RED PUPILS

DATE OF DEATH: 25TH SEPTEMBER

4 MONTHS BEFORE

“Don’t you get it? Why waste money on this when the same thing costs half as much? What do you expect it to do, turn water into wine?”

Shards of glass scattered through the air, landing near Mama’s toes. Cracked bamboo lay beside them. He’d thrown it too hard. The shock wrinkled Dada’s face; bamboo wasn’t supposed to break. And since when was there glass?

Mama stood frozen, ghost-like. She didn’t look at Dada, at me, or at her prized shattered eco-friendly bottle. The tiny tortoise squirmed in my arms, I slowly covered his little eyes.

"At least now we know it isn’t durable either,” laughed Dada weakly. Mama’s eyes were in a different world; she simply walked out of the room. The light from before was all gone.

As Dada gathered the glass, I went for a broom, gently placing the tortoise near the rabbit's cage. On my way back, a cold shiver ran down my tiny spine. He was watching me again. The rabbit was watching me again.

Red pupils narrowed, foot tapping, he was going to lunge at me. I handed Dada the broom, then rushed over, pulling the tortoise away. I didn’t want him to throw my tortoise; I didn't want to see his shell on the floor broken.

1 MONTH BEFORE

I touched the soft fabric in the box with my hand, and the tortoise poked it with curiosity. The house was celebrating. Dada had started a new branch in his clothing brand, Sustainable Clothing.

“Do you like your gift, Sonu?” asked Dada, slipping the sweater over my head. I nodded. Dada then revealed a mini sweater for my tortoise as well. The guests laughed as I excitedly pulled in onto his little body.

I saw Mama standing in the corner, her face drained of its warmth. “What?” asked Dada, kissing her cheek, “You like sustainable things, right?”

The rabbit just munched away.

3 MONTHS BEFORE

I saw him every day after school, sitting in the sun, drinking from a crushed plastic bottle. Mama said plastic was bad for you; he already looked sick.

The new bamboo bottle Dada had bought was in my hand. He needed it more than me anyway. I propped the bottle beside him before running off. He touched the bottle curiously.

The next week, when I went to school, there was a plastic bottle in his mouth. I didn't ask. He looked me straight in the eye and said three words - "Brought good money".

1 DAY BEFORE

A cold hand touching my neck woke me up. I looked around, it was dark. Mama gently rocked me awake. In her lap, Dada's sweater, the one I wore everywhere, lay crumpled.

She helped me remove the new sweater that I received from Dada last night. "They're not eco-friendly," she said as she folded them neatly. "Dada Lied."

"Why?"

"For money."

She pulled the sweater off my tortoise. I hadn't noticed he was having trouble breathing in it. As she left, I saw the rabbit. In his sweater, eating his lettuce, just slower. The suffocating sweater made no difference.

2 HOURS LATER

I shivered, unable to stop the tears that were rolling down my cheeks.

"It's the food. What product did you use?" asked the vet, covering the rabbit with a white cloth.

"Iceberg lettuce. It was cheaper than the hay packet," shrugged Dada.

"Must be the cause; it's bad for the long term."

The tortoise lay on the white cloth, and for a moment, I saw a big tear roll down his cheek, too.

Description

"Red Pupils," a short story/essay exploring the darker side of sustainability culture, including greenwashing and how sustainability can be driven by profit rather than genuine concern. Received an Honourable Mention in the TSL 2026 International Student Competition.