj Akbar, we’ll live there always.”

“Oh no, you think you can live forever in Taj Akbar? You’ll be thrown out.” Kakku was such a killjoy.

“Why will we be thrown out? We’ll refuse to leave,” Teetu said confidently.

“Whether you stay in Taj Akbar, or Shaheen Villa, or any other house, you’ll still be living in a country, and you have to pay taxes on your income,” Sofie Aala explained.

All three turned pale. Why should they be forced to do anything?

“Does everyone have to pay tax?” Teetu asked in a tiny voice.

If the money they received at Eid was taxed, they would be left with nothing. As it was, Amma and Aala borrowed all their Eidi money and when they asked for it they were scolded, as if they were not simply asking for their principal but were demanding to be paid interest instead. True, this income tax was a very dangerous thing and that is why all the elders dreaded it so much.

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