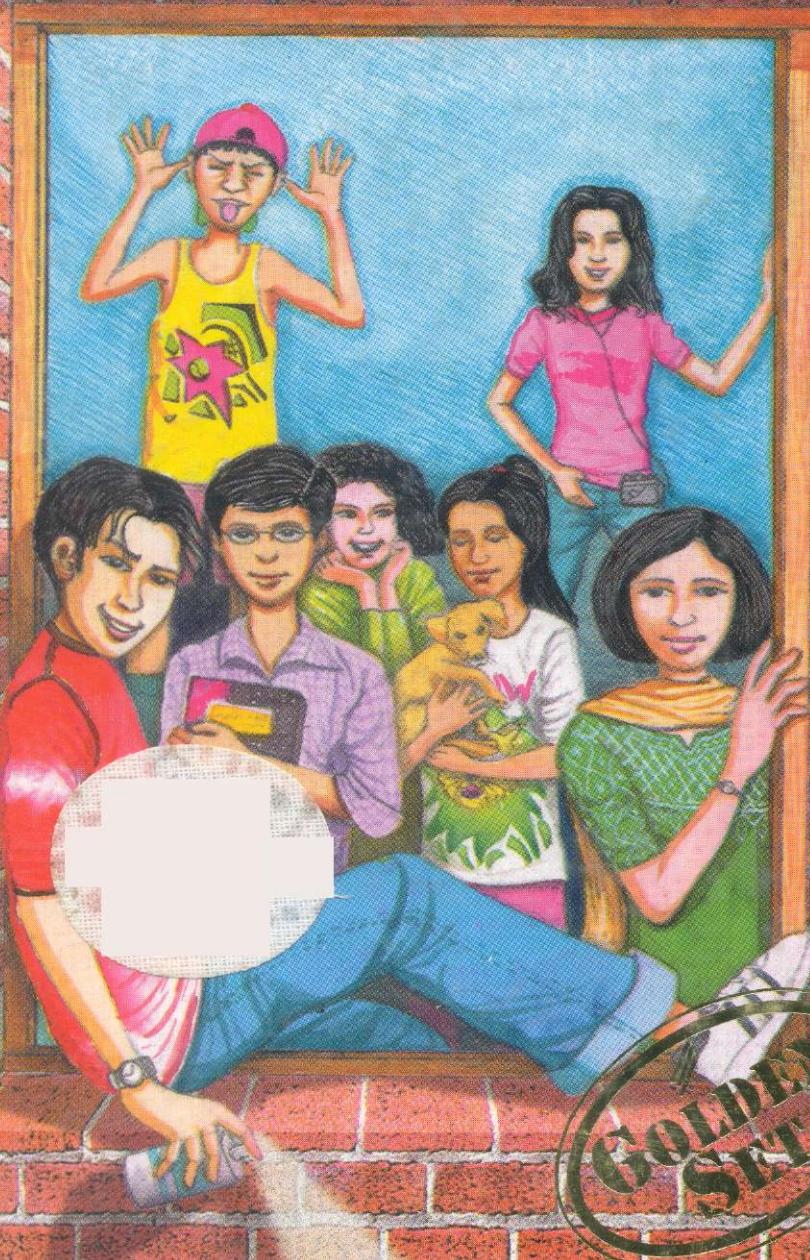


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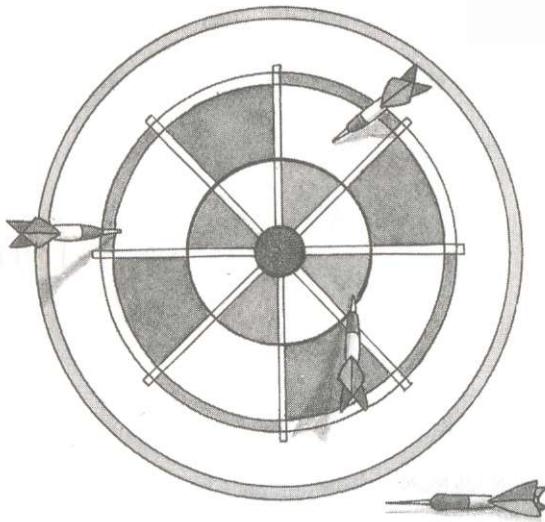
# 30 TEENAGE STORIES





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Illustrated by Ankur Mitra



Children's Book Trust, New Delhi

The stories in this collection are prizewinning entries in the category Teenage Stories in the Competition for Writers of Children's Books organized by Children's Book Trust.

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## **Growing Up Pains**

*R.K. Murthi*

'Life is hard/ I tell myself, as I stand before the mirror and watch acne, that dreaded scum of a disease, playing havoc with my face. I wish I could drive the pimples out with a wave of the hand. Then I tell myself that acne is a temporary ravage that makes life a little less comfortable for a teenager. But it is a sure sign of a child moulting into an adult.

'Life is tough/ I turn away from the mirror, when it strikes me like a bolt of lightning. My voice has turned rough, almost raucous. It grates, if I may add. Where has my sweet, soft voice gone? Have I caught a cold? Such gruffness goes hand in hand with a cold. But, the common cold and I have nothing to do with each other, at least at this moment. 'Is there an uncommon cold?' a light banter lifts my spirits.

A common cold is common to all mankind. But every time I catch a cold, it becomes an uncommon one for *Appa* and *Amma*. They think I have come

down with a dangerous cold, one that could kill! They force me into bed, send for the doctor who pumps all sorts of medicines into my system. They pray to all the gods and goddesses—according to our religious texts we have thirty-three crores of them—to cure me quickly and set apart money for donating to the gods, once I am back on my feet. That is what I do in a day or two, none the worse for the temporary cold.

When I tease them for being over-protective, they grunt, "How would you know? You are too young to understand our fears. Our only child, the apple of our eye."

As if they understand my fears!

I too have my fear. It was not there till the other day. But, suddenly, out of nowhere, it has appeared. It fills all my waking thoughts and haunts my dreams too. I try to dispel the fear, tell myself, 'Only cowards fear. I am no coward.' But this bravado doesn't last long.

The more I think of it, the stronger becomes the hold of this fear. I am no longer my usual self. I have become a stranger to myself.

Till the other day, I used to feel happy when *Amma* walked in unannounced, surveyed the room, gently chided me, "Is this a room or a pigsty?" and quickly got down to the task of cleaning the room. She would work at it with total dedication. The books would go back into the bookcase or side rack; the caps and pens, pulled

apart by me, would get reunited; bits and pieces of crayons that dot the floor would go into the bin; the dust would be swept off the table and the room would gain a fresh look.

How I hate her now when she does that!  
I have put up a warning on the door:

### **Knock Before You Enter**

Beneath the above instruction is a warning:

### **My Room! Love It Or Hate It!**

Amma sees the notice, but behaves as if it is Greek or Latin. She continues to step into my room, unmindful of my privacy.

How can I make her understand that I need privacy? If only she senses the gossamer-thin curtain that has come up between me and my parents! Is this what growing up is all about—a matter of individuality, a snapping of bonds?

Who wants to snap bonds with one's parents. Not I. The very thought makes me cry. Yet, I feel I am drawing away from them.

Or am I imagining! I think *Appa* is watchful and wary when he meets me. Of course, his eyes gleam with joy whenever I walk into his presence. But is it as spontaneous as it used to be? Or am I unable to feel its warmth because of the curtain that has come up between us. May be, because of the curtain, he sees me as someone different, a rather misty figure, imprecise, vague and elusive, developing a form that is difficult for him to gauge. May be he too is scared of this new figure.

Is that why, at times, he makes extra efforts to be overtly affectionate! I do not know. May be he tries to kill the fear in him by treating me with caution. He finds safety in treating me as a child. He runs his fingers through my thick, curly hair, holds my head close to his chest and pats me.

I would not say I hate him for doing that. But I am not able to enjoy it as I used to. Once, I would give the whole world for being held lovingly by *Appa*. Now I feel as if it is not what *Appa* should do to me. Is it not time, I tell myself, that he treats me as a grown-up. Especially when he has been reminding me to behave like one.

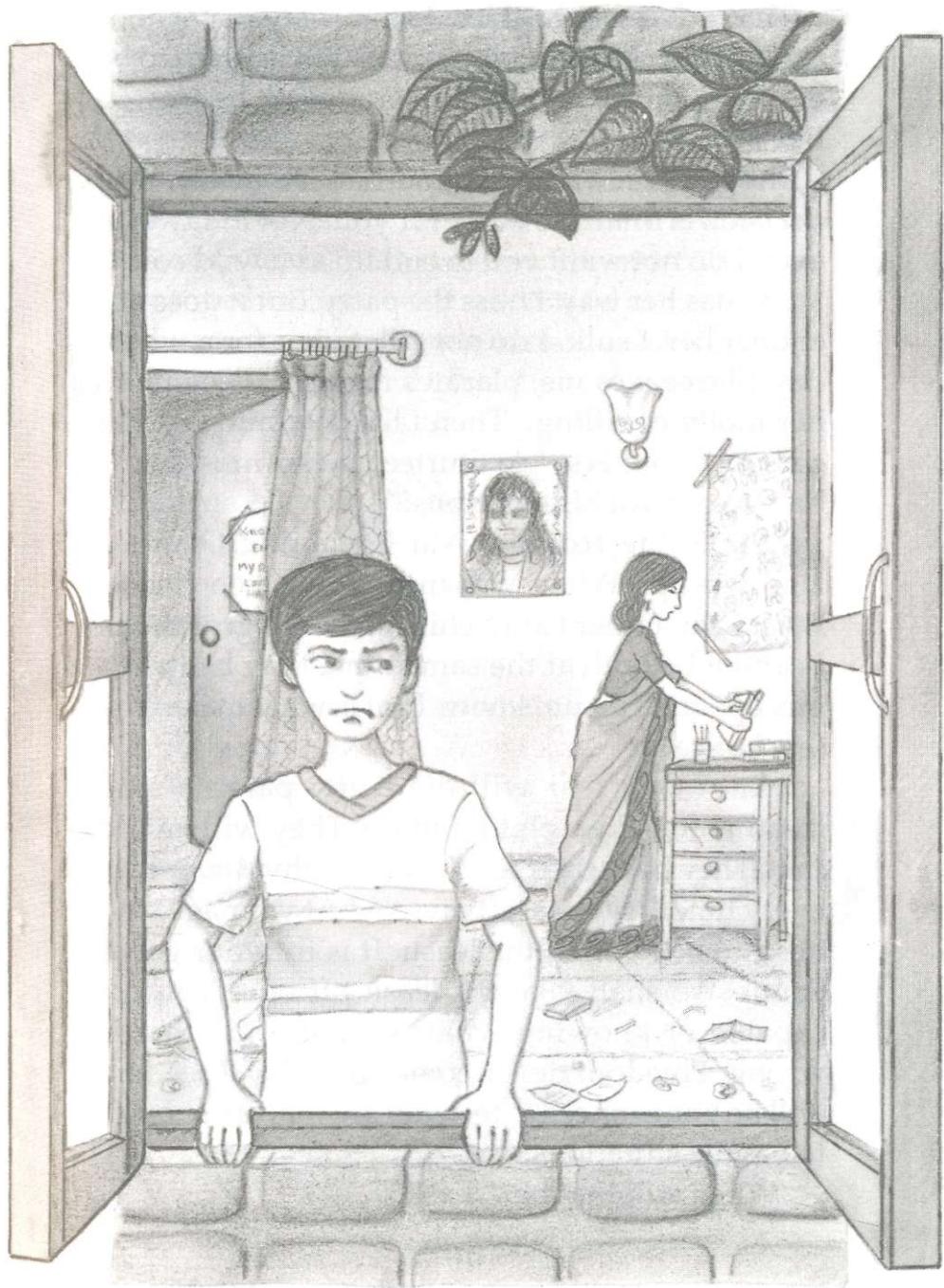
I fall and slip and scream with pain because of a sprain. *Amma* is all kindness. Not *Appa*. He growls, "You are fourteen, Samir. It is time you learnt how to bear pain with stoic courage. You are no longer a child."

I cannot forget those words.

Next evening, before *Appa* has returned from office, I walk up to *Amma*. She welcomes me with a big smile. But the smile turns into a frown when I ask her whether I could go for a party at Vishal's house. *Amma* says, "Must be back before nine."

"*Amma*, I am grown-up now. Can I not stay out till all my friends leave?" I ask.

"You think you are old enough to be on your own, Samir? Remember you are still a child even though you think otherwise. You are at an in-between age. A Teenager."



That raises my hackles. I stamp my feet, shout at her, "I am old enough, *Amma*. Old enough to be on my own. I will not allow myself to be treated like a kid!"

She gives me a stern look and asserts firmly, "My decision is final. No party for you. Not today. Not ever. I do not want you to end up as a wild colt."

She has her way. I miss the party. But it does not endear her. I sulk. I do not talk to her for a whole day. She coaxes me, placates me till I succumb to her molly-coddling. Then I hug her and cry. Pat comes her remark, "At fourteen, a boy must know how to control his emotions!"

That is the trouble. Am I a child? Or have I grown-up? When will my parents see clearly what I am. Either I am a child or, I am a grown-up. I cannot be both at the same time. May be I am a mix of both. I do not know. That is what makes my fear so scary.

I know my fear will die if my parents stop treating me like a child. But no. They will not do that. They have their fears. That is why *Amma* says every time I try to assert myself, "At your age, you need to be kept on the leash. It is for your good, Samir. We shall take the leash off once you are capable of knowing what is right and what is wrong. Freedom never comes in a day. Freedom will be yours once we feel you are mature enough to handle situations."

"When will that be?" I ask.

*Appa* walks in. *Amma* warms up to his presence with a gentle nod, then tells me, "Samir, everything takes time. A flower takes time to turn into a fruit. It takes a year for you to go from one class to the next" she grins.

*Appa* caresses my arm and says. "I know you have your fears. We have ours. We must fight our fears together. You must understand our concerns. There are so many temptations to which a youth is drawn. I do not want to list them. You know them now. Come to us, talk to us openly. Let us learn to be friends. Take every advice we offer as coming from true friends. We, in turn, promise to do all that we can to appreciate your viewpoint. Will you let me be your true friend?"

"Me too," *Amma* lifts my chin and smiles into my eyes.

I press her palm and grin happily, "We are three friends, bound by love. We will never do anything that hurts the others."

"That's it! Happy are we, now that we have, from fear, been set free." Papa gently ruffles my curly hair.



## **Right Stand**

*R.K. Murthi*

Shanti swung the satchel lightly and made the instrument box which contained the protractor, the divider and other assorted items that one needs to draw geometrical figures, sing to her. The notes it produced were the beats she needed to provide the orchestra for the gentle notes produced by the breeze that ran into a dancing cluster of bamboos.

"Hi! Shanti," she heard the shriek of brakes biting into the tyres. She turned quickly and noticed her cousin, Arumugham, tilting the bicycle and gaining stability by simultaneously taking his left foot off the pedal and planting it on the ground.

She acknowledged his call with a smile, her fair cheeks turning pink, her lithe figure feeling strangely electrified. Perhaps the heart had its reasons.

She wanted to say—Glad to meet you! So your course at the Military Academy is over! You are now an officer in the Army! Congratulations!—but the words died in her throat.

Not that she was short of words. In fact, in the 16 years that she had been on this planet, she had spoken more than most girls of her age. The children of the village looked upon her as a fantastic story teller. Her teachers relied on her to win laurels in elocution competitions. Hari Shastri, the village priest, hailed her every time she came to the temple and recited verses: "Vagdevi resides on your tongue," he would say.

Yet, she was speechless in the presence of Arumugham.

He was not a stranger to her. He was her maternal uncle's son. Four years older to her. They had grown up together. Played together. Fought together.

All that ended once she attained the age of maturity and the family dropped the hint that in a few years she would marry Arumugham.

She liked the idea. Arumugham was tall, well-built and had a native sense of humour. 'Not a bad catch,' she told herself, when she heard of the family's decision. But from that day, she became tongue-tied whenever she ran into Arumugham.

"Shall I call you *Mookambika*?" Arumugham teased her.

She took the rebuke in her stride. She could not gather enough words to respond.

"Well, my dumb doll, get it into your head. In a fortnight, you will have to speak to me. Ask me why?"

Shanti raised her eyebrows, signalling that he could give her the answer.

"Because, in a fortnight, we are to get married." Arumugham swung off the cycle, rested the cycle against the cluster of bamboos and started moving closer to her.

She could not believe her ears. Nobody had told her of the decision. She had heard the elders whispering behind her back, but every time she tried to find out, they told her, with that supercilious look, "You will know, girl. Soon. Not now."

So that was the secret. They were conspiring behind her back, deciding her life, without taking her into confidence.

"That cheers you, doesn't it, Shanti?" Arumugham gently picked up her hand.

"No." She finally found her voice.

He dropped her hand, instantly. "I thought, fool that I was, that you loved me too." He was rattled.

"Who says I will not marry you?" Shanti now found her voice.

"Ah, my sweet little girl. You gave me a fright. You always manage to do that. Wait till I get my chance." He came closer and stood before her.

"That remains to be seen. You will not get one for another four years," Shanti bit her lip.

"Why?"

"Because I want to complete my studies. Because NI want to be capable of earning a living. Because

you will be away, posted at non-family stations, and I will have to manage on my own. I can give you a hundred reasons to justify why I shall not marry now. If you are in a hurry to get married, forget me. Find another girl." Shanti was eloquent.

"But our elders think we are both old enough to marry," Arumughan tried to bring her round.

"Go and tell them what I told you. Will you? Otherwise I will fight my own battle. If that happens, you will not have a face to show," she warned.

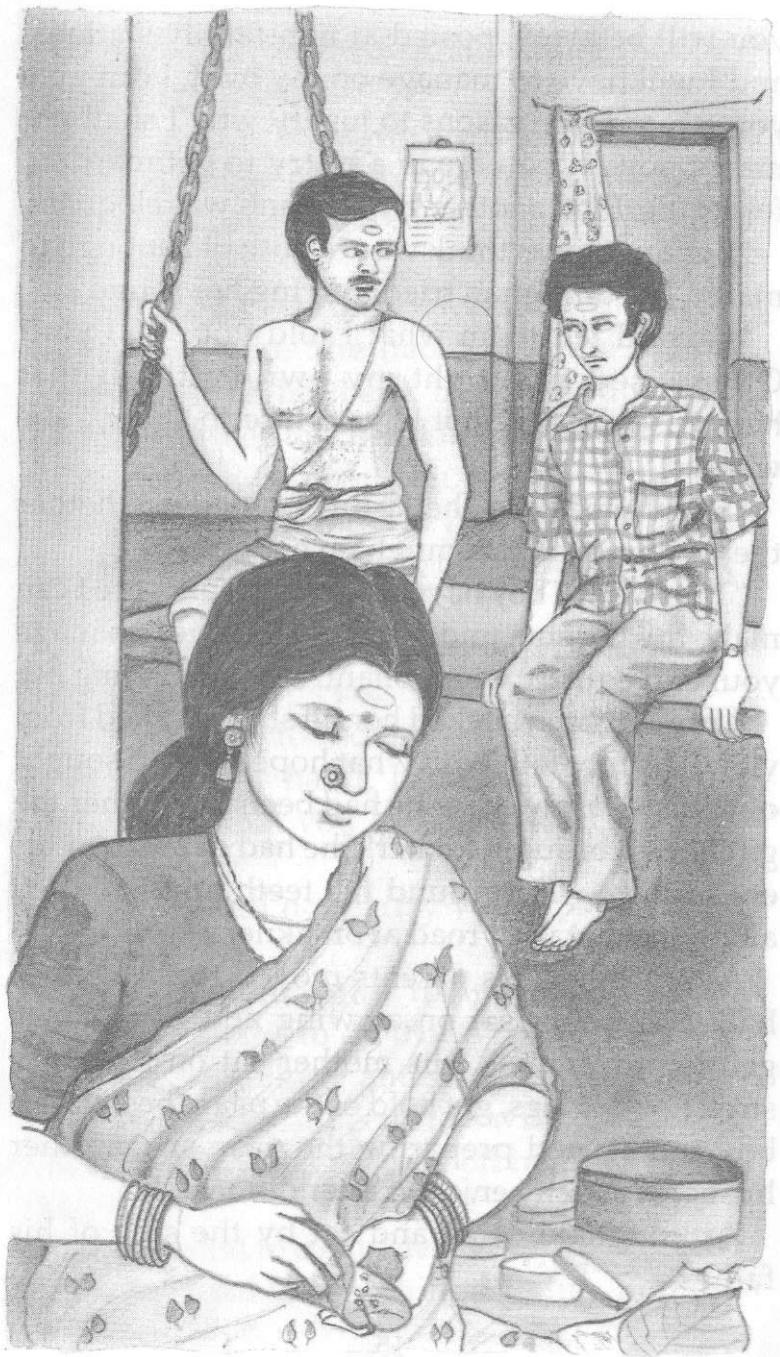
"I shall speak to them. But I wonder whether they will agree," Arumugham hedged.

"They will. They have no option. I am sure I can make my parents understand. Hope you manage your end equally well," Shanti started moving off.

Arumugham watched her till she vanished from view. His face fell. With what hopes he had sought out Shanti! How eager he had been to give her the gift he had brought for her! She had damped his enthusiasm. He ground his teeth and pedalled along the metalled road at breakneck speed.

After dinner, his parents moved to the central hall. His father sat on a swing and enjoyed its gentle movements. His mother sat on the floor, stretched her legs, got hold of the paan (beetel leaf) box and started preparing the paan she and her husband usually enjoyed after dinner.

Arumugham came and sat by the side of his father.



"Ah, Aaru, did you meet Shanti? Poor girl, she doesn't know that her days of freedom are over, that you have come to tie the mangalsutra on her neck and take her away with you. We let her have all the fun till you came on leave." The old man had a big smile on his face.

"You should have taken her into confidence," Arumugham mumbled.

"We, the elders, decide what is good for you. You are children. What do you know?" his father was stern.

"But, *Appa*, Shanti doesn't want to marry now," Arumugham sighed.

"She thinks she is too young for marriage?" his mother stopped rolling the paan leaf and gaped at him.

"*Anuria* she says she wants to complete her studies," he replied.

"I will talk to her, and to my sister," his father bristled.

That was when they heard the rustle of feet. All eyes turned to the sound. Moving across the door were Shanti and her mother.

"Come, *Thankachi*. How are you, Shanti?" Arumugham's father welcomed them, warmly.

Shanti bent and touched the old man's feet, before turning to her aunt to do the same.

"*Anna*, has Arumugham told you?" Shanti's mother sat on the swing by her brother's side.

"Yes. That is the stupidest thing I have heard.

Remember, *Thankachi*, you were hardly twelve when you got married. Are you not happy with Mani? Such a nice man. Who chose him for you? Our parents. I think choosing the bride or the bridegroom is our right. Further, Shanti and Arumugham are cousins. And they are made for each other, *muraipenn* and *muraipillai*," Arumugham's father laid down his case.

"*Mama!*" Shanti was happy that Arumugham had already talked to his parents about her view.

"Yes, my dear," the old man gave her the nod.

"I never question your rights or your decision..." she paused.

"Do you not like Arumugham?" his mother interruppted.

Shanti's face turned red. She bent her head, stared at the floor for a few seconds before regaining her courage. "*Mami*, you know the answer," she hedged.

"Good," *Mami* purred.

"I talked to your son. We agreed we would wait for four years before we marry," Shanti said.

"Is that so?" the old man shot the question at Arumugham.

"Yes, *Appa*. I met her this evening when she was returning from school. I told her of your decision. She was shocked. She said she wants to complete her studies, become a graduate at least," Arumugham pleaded her case.

"Why does she need all that education? It is

enough she knows how to keep a happy home, cook well, look after the children when they arrive..." Arumugham's mother scowled.

"*Amma*. Days have changed. *Appa* was always with you. I will be posted at non-family stations often. Shanti will have to be on her own. She is right, *Amma*, let her complete her graduation. Then we will marry. Till then..."

"Till then?"

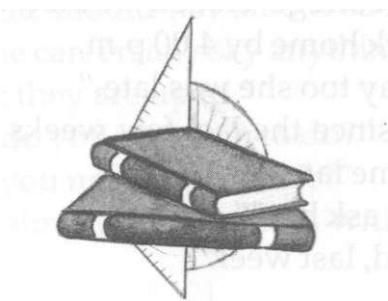
"Till then we remain engaged," Arumugham said firmly.

Next day, when he ran into Shanti near the cluster of bamboos she was bubbling with joy. "I am proud of you. You stood by me, fought for my right. You brought your parents round," her eyes held a rare glow.

"Tamed them, girl! Four years hence, it will be your turn," he joked.

"Who tames whom? The future will tell," Shanti smiled.

"The future is not ours to see," Armugham gently took her hand and placed in it the eardrops that he had brought for her.



## **Chasing A Dream**

*Ramendra Kumar*

"Has Priya not come home as yet?" Surya asked, depositing his bag in the cramped drawing-cum-dining-room of his tiny two bedroom flat. He had just returned from work. He was a cashier in the State Bank of Hyderabad, while his wife, Sharada, a lab assistant in Reddy College for Women. Their daughter, Priya, was a Class X student in Saint Anne's School. They lived in Vidyanagar, while Priya's school was in Tarnaka around six kilometres away. There was a direct bus from Priya's school to Vidyanagar.

"She should have been here by 4.30. It is 5.30 now and she still has not come," Sharada replied. Sharada's college closed at 3.00 and she was usually back home by 4.00 p.m.

"Yesterday too she was late."

"In fact, since the last few weeks she has been coming home late." /

"Did you ask her?"

"Yes, I did, last week."

"What did she say?"

"She mumbled something about spending time with her best friend, then she kept quiet. You know she is not very forthcoming. If I ask her too many questions she just clams up or bursts into tears. Sometimes when I talk to her I get the impression I am conversing with a stranger, not my own daughter."

"I know she is a difficult child. But should we at least not know what she is up to? I...I hope it has nothing to do with some boy... You know at this age..."

"No, I do not think our Priya would get involved in that sort of thing."

Priya was to appear for the Class X examination in April the next year. This was the month of July and her studies had started in real earnest. Morning six to eight she went for Maths and Physics tuition, and in the evening seven to eight for Chemistry.

The next day, Surya happened to discuss Priya's strange behaviour with his colleague, Durga, who too had a teenaged daughter. Durga was a despatch assistant in the same bank.

"Surya, you should not take it so lightly. With teenagers one can't really say anything. One never knows what they are up to."

"So what do you want me to do?"

"Why do you not confront her?"

"She will simply clam up and withdraw into a

shell. I am worried what her reaction will be if she knows that we are even remotely suspicious of her activities. With so many youngsters running away from home at the smallest pretext and news of teenaged suicides appearing in the newspapers almost everyday, frankly, I am scared. You know, with both of us working, Priya is left alone in the house quite a bit. What goes on in her mind only she knows. I would not like to probe too deeply and upset her. All we know she may just be going to her friend's house for some combined study."

"I have an idea. My brother, Ajay, works in a Detective Agency. I will tell him. I am sure he will agree to follow her. Since Priya does not know him, she will not get suspicious. Moreover, it will all be done in strict confidence."

Surya kept silent for a while, finally he spoke.  
"I think it is a good idea. How do we get started?"

"I will talk to my brother and let you know."

Two days later, on Monday, 'Operation Shadow' had begun. Surya took Ajay to Saint Anne's and showed Priya to him from a distance. Ajay promised he would have the required information in a day or two.

On Wednesday, Surya got a call in the office.

"Hello! Surya? This is Ajay?"

"Yes, Ajay. Any news?"

"Plenty. Can you come to Arts College at 4.30 in the evening?"

"Why?"

"I will explain when we meet."

Sharp at 4.30, Surya parked his scooter in front of the Arts College Building. It was an imposing stone structure which formed the nucleus of the sprawling Osmania University Campus. Ajay was waiting for him.

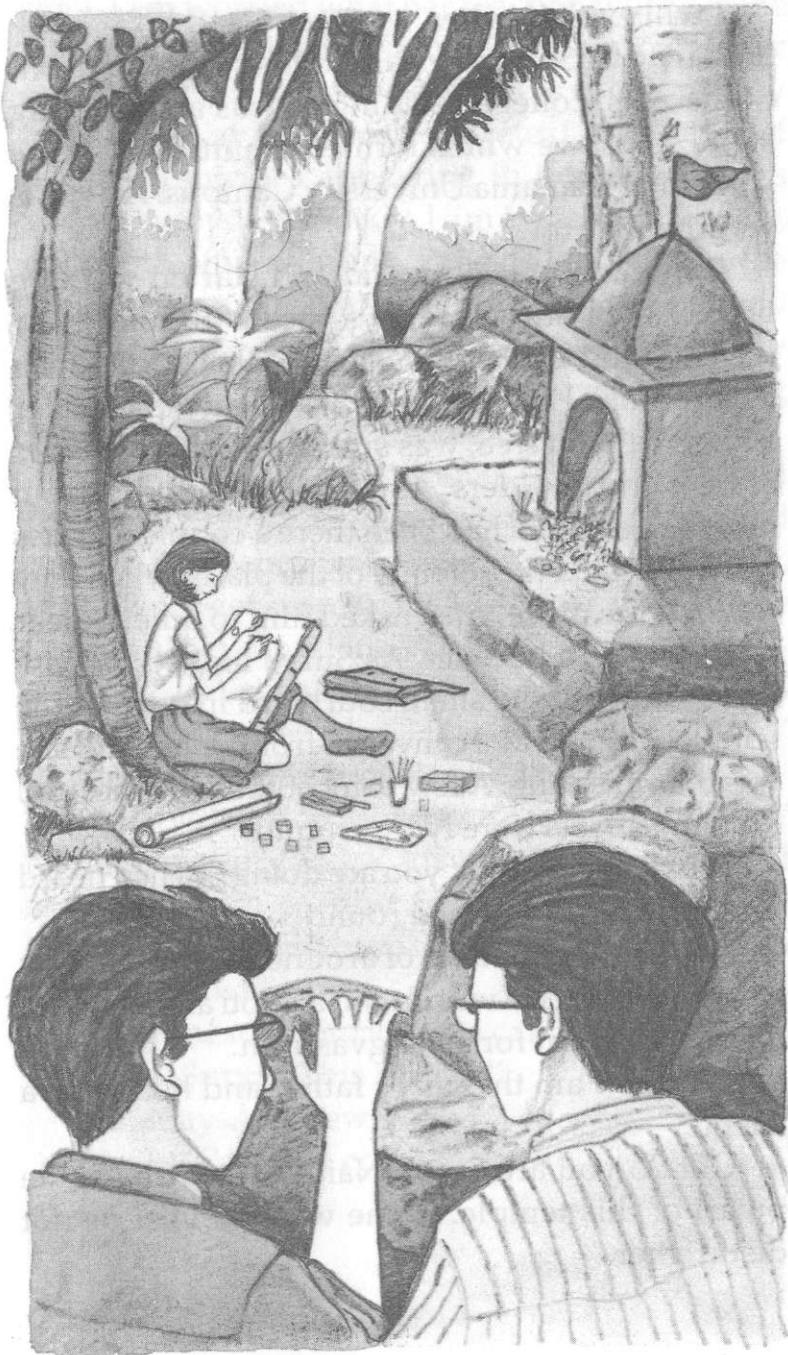
"Come with me," he said and started walking briskly with Surya keeping pace with him. They went behind the building and took a path which led to a small Hanuman Temple. The temple, under a huge banyan tree, was surrounded by a cluster of trees and boulders. As such it was hidden from the college. Surya had been there a couple of times and quite liked the serenity of the place. When they reached the place, Ajay asked him to quietly peer from behind a boulder. As Surya looked, he saw Priya sitting in the small courtyard in front of the temple. There was a canvas in front of her and she was busy painting. A few paint bottles, brushes and drawing sheets were lying around.

"What do you think you are doing?" They heard a male voice and turned round.

A tall, well-built man of around sixty years was standing there. He was clad in a dhoti and his chest was bare except for an angvastram.

"We...I...I am that girl's father and he...he is a friend."

"Oh! So you are Surya Naidu. I am Chari, the pujari of this temple. Come with me. Let us not disturb her."



He took them down a narrow path that led to a small house behind the temple.

"This is my humble abode. I am sorry I cannot offer you chairs," the pujari said, spreading a mat in the tiny verandah.

"You must be surprised to find Priya here."

"Yes... I.. .had no idea that she was coming here. Only when my friend, Ajay, followed her..."

"So you had to take the help of a detective to know what is in your daughter's mind," the pujari said with a chuckle.

Stung by the remark, Surya started to say something when Chari held up his hand.

"Surya, I know it is very difficult for parents to understand the minds of their kids, especially teenagers. Let me tell you how I came to know Priya. She had come once with a friend of hers. She was fascinated with the peace and calm here.

"Is it always so serene here," *Thaatha?*" she had asked me.

"Yes, my child," I replied to her. "There is always peace and calm in the Lord's abode."

"*Thaatha*, can I come here every day?"

"Why not, my child. But don't you think you are too young to spend your evenings praying in the temple?"

"*Thaatha*, I do not want to come here to pray. I want to come here to paint."

"To paint?" I asked in surprise. "But you can do that at home."

"No, *Thaatha*. My parents will not allow me."

"Why?"

"They consider painting a waste of time. They want me to study Physics, Chemistry, Maths, Biology, and become an engineer or a doctor. They believe painting cannot guarantee a person his bread and butter but engineering or medicine can."

"Child, don't you think they are right?"

"But I do not want to become an engineer or a doctor. I want to become a painter. I do not mind struggling, even starving to realize my dream. Is it really that wrong to chase one's dream?"

"No, child, no," I replied. I was really struck by the child's determination.

"That was almost two months ago. Since then she has been coming here almost every day and painting for an hour or so. Since she cannot carry the canvas home, she has been keeping them in my house. Come inside and take a look."

They went into the one-room house. In one corner were several canvases. As the pujari spread them out one by one, Surya was stuck by the beauty, the raw energy, of his daughter's art.

"Beautiful," he heard Ajay mumbling.

"Surya, I know Ramji Jain, the owner of an art gallery. Can I take these paintings to him? I think Priya is really talented. I am hopeful Ramji might give Priya some guidance," Ajay said.

Surya did not hesitate. "Of course. But let us check With Priya first."

The next three months were hectic for both Priya and Surya. Ramji Jain was impressed with Priya's talent. He agreed to sponsor a solo exhibition of Priya's paintings and explained to Surya the groundwork that needed to be done to make the exhibition a success. While Priya got busy creating magic on her canvas, Surya ran around helping with the arrangements. Finally, on October 25, the exhibition was inaugurated. Priya was hailed as the youngest and the brightest star on the art firmament of the city.

The painting which drew the greatest appreciation was a simple one. It showed a tall and well-built pujari praying to Lord Hanuman with a fifteen-year-old girl sitting beside him. The painting was titled 'My Inspiration.'



## Crossing The Torrent

*R.P. Subramanian*

Wisps of vapour rose from the meadows in the warmth of the morning sun. We picked our way along the pebble-strewn banks of the stream. There were six of us. Big and burly, Peacemaker led the way. Behind him, in a noisy group, were Bala, Milan, Biman and Leonard with his guitar. I brought up the rear of the expedition. I was the youngest member, and it somehow seemed the right place to be in.

The others proclaimed their maturity by their knowledge of lyrics, swear words and ribald stories; by the depth of their voices, height of their boots and narrowness of their drain-pipe trousers. I wore a pair of hand-me-down shorts and my wornout shoes were cracked in places. I laughed as loudly as any of them when a joke was cracked even if I did not understand it; and like them I brandished a stout stick to brush aside thorny bushes and swipe at passing dragonflies.

And so we made our way along the streams

pausing now and then to skip over stones spread across the water or to examine interesting-looking pieces of driftwood and strangely-coloured pebbles.

The sky was an incredible cornflower blue, dark green pine-forested slopes surrounded us; the valley was filled with the chirping of birds and the gurgling of waters, with the scents of moist earth and damp leaves, wildflower and pine resin.

Occasionally we would come upon a little pool dammed off from the mainstream by a chance rockfall or a gathering of dead branches; and then we would cluster around and peer into it and see, within its clear green depths tadpoles and water-spiders and minnows and strange translucent worm-like creatures that seemed to glow with a light of their own. At one such pool Peacemaker dislodged a stone and a foot long black snake emerged from beneath and swiftly wriggled its way to safety under a larger rock. I wanted to find it and kill it, but the others laughed and would not let me.

The valley grew narrower as we trudged along, and after a while we became aware of another sound over the pleasant murmur of the stream. It was the hissing roar of a waterfall. Presently, we rounded a huge rock face and there it was! Forked ribbons of foaming water leapt a good ten feet onto a table of black rock and swept across its surface and down a series of rocky steps to the stream-bed

beneath. Ferns, brush and weed clung to the banks; above their dripping foliage were dense thickets and still above lay the sombre preserves of the wattle and pine.

We settled ourselves on a large boulder above the cascade. Footwear came off, sweaters were spread out, the guitar carefully removed from its case and tuned. The others dangled their feet in the gushing water. I wanted to do the same but found that my legs were too short! After a few tentative attempts (during which I felt myself slip down the rounded boulder), I hurriedly withdrew from the edge and instead unpacked the contents of my satchel—a bottle of water, four dog-eared comics, a rusty penknife, several pears, and a tiffin box containing six thick, butter-jam sandwiches.

The others, too, spread out their belongings—playing cards, a battered chess board, books, boiled eggs, soggy *samosas*, an assortment of biscuits and chips, buns and sandwiches, a flask of orange juice another of warm tea, and a huge, slightly dusty slab of cheese.

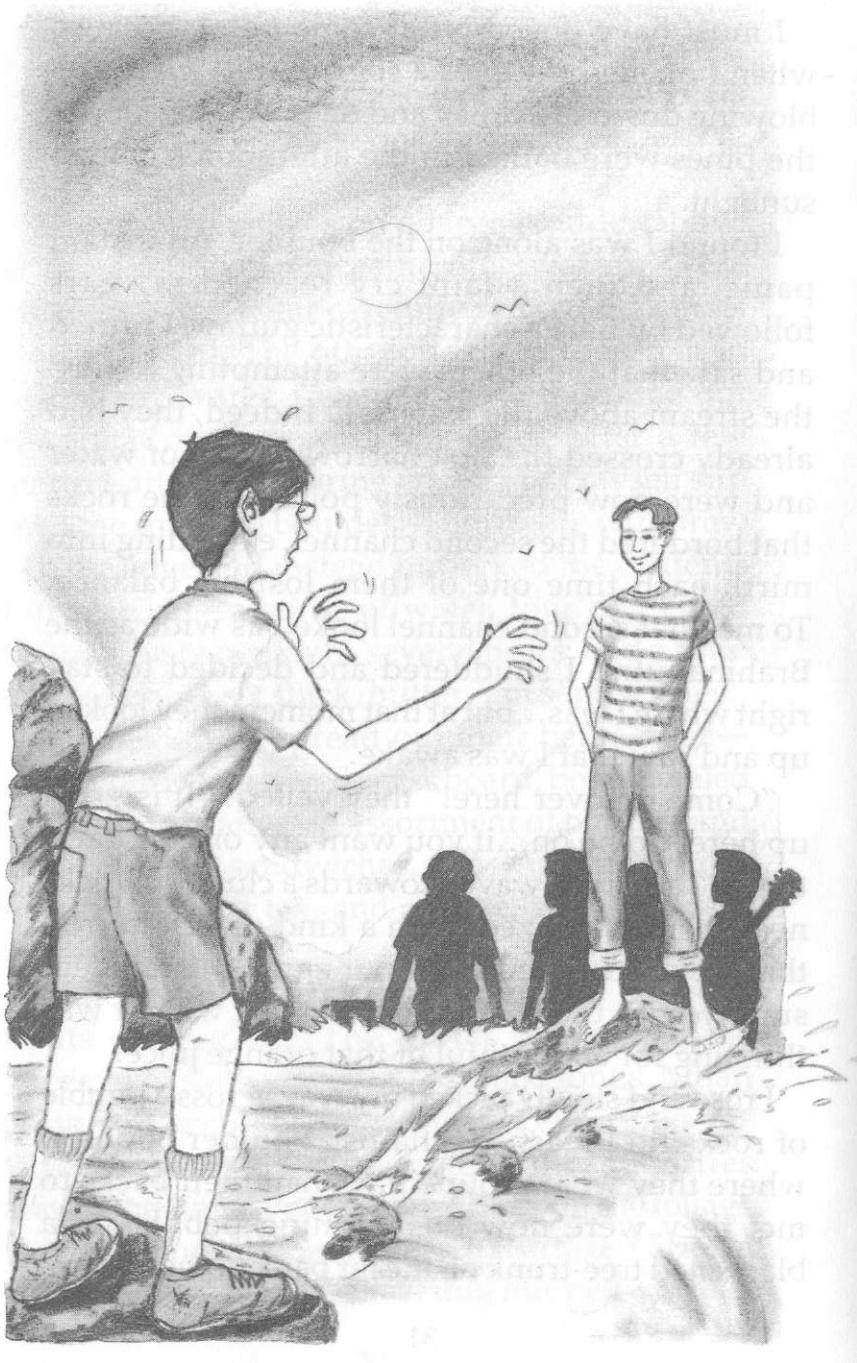
We ate and drank, the dale resounded with our shouts of laughter. The guitar passed hands; Peacemaker sang wistful Khasi folk-songs, Milan set up soft accompaniment on an empty water-bottle. The waterfall roared, the bluebottles droned; the sun suddenly broke through the foliage high above and the waters splintered into a thousand fiery mirrors, dazzling our eyes.

I must have dozed off at some point, because when I opened my eyes a slight chilly wind was blowing down the valley and on the higher slopes the pines were bathed in the afternoon's golden sunlight.

I found I was alone on the boulder. An instant panic, and then a faint cry reached my ears followed by Bala's characteristic guffaw. I turned and saw that the others were attempting to ford the stream above the waterfall. Indeed, they had already crossed the first narrow ribbon of water and were now precariously poised on the rocks that bordered the second channel, exploding into mirth each time one of them lost his balance. To me, that second channel looked as wide as the Brahmaputra! I shuddered and decided to stay right where I was.. .but at that moment they looked up and saw that I was awake.

"Come on over here!" they yelled. "It is great up here. Come on.. .if you want any orange juice, that is!" and they waved towards a cluster of rocks near them. I realized, with a kind of sick horror, that they had carted along our entire refreshment supply with them. And that too just when I was thirsting for a mouthful of that orange juice!

I rose and slowly picked my way across a jumble of rocks till I reached a flattish boulder opposite where they were grouped. All had their backs to me; they were now busy aiming pebbles at a blackened tree-trunk on the far bank of the stream.



I glanced down. Frothing water streaked past the boulder, inches from my feet. Gingerly I extended a toe but withdrew it hurriedly, amazed at how cold the waters were. Again I gazed across the belt of water, at the brightly coloured satchels that contained not just the orange juice but also several delicious plums and at least two bars of chocolate—unless of course my villainous colleagues had already devoured them! This ghastly prospect, more than anything else, galvanized me into action. I crouched, tensed myself to leap... and then, for some reason, looked towards the left.

Barely thirty feet downstream was the waterfall, a blurry line above which hung a cloud of white spray. Even as I looked, the roar of its waters grew, till it swamped my senses. All of a sudden I became intensely aware of its power, of how swiftly the waters surged past my feet. My knees began to tremble; I drew back a couple of paces, eyes on the water. A twig raced past, spinning madly on the waters. I could almost feel the mighty forces that flung it against the rocks, sent it crashing and tumbling along the torrent before hurling it over that terrifying cataract...

"Come along, then..." said a gentle voice.

As in a dream, I looked up. Biman stood on the other side, barely four feet away. He must have seen me wavering on the edge of the boulder and sensed my terror at jumping across this little creek!

Cheeks burning despite the chilly breeze, I made a great show of wiping my spectacles clean while I desperately looked for an excuse to avoid crossing the water. When I donned my glasses again, Biman was still there.

"I do not want any orange juice!" I snapped. My voice was shrill and shook just a little bit. Biman nodded thoughtfully.

"Fine!" He spoke pleasantly and stood waiting. Furious with him, furious with myself and my weakness, I clenched my fists/took a deep breath and prepared to launch myself across the channel... Once again the mad fear overcame me and I froze in mid-step. It was terrible. Frantically, I looked towards where the others sat. To my relief they still had their backs turned; only Biman stood opposite me, looking straight into my eyes, infinite patience in his face.

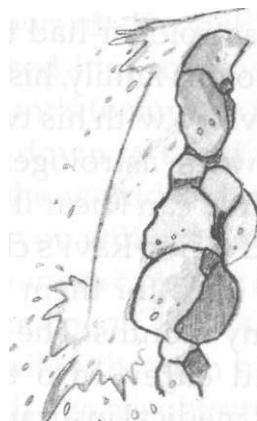
I prayed that he would sympathize with my fear, murmur encouraging words, stretch out a helping hand... do anything that would give me an excuse to feel insulted, turn away in mock anger and retreat to safety. But no, he just waited there quietly, limbs relaxed, eyes calm and untroubled.

An eternity passed.

All of a sudden, the chirruping of the crickets seemed to fade, the roar of the waterfall softened and died. I took a step forward and jumped lightly across the channel. My heel slipped on a mossy stone; I felt Biman's hard forearm against my back,

steadyng me.. .but only for an instant. I looked up, he was much taller than me, indeed the tallest among us all. He gave me a nod and a kind of half-smile, then turned and ambled across to join the others. After a moment I followed.

The rest of that hike is now a haze of fragmented memories. I do recall that on the way back I walked alongside the others. Though I still did not understand most of the jokes they cracked, somehow it did not matter very much anymore.



## A Matter Of Choice

*Cheryl Rao*

"You are going to lose a loved one/' the astrologer said, "and together you will have to make a difficult choice. The path you decide to tread on will bring you pain..."

Ravi jumped up and refused to listen anymore. Much of what the astrologer had told him so far was true—The size of his family, his father's name, his mother's, his rivalry with his twin, Girish.

Papa was ill. Now the astrologer had said that Papa would die. 'How can I bear it? What will we do?' Tears streamed down Ravi's cheeks.

Life was already hard for them with Papa laid off work for so many months. The medicines and the treatment had eaten into their savings. Although Papa had medical insurance, he couldn't afford not to get his monthly salary. Ma had started taking in orders for meals and this had become a regular tiffin service. She was always busy and tired and the smoke from the kitchen seemed to make Papa cough even more.

Ravi delivered the tiffins each afternoon during

his lunch break, cycling furiously to get back to school on time. He had thought it would be better to give up studies for a year so that he could save on his school fees and at the same time, by helping his mother, contribute to the family's income until his father was well enough to get back to work. 'But Papa is not going to get well. He is going to die. If I leave school this year, before completing the tenth, I will never be able to go back. That is probably what the astrologer meant.'

Ravi could not bear the thought of going home now. How would he control himself when he saw his father's thin cheeks and heard that hacking cough and knew that he was going to die?

He turned towards Deepak's house. It was he who had advised him to consult the astrologer. "He read my aunt's fortune so accurately, then my sister's—right down to the time of her marriage and the man she would marry. He will tell you whether or not you will pass. You can decide then, whether you want to carry on in school..."

Studying was one of Ravi's biggest problems. While Girish sailed through his exams, Ravi had to struggle with every subject. And it was not as though he was good in anything else, in Sports for example. There too, Girish was ahead of him. Girish was a House Prefect and one of the brightest stars of the school. He was a debater. He was in the school quiz team... What was there that Girish could not do?

Ravi had lived in his shadow for so long that he had begun to believe, like Ma and Pa, that Girish should not be given mundane jobs to do. "Girish is meant to do great things," everyone said. Girish had to play for the school cricket team. He had to practice in theylunch break... What about Ravi? What was he meant to do? What could he do? He never got a break from his job. He delivered tiffins, ran errands and made a bit of money by helping Ganga *halzuai* at festival time. When Papa was well it was okay, but now, with money so tight, did he have the right to spend a portion on his own fees?

Deepak tried to console him when he heard what Ravi had to report. But nothing helped. "I wish I had not gone to the astrologer..." Ravi sighed.

"But you wanted to know your future, whether you should carry on with school or not."

"All I know now is that my choice will be wrong. 'Painful' to be precise. That is no help, is it?"

"What do you want to do then?" asked Deepak.

"I want to carry on with school and manage somehow to work as well; spend as much time as I can with Papa..."

"That's three choices. You cannot have them all."

The words kept ringing in Ravi's ear over the next few months. Papa's younger sister who was married to the administrator of a Bombay hospital, arranged for Papa to be treated at a sanitorium. She also lent Papa the money for the treatment.

As Ravi waved goodbye to his father, he could not

stop his tears from flowing down his cheeks. He knew he would not see him again. Ma and Girish were also crying, but they had hope on their faces. They did not know what Ravi knew. They expected Papa to return in six months, hale and hearty again.

Ravi hated himself each time he saw Ma wiping the sweat off her forehead as she handed him the tiffins. He knew he was earning for her because she charged her customers extra for delivery, but he also knew that more than what he earned for her, his mother was spending on his monthly fees. He decided to drop out of his tuition classes and work at Kohli Caterers every evening.

"I will take all the notes and exercises from Girish," he said to his mother. "The tuitions have not helped me get to the top of my class all these years. I will be satisfied, Ma, if I pass."

Ma could not say anything. Ravi was right about the tuitions. They needed all the money that could be saved and whatever he earned at Kohli's. But she was worried that he would not pass. Being left behind by his clever twin brother would lower his morale terribly.

While Girish concentrated on his school work and went for sports practice, barely aware of what was going on around the home, Ravi dashed in and out, buying vegetables for his mother in the mornings, delivering tiffins in the afternoons and working in the evenings. How could he have the energy to study at night? He already looked thin

compared to the well-built, confident Girish.

When Ravi fell asleep over the Maths test the tutor had set for the day, Girish finally noticed that his brother was not concentrating on his studies. "You will never get through at this rate," he told Ravi bluntly. "You need to put in a lot more effort."

Ravi only shrugged. What could he tell Girish?

There was only a week left for the exam when the telegram arrived. Papa had had a relapse! "This is it!" thought Ravi. "I am coming with you, Ma," he said, as she packed her clothes and prepared to leave for the sanitorium. "I am the older twin and my place is beside Papa now."

"Your place is in the examination hall," replied Ma. "You will not help Papa recover by missing your exams."

"But.. .he will not recover..." the last few words Ravi uttered almost silently. Why did she not understand that? Short of telling his mother what the astrologer had said and making her lose hope as well, he had no argument to convince her to take him along. So he stayed back.

Instead of discontinuing the tiffin service as Ma had wanted him to, he carried on with the aid of a friendly cook from Kohli Caterers. Girish also pitched in to help. They prepared a simple meal early in the morning and Ravi and Girish delivered the tiffins before they went for their exams.

After the first day's new routine was over, Girish sprawled on the floor. "I am pooped! How have



you managed this kind of schedule over the past so many months?"

Ravi did not reply. He picked up his books and began to study. Long after Girish had fallen asleep, and even after he had begun to nod off, Ravi persisted with his books. He ought not to have left it for the last, he knew, but there had been so much to do...

By the time the exams were over, Ma was back again. Thinner, very tired, but with encouraging reports about Papa. "He has to repeat the entire course of injections," she explained, "but there is nothing to fear. He will be back in June."

Ravi's relief on hearing this was so intense that he had to sit down. "Are you sure? Are the doctors sure?" he kept repeating. Deep down, he still expected another telegram any time.

His fears were not eased until he faced his father three months later. This time he could not control himself. He burst into tears of relief and as his father held him, he finally confessed what the astrologer had told him.

"He said I would die?!" exclaimed Papa.

"He said I would lose a loved one and I was so afraid," sniffed Ravi. "I thought I would never see you again. I thought we would never be able to pay back all the money we owed. I thought I should give up school and take up a job..."

"Your thoughts were all for the family, son, and I am very proud of you. Ma has told me how you have worked."

"I did not have much time to study. I may not pass."

"You have already passed a great test, Ravi. Not many could have done what you did. Do not worry about the exams. They can be taken again."

But Ravi need not have worried. When the results were declared, he was too nervous to even look for his roll number. It was Girish who slapped his back and said with shining eyes, "You have got a First! You have got a First!"

Ravi hugged him and the two of them danced round the room. Ravi forgot all the overwork and anxiety of the past two months. He only knew that his choice had been right. Painful, certainly, but right for the family and for him.



## **Chrysalis**

*Cheryl Rao*

October 5. What does one do when you are sweet sixteen—a dreamy sixteen—you have a picture of the perfect woman before you, and the woman is your mother?

She is everything I want to be—tall, slim and beautiful. She works for her figure, goes to the Gym thrice a week and never overeats. She is old, nearly forty, but when the two of us go out together, the admiring looks are directed at her!

I do not know which side of the family I take after, but my looks are certainly a disappointment. To make matters worse, I seem to be permanently hungry and nibble all day. In fact, I spend most of my free time with Rukmini in the kitchen.

Ma hates that, especially when she finds that I cannot fit into yet another set of clothes. She has installed a mirror of awesome proportions along one wall in my room in the hope that I will become figure conscious and exercise with her.

Yet, try as I might, I cannot believe that the slob

that I see reflected there is really me. That person is some mistake. The real me is beautiful. Like Ma. Younger. Even better. That thing in the mirror is just a chrysalis. Inside is the gorgeous butterfly that will one day open its wings and soar happily into the world and never be discontented again.

Success comes easily to Ma. When she was my age, she was already studying medicine and taking part in athletics and basketball. You name it, she did it. And did it well. After she qualified, she married and practised medicine until Dad's floundering pharmaceutical company almost collapsed. Then she took over and has never looked back. Last November she was named Business-woman of the Year, and I know she did it all alone.

Papa, as you may have guessed by now, is no businessman. His first love is, of all things, the ancient world. He was an Archaeology student and had no interest in the family industry that was left to him to manage. After a couple of years, he was happy to let Ma take over and he returned to the study of old ruins.

Ma and Papa make a fine pair. He admires her business-sense and her wit, and she marvels at the way he can unravel the masteries of the past by studying some old pots, bricks and stones.

As for me, I seem to be a total misfit. I cannot understand Papa's wanderings into the past and I cannot cope with Ma's expectations from me. She was a gold medallist and Papa has had his share

of laurels too. I am expected to bring credit to the two of them, but I am just a mediocre student. Something of a plodder. I even had to repeat a class way back, when I was a kid.

Now, here I am in the tenth, still struggling and at a loss with the syllabus. What is worse, I do not know yet what I want to do after school. The only thing I am sure about is that I do not want anything that involves memorizing. But will I have the freedom to choose? Knowing Ma's managerial ways, I will probably be bulldozed into something I do not want to do and all that Papa will say is, "Your mother knows best, baby."

So while Divya will go for Fashion Designing and Malati for Literature and then journalism, I will just slide into some choice of Ma that holds no interest for me.

\*

"Sunaina," called Mrs Murthy. Sunaina slammed her new diary and pushed it under the pile of books lying on her desk. Divya, her best friend, had presented the diary to her on Friendship Day, but Sunaina had not started writing in it until now.

"Are you ready?" asked her mother putting her head round the door.

"Yes," said Sunaina. Hastily, she picked up her books and followed Mrs Murthy out of the house. 'Boring tuitions!' she thought as she got into the car with her mother.

When Sunaina hopped off at the coaching class, she waved carelessly to her mother and joined her friends as they went in. Between classes, she decided that she had enough for the day. "Let us go for an ice cream," she suggested to Divya. Quietly, they left the building and entered the ice cream parlour next door. They whiled away their time for an hour, then Sunaina cadged a lift home.

The next few days were busy and Sunaina had no time to confide in her diary. She skipped tuitions and went for Diwali shopping with her friends. She bought a small *sindoor* box for her mother and a cigar box for her father.

"I thought your dad doesn't smoke," said Divya.  
"He does not. He will use it to keep the old coins he is trying to date or something like that. You know my dad. His study is full of things that look like junk but are really valuable, and he is always sorting or sending off stuff to appropriate places. At least he will have a nice-looking box in which he can store those things!"

They laughed and carried on with their shopping, unaware that while they were enjoying themselves, a crisis was brewing. It was just not her lucky day...

\*

October 20. What a Diwali this was going to be! Ma was laid up with a broken leg and their help, Rukmini, had taken leave to be with her daughter who was expecting her first child. There was no

one to manage things in the house except me. And do you know, I am enjoying myself!

Don't get me wrong. I don't like to see Ma like this, but at the same time, it is nice to be the strong, efficient one round the place for a change!

Ma was on way to my tuition institute when she had met with this accident. I wondered why she was going there. I later learnt that Sir had called her up because I had been cutting classes so often. I informed him about Ma's accident and promised to be regular in the future. He agreed not to complain and said he would assure Ma. He called her up and told her that he had only wanted to show her my test papers and while he thought I did need to put in more effort, I was doing okay. How I had to work to get that one sentence out of him!

"If you don't work hard, Sunaina," he had continued, "you will be disgracing yourself, your family and my institute," he spoke emphatically, his eyes bulging a little and making me tremble. "I have got a reputation to maintain and I can tell you, I will not tolerate casual behaviour here."

Wow! That was some ordeal for me. For Ma's sake I went through it, and now I had this awful job of living up to my promise to Sir.

But it is not all that bad. Ma is really impressed with the way I have been looking after her and the house and still managing to go prepared for tuitions. Luckily we have got our Diwali holidays



early this year and I do not have to go to school.

As for Pa, he lives in his own world. He still thinks Rukmini is doing the cooking and on more than one occasion has said, "Namita, you must tell Rukmini that today's curry was delicious."

Ma and I look at each other and burst out laughing. We seem to be doing a lot of that nowadays, where earlier we did not have much to say to each other.

October 28: It is tough to find time to write regularly. There seems to be something that needs to be done at every moment of the day. Ma has so many visitors plus all those files to attend to. Rukmini is back, thank goodness, so I am not too busy, but I do help her out in the cooking because I enjoy trying out new dishes for Ma and Papa.

And do you know, in spite of being so involved with food, I seem to have lost weight. Ma said so, my mirror told me so, and my old jeans proved it! And recently, at least three people commented on my resemblance to Ma. Can you beat that?

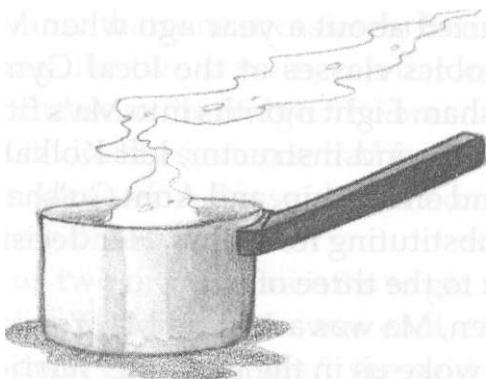
What is more, Ma and Papa and I all seem to have the same idea for the first time in years. Maybe I ought to go into the catering vocation. Papa suggested it after he finally realized that it was I who was producing those pies and souffles and different kinds of stuffed parathas.

To my surprise, Ma had also agreed. "As long as you are happy in the career you choose..." and she had left the sentence half-finished.

Is it not amazing? I cannot believe this is the same mother who was so exacting and so strict about my marks.

I feel so happy inside that I do not even mind studying all this gibberish because I know it won't be for very long.

I am looking forward to the next few years...



## **Mother's Days Out**

*Cheryl Rao*

It all started about a year ago when Ma began those Aerobics classes at the local Gym run by Aunt Gulshan. Eight months into Ma's fitness fad, Naina, the second instructor, left Kolkata to join her husband on his ship, and Aunt Gulshan bullied Ma into substituting for Naina. Her decision came as a shock to the three of us.

Until then, Ma was a normal Ma. You know, the type who woke us in the morning, hurried us for school, got our tiffins ready and so on. Now she had to be at the Gym from 9 to 12 in the morning and from 4 to 7 in the evening. She had to workout along with each batch of exercisers. It was strenuous work. Sometimes she overslept in the morning—which meant that all of us did too—and then there was a mad rush to get out of the house on time.

Ma had to prepare the lunch and dinner before she left and she no longer had time to lay out our school uniforms or polish our shoes if we forgot to

do that the night before. Torn shirts, crushed collars, no tie—for the first month it seemed that my kid sister, Sumita and I were getting hauled up by the Dress Captains almost every day.

Tiffin became a packet of chips or a jam bun. Once in a way, as a special treat, we got a toasted sandwich. That, when we were used to parathas and sabzi, noodles or fried rice, or even a piece of fried chicken!

Papa did not know what had hit him. He came home on more than one occasion to find Sumi and me fighting like two starving predators over the last bit of cheese in the fridge. The bread was often mouldy. Obviously someone had forgotten to put it in the fridge—and the same someone had not bought fresh bread.

It took us two or three months to get ourselves into functioning order. Ma was cool. "Time you learnt to darn your clothes," she said to me, as she handed over a needle and thread.

I moved away dolefully, muttering to myself that I wished I had a Ma who was always at home, like my friend Bishu's. Bishu did not have to darn his clothes, that was for sure!

"And Shekhar," Ma added, "you are fourteen now and old enough to take on some responsibility around the house. See that you buy the bread daily and if it gets over faster than expected, fill up the bread box again."

In time, Sumi and I got accustomed to doing our

bit and so did Pa. Our house began to look like a home again and there were more smiles than snarls till a second bombshell was dropped on us.

Aunt Gulshan rang up one day to say that, as in the previous years, the second instructor from the Gym would have to go along for a children's Summer Camp at Ranchi.

"But it is holiday time, Gul," Ma protested. "Amit is on tour and I cannot leave the kids alone."

"Let them fend for themselves," Aunty Gul bellowed and Ma, as usual, gave in to her superior lung power.

Before we knew it, missile number two had been launched. Sumi and I had been bundled off to Papa's sister, Aparna, in Meghalaya. She was the only one among our relatives who was not going anywhere that summer.

Like two waifs, we landed in Shillong where she met us and drove us off in her jeep. We travelled for half a day before we reached her house in the wilds. Aunt Aparna did not talk a lot or try very hard to be nice. It put us at ease.

Her cottage nestled in the hillside and as I looked at the scenery around, I understood why Aunt Aparna had not needed to go away for the summer. The place was awesome!

We stopped and got out of the jeep and Aunt Aparna said, "Relax today. Tomorrow we will do some spelunking."

"Spello-whatting?" I asked, wondering whether

Aunty expected us to play some kind of spelling game indoors!

"We will go exploring the caves," she replied.  
"It is called spelunking and you will like it."

"Wow!" Sumi and I exclaimed in one breath.

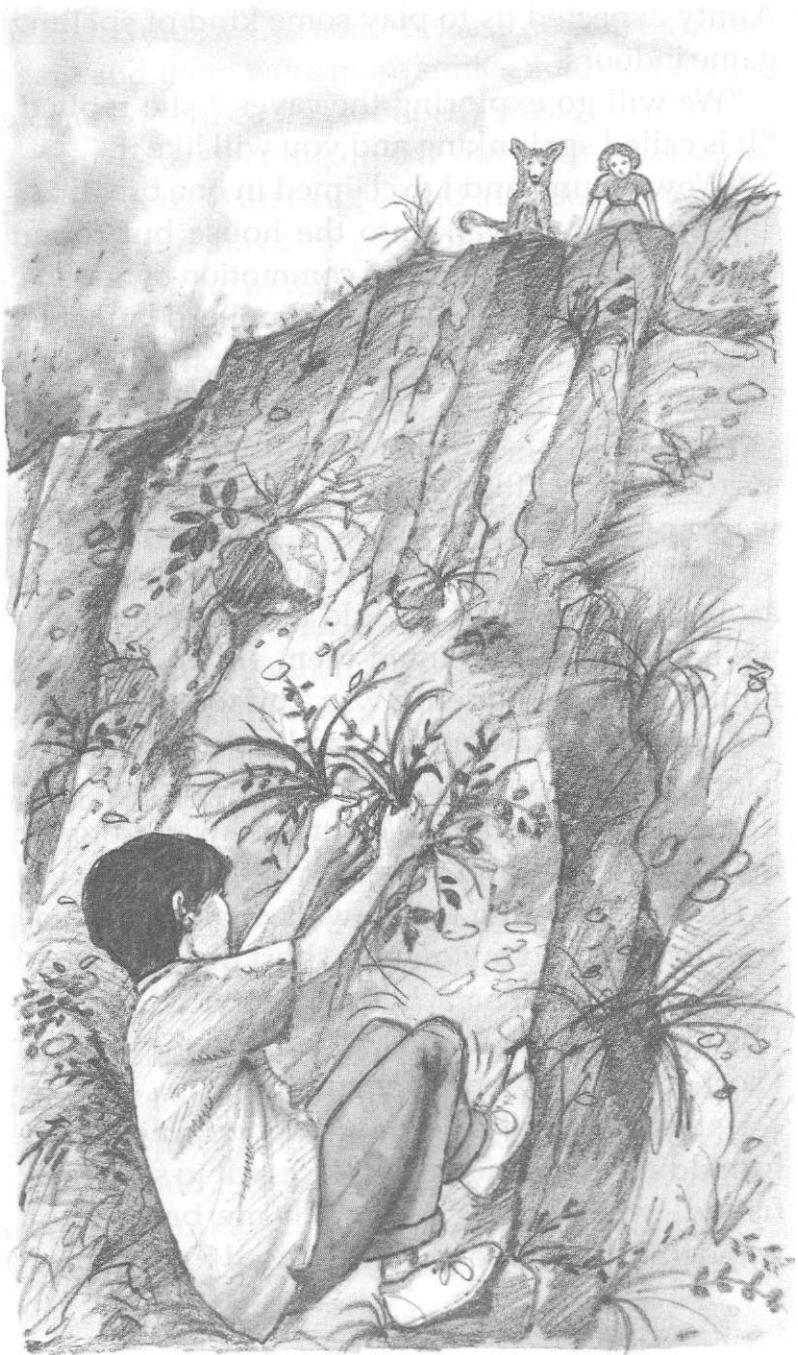
We started to walk into the house but found ourselves in the middle of a commotion of massive proportions. A huge German Shepherd launched itself at Aunt Aparna. A slightly smaller one wagged its tail from the corner of the covered verandah, but would not move as it was surrounded by little greyish-black furry things that were apparently its puppies.

Sumi and I froze. We were not used to animals around the house. Ma would not have them and we had not really wanted them either. To face a family of them suddenly, was a bit too much!

Aunt Aparna saw our faces and realized what was happening. She made sure that the big guy she called Romeo only sniffed us. We hurried away from the mother—Juliet—and the rest of the clan.

The next morning I was awake really early, so I wandered off on my own. A short distance away from Aunt Aparna's house, I spotted a cave. I headed towards it and was almost there when I sort of felt a presence behind me.

I spun around and saw Romeo. He had a forbidding expression on his face as if to say, 'Look friend, you better check with me before you wander in my territory,' but I refused to be bullied.



"Shoo!" I said as convincingly as I could given his size and the sight of his teeth as he bared them at me.

I walked on, bravely. Romeo suddenly caught hold of my pant and tugged. "Hey!" I cried in panic, "Let go!"

But Romeo was in no mood to listen. I tugged, so did he. There was a ripping sound and my knee pocket was left between Romeo's teeth as I backed off. Five strides and I tumbled headlong into a steep-sided gully. It must have been about fifty-feet deep but luckily, I got stuck on a bush about half way down. It took me some time to recover my senses. Then I looked up and there was Romeo, looking down, my pocket still dangling in his mouth.

"Don't just stand there!" I gasped, as the bush seemed to give way. "Get help!"

Romeo turned silently and disappeared. I had no way of knowing whether he had understood. I tried to twist and work my way up, but the bush appeared unsteady and I was forced to keep still and cling on.

At last I heard voices.

"I am here!" I yelled, "get me out fast!"

Sumi's anxious face peered at me and I must admit that never before have I been more happy to see the pesky little thing.

"*Bhaiya!*" she cried, "hang on!"

I heard a scrambling sound and mud and pebbles began to fall around me. Then Sumi was suspended

beside me and she managed to fasten a thick length of rope round my chest without pushing me down. Within moments, both of us were hauled up.

As I lay panting on the ground, Romeo began to lick my face. I was so relieved to be safe that, without thinking, I hugged him!

"Romeo brought your pocket to me," Sumi said, "and I knew something had happened to you."

"Thanks, Pal!" I whispered to Romeo, now absolutely sure that he could understand every word I said. After all, he had got me safely out of the gully, had he not?

"You are very lucky," commented Aunt Aparna, "that bush broke your fall, or you could have hurt yourself badly."

"Romeo tried to warn me," I muttered, "but I thought he was attacking me..."

I looked down at him and saw a hurt expression in his eyes.

"Sorry," I said, "I will never doubt you again."

I did not. In the days that followed, Romeo accompanied us everywhere, even to the longest cave in Asia, which was a couple of hour's drive from Aunty's house.

We spent the rest of our time climbing the hills around Aunt Aparna's cottage and exploring the caves nearby. As usual, Sumi and I found something to fight over—Juliet's puppies. And as we put them on our beds and rolled about with them, we were really thankful to Aunt Gulshan for

sending Ma off in one direction so that we could go off in another!

When Papa came to pick us up, we were not ready to go home. Papa caught on what was going on in our heads and the three of us convinced Aunt Aparna to let us have one of the pups as our own. I would have preferred Romeo but I knew Aunty would not part with him. Besides, how would I hide such a huge guy from Ma? A pup was okay. It would fit into the household and Ma would not even notice him.

We had, of course, not reckoned the mysterious growth factor that takes a pup to within a couple of inches of its adult size in just a few months. Little Caesar began to inflate before our eyes and we knew that we would not be able to keep him out of Ma's range of vision. He began to take up a lot of space. Pie made a great deal of noise. His presence was certainly felt in the house! What would Ma say? Our only hope was for her to be out of the house most of the time so that she would not fall over him and order him out!

By now you must have guessed that ours is not a very predictable family. When Ma returned, she did not notice the gnawed legs of the chairs or the patches on the carpet. "Guess what?" she said, "Naina will be back soon and I can return to being a twenty-four hour Mom again. You would like that, would you not?"

Sumi's grin and mine was kind of fixed. Papa

had a dazed look. From inside, the pup gave a whine and to drown out the noise, all of us began talking at once.

"You must not give up what you enjoy, Ma..."

"We will help you out Ma, don't worry..."

Even Papa's words came out in a rush. "You need your freedom, dear... You need to go out to work..."



## **As Clear As Crystal**

*Cheryl Rao*

Fifteen-year-old Hemant threw the pebble viciously into the pond. He did not care that he could have hit the fish his father loved to watch when he sat outside on the rolling lawns. All that luxury and the old man was turning into a skinflint! Thrice this month he had refused to give him more than fifty rupees when usually he just handed over his purse to Hemant to help himself!

What could he do with fifty rupees? He had promised the gang a treat at the movies. He looked at his watch. Just another half-hour before the booking opened and no way to put together the cash for five tickets. What should he do?

Suddenly, a fragment of his mother's conversation with a friend ran across his mind. "I have collected this crystal from all over the world and it is my pride and joy."

What a great idea! Hemant jumped up and sneaked back into the house. There was no one in the living room. He picked up the first piece

of crystal he saw—a tall vase—and made off with it.

Hemant arrived at the theatre after the other four boys. Panting, but pleased, he grandly pulled out the four hundred he had got for the vase and peeled off a hundred rupee note for the tickets. Akash, Arjun and Rohit took it for granted that he should pay. Only Gaurav, whose father supplied steel to Hemant's father's factory, felt a bit awkward. He would have preferred to buy his own ticket but he had seen how annoyed Hemant got if he suggested it, so instead he bought two packets of chips to pass around as they watched the movie. Hemant was relieved that he did not need to spend any more money. The remaining three hundred would see him through the next few days.

The missing vase was not noticed for almost a week. By then, Hemant had helped himself to an ashtray and a three-cornered bowl as well.

"That is strange," commented Mrs Khanna. "Where did I keep the gladioli vase?"

She questioned the household staff, but no one seemed to know anything and Hemant, who was listening, just pretended he was reading. When the sixth piece disappeared, Mrs Khanna could no longer take it lightly. "You must call everyone and question them," she said to her husband.

"I have no time for that," he replied. "My hands are full with the factory and the labour there."

His father had not mentioned it at home, but he had big problems at work. Huge payments (for

items his factory had manufactured and supplied) were held up because a defect had come to light, and he was finding it difficult to keep going. The manufacturing process had to be looked into and fresh supplies made. Labour had to be paid or they would go on strike. He did not share his worries with his family because he did not want them to think that his business was collapsing.

Hemant did not ask his father for more money for an entire month, but Mr Khanna did not give much thought to that. Mrs Khanna, on the other hand, was not going to let go of her crystal that easily. She began keeping track of the number of pieces she had and made sure she arranged them in such a way that even one empty space would be noticed. Hemant did not have a chance to pinch any more of his mother's collection to acquire spending money for himself.

"Let us go for the Daler Mehndi show next Saturday," suggested Akash and Arjun, when the gang was together. They were confident Hemant would, as usual, manage to get the expensive tickets for them. Rohit's eyes shone at the thought. He fancied himself as a singer and wanted to become another Daler himself!

Gaurav shook his head. "No, I cannot come. My parents will not allow me to go for a late night show like that."

Hemant did not say anything. He had a sinking sensation in his stomach. He knew he could never

ruffle up the money for the tickets.

Gaurav saw the look on Hemant's face and suddenly recalled the conversation he overheard between his parents a couple of nights ago.

"*Arrey,*" replied Akash. "Hemant's father always gets such things for us. He can afford it. What is a couple of thousands for him?"

Hemant glared at Gaurav. "Yes, spending on tickets and such stuff is chicken feed. If you ask for return tickets to the U.S. then he might think twice..." He walked away and Gaurav ran after him.

"Hemant, wait!" He waited for them to be out of earshot of the others, then he spoke rapidly. "I know things are not good at the factory, Hemant. You can always tell the others to pay for their own tickets. You do not have to treat them."

"Why don't you mind your own business?" Hemant snapped.

He headed home, putting Gaurav's words firmly out of his mind and concentrating on a way to get some money. Ma's crystal was out of the question. The silver was not. He went straight to the side-board and opened the drawer where the six heavy, silver mugs lay. He dumped them in his backpack and headed for the lane of silver shops his mother often visited. He did not know that Gaurav was on his trail, determined to reason with him.

When Hemant dumped the silver mugs on the jeweller's counter, Gaurav rushed into the shop

and confronted his friend. "Do your parents know what you are doing, Hemant?" he asked.

"Get lost!" snarled Hemant, pushing Gaurav away.

"What is this? What are you boys up to?" asked the shopkeeper, pressing an alarm under his table. A siren went off and an armed guard rushed in.

Hemant panicked. He left the mugs on the counter and ran into the market-place with Gaurav close on his heels. When they were at a safe distance, Hemant stopped and turned on Gaurav.

"Why did you interfere? Now look what has happened! I don't have the silver and I don't have the money for it either!"

"You can get the silver back," said Gaurav.

"Oh sure. I just walk back to the sweet, helpful jeweller and tell him that it was all a mistake and that I want the mugs back,"

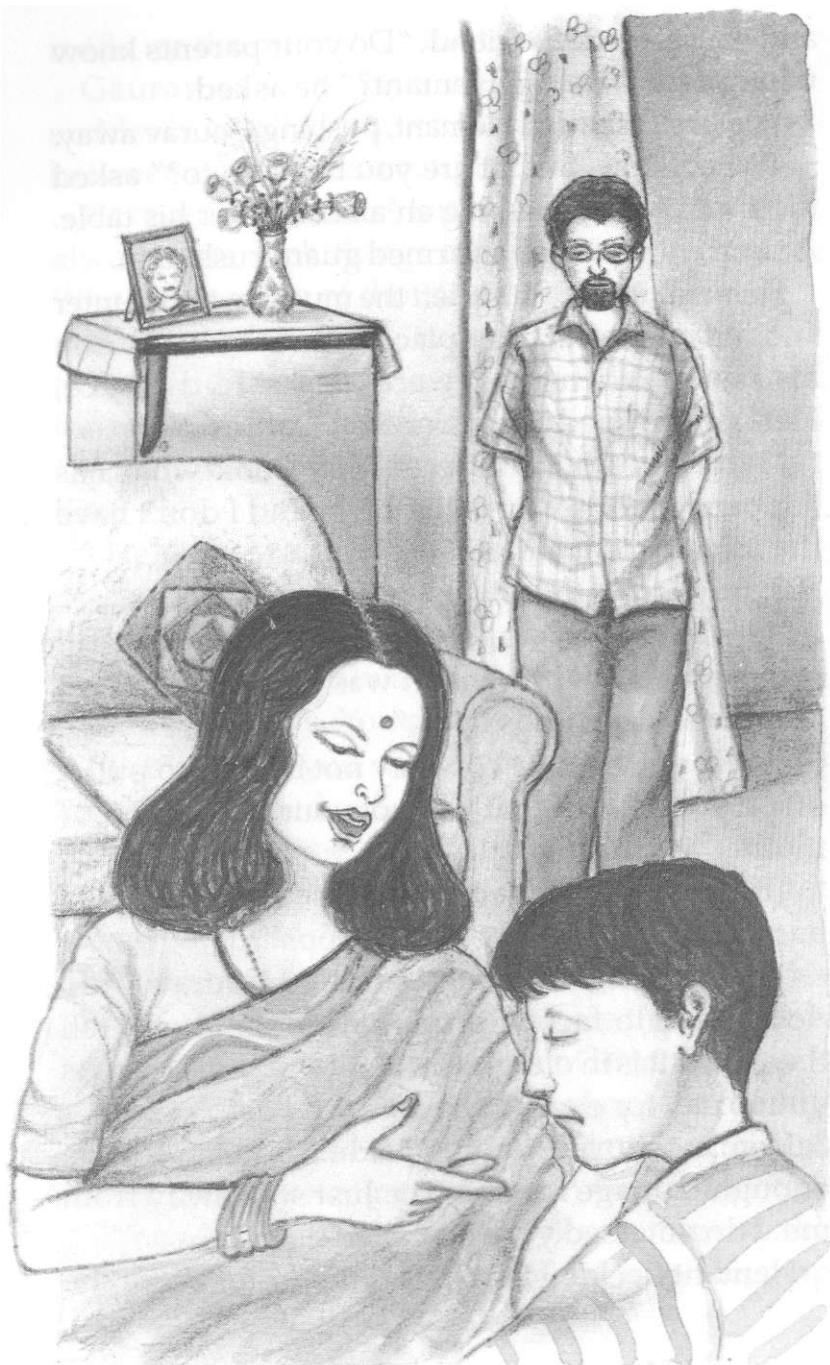
"Well, not exactly. You may not be able to pull it off on your own, but if you got your father or your mother to go with you..."

"Brilliant!" growled Hemant. "I may as well handcuff myself and go to the cops."

"I will come with you," persisted Gaurav. "You don't have to face your parents alone. I will tell them how it is in our group. How everyone expects you to pay for everything..."

Hemant shoved Gaurav aside. "You have done enough damage for one day. Just stay away from me. I do not need your so-called help."

Hemant decided that he would forget about the



silver mugs and just hope that his mother did not think of using them. She had not taken them out in months anyway. But luck was against him. That very evening, when his mother's *chacha*, Prem, came over, she insisted that *lassi* be served in the silver mugs.

Hemant cringed in his chair, waiting for the uproar when the drawer was found empty.

But there was none.

When at last he found the courage to look up, Uncle Prem and his wife, Papa and Ma, were all helping themselves to their favourite drink—from the silver mugs!

Hemant looked at the tray as if it was going to bite him. 'How? How did the mugs get back into the house? Who brought them?'

He looked at his mother. 'What was she hiding behind that smile? And Papa? What would he do to him when they were alone?'

Hemant sat like a robot until Uncle Prem left. Then he tried to move away, unobtrusively, but his mother called out to him, "Hemant! Just bring me that bunch of flowers *chacha* brought!"

Hemant picked the bouquet that was lying on the coffee table and went to his mother. His legs trembled and he felt sick. She didn't say anything but took the flowers from him and began to arrange them in her tall, crystal vase.

'Wait a minute. The tall vase? That was the one he had sold! How did it get back into the house?'

Hemant looked around wildly. The ashtray was back, and also the three-cornered bowl! It was too much for him. He crumpled on the floor and began to cry.

"I am sorry, Ma, I'm sorry. I'll never do it again."

Mrs Khanna bent down and smoothed Hemant's hair back from his forehead.

"Why, Son?" she asked, "why did you do it?"

Hemant sobbed out the tale of his friends and the money all of them had needed to have fun together. As he tried to explain, he heard himself for the first time. How lame his excuses were! What foolish aims he had! Trying to buy friendship with his father's money and robbing his own parents to do it!

"Gaurav told me everything," Mrs Khanna said, "but I was waiting for you to talk to me."

Hemant wiped his eyes and as he did so, he saw his father's feet next to him. He waited fearfully for the blow to fall on him, but nothing happened. "I should have taken you into confidence, Hemant," his father said, "but I was always far too busy. I did not credit you with the ability to understand that there are hard times as there are good times and we must know what to do in each."

Hemant stood up. "I was selfish, Papa. I thought only of myself. I thought Gaurav was interfering . But now everything is clear to me. Now I know that he is the only true friend I have."

## Aunt Linda's Christmas Party

*Debashish Majumdar*

Clara walked out of the confectionery shop. In her hand she held a cardboard box. It was a chocolate cake. A little gift of love for Aunt Linda. She walked down the winding road, pausing momentarily in the chilly, wintry air. To her left, majestic conifers rose to dizzy heights.

Clara now followed a forest path. She gingerly climbed up the hillock. Like gems, dainty orchids were strewn upon the tall, green, grass. Finally, she stopped in front of a wooden bungalow with a red roof, panting for air. She could hear the strains of Christmas carols wafting in the breeze. The sleepy sun had disappeared under a blanket of white clouds. She knocked thrice on the pinewood door. A radiant smile spread across her beautiful face.

"Merry Christmas, Clara!"

It was the same warm voice that greeted Clara every year on Christmas. The greying lady was wrapped in a shawl, a muffler round her thick neck. Her gleaming eyes seemed to say it all.

"Merry Christmas, Aunt Linda!" Clara kissed the ageing cheeks that blushed pink with the warmth of love. She held out her gift which Aunt Linda accepted with a gracious smile. Then, with a big hug, she led Clara to the Christmas party.

There were children of all ages. Tall and strong, lean and weak; even a little boy who hobbled about on one foot. Clara admired the Christmas tree which was a pine bough richly decorated with colourful streamers, bells and holly. At the top of the tree was a silver star, and in a showcase was Jesus in the manger.

A deep voice greeted Clara from over her shoulder. "Hi, I am Rajiv. What is your name?"

Clara turned and discovered a boy of about sixteen, a stubble on his chin, wearing a leather jacket with a pair of blue denims.

As Clara introduced herself, Rajiv steered on the conversation. "Is this your first party at Aunt Linda's?"

It was Rajiv's first ever Christmas party.

"You are new here?" asked Clara softly.

"My dad's in the army..." the teenaged boy spoke in a gentle manner, "and I...I am an only child," he added hastily.

The party was now on in full swing! Rajiv and Clara moved to one corner of the room to chat.

"I have been in this town for a month now," Rajiv picked up the threads of Clara's earlier question, "I met Aunt Linda in the bazaar, once.

Since then I have been running errands for her."

"That is wonderful," encouraged Clara, "helping people...old people, specially, is one of the finest service we teenagers can do. Your parents must be really lovely human beings to..."

"Don't talk about them," Rajiv interrupted, "I hate them!"

Clara was taken aback by Rajiv's verbal attack on his parents.

"Come on, Rajiv, your parents love you deeply," she smiled. "Parents always wish well for their children."

Clara realized that she had almost spoilt Rajiv's Christmas party.

"Clara, you are lucky to have wonderful parents yourself," emphasized Rajiv, "my parents even dislike my listening to rap music, watching videos or driving around with friends..."

"Maybe you are right," sighed Clara. "Probably you are not as lucky as I am."

Aunt Linda clapped her chubby hands and disrupted the conversation.

"Hey Rajiv and Clara...dating afterwards, okay?" she winked. "Now come and celebrate the spirit of Christmas with of all us."

Clara played with the kids, laughing and cheering them in their games. Aunt Linda joined in the fun too.

"Let us play blind man's buff," suggested Aunt Linda to the kids.

"Yes, Aunt Linda!" they all cried out together.

"I used to play this game with Uncle George every Christmas morning... and I lost every time!" she recollected merrily. "Of course, he was such a big cheat!" she told Clara.

Aunt Linda was the first to be blindfolded with a handkerchief. Clara carefully tied it round her eyes. Then she waved three fingers and cross-examined her just to be doubly sure that she was not peeping through the folds. "How many fingers?"

She paused. Then said, "hmmm...five!"

All the while Rajiv sat alone upon a chair and absorbed the cheerful ambience.

Aunt Linda wobbled towards Rajiv, spreading her arms and whirling them in the air. "Ah... I have got you ..A" she said, grabbing Rajiv's shoulders.

"But I'm not playing," Rajiv explained, morosely.

"Of course, you are!" Aunt Linda spoke emphatically, "or else no more errands from tomorrow."

"You are all happy people," said Rajiv, sadly. "There is no point in being a Cinderella..."

Clara came to Aunt Linda's rescue, "What do you mean?"

"Today is a one-day affair of merrymaking. Just a dream." Rajiv added solemnly. "Tomorrow I walk back into the miserable life once again..."

Aunt Linda led Rajiv to the dining-table. It was spread with goodies and cakes. "Help yourself,"



Aunt Linda said generously. Even the disabled boy was smiling with joy as the spirit of Christmas filled Aunt Linda's warm home.

After the feast was over, Clara took Rajiv's hand. She led him to a sofa. Aunt Linda walked up to the mantelpiece. She lit a pair of candles and placed them next to a photograph.

"She mentioned Uncle George, didn't she?" Rajiv asked Clara. "Why isn't he present at today's merry gathering?"

"That is him...in that photo." And Clara led Rajiv to the wedding photo now lit up by candles. "Uncle George and Aunt Linda loved each other from the time they were teenagers. Uncle died in action during the second world war only weeks into his marriage with Aunt Linda."

"You mean to say Aunt Linda is smiling through all this sadness?" Rajiv said, unbelievingly.

"That is not all," added Clara, sedately, "Uncle George died in action on Christmas Day..."

Rajiv was overcome with grief. He felt sorry for Aunt Linda. "And I thought she was the happiest person in the world?" Rajiv was struck with guilt.

"We must find happiness within ourselves," Clara reminded Rajiv.

Rajiv agreed fully. "I was so selfish. I thought I was so miserable...I even envied you for having such kind and understanding parents..." Rajiv confessed to Clara. "I am grateful to you, Clara. You have changed my way of thinking... I must

love my parents and take care of them like I've never done before."

Clara smiled, "Surely the spirit of Christmas has taught you a wonderful lesson or two."

"Yes, thanks to Aunt Linda and you, Clara," Rajiv forced a shy smile, "and that poor, lame kid who seemed to be ever-smiling..."

The clock struck six in the evening. "I am sorry I have to leave now," said Clara. She kissed the children and bade Aunt Linda goodbye.

Rajiv was so touched that he forgot to ask Clara her address. When Clara had gone away, Rajiv stood at Aunt Linda's balcony and looked out at the tiny houses in the distant hill-tops and wondered where Clara lived.

As the kids left, one after another, some accompanied by parents, Rajiv held Aunt Linda's warm hands. "Aunty, may the spirit of Christmas always be with you... You have showed me today how to smile through sadness..."

There was a twinkle of joy in her kind eyes. "George and I remember our togetherness through all the children," said Aunt Linda. Then quickly burying her sadness, she added, "Rajiv, don't think I will not send you on errands from tomorrow!"

Light-hearted Rajiv, like a conscious teenager, felt he had almost fallen in love with a beautiful person, Clara. He hesitated, then asked Aunt Linda coyly, "Can you tell me where Clara lives?"

The church bells chimed. Joyous young men and

women streamed the winding road below, singing carols to the Lord.

Aunt Linda seemed to loose her cheerfulness this one time. She pursed her thick lips, then muttered, "Clara is an orphan, Rajiv. She has no family." Then she raised her hand, pointing to a convent. "Clara lives there.. .finding happiness in herself in her own special way..."



## **My Son Rises**

*Debashish Majumdar*

The evening sky changed hues like a chameleon. From orange-red to a dark grey, casting dark shadows upon the football field. The tired referee limped along and blew the long whistle which sounded like a railway guard welcoming a chugging train home. From one corner of the wide, lush green field I watched with care as the young teenage boy sank, untying his football shoelaces and then lazily stringing his boots over his shoulders like a fisherman's catch. He looked around and saw me. I waved at him frantically. With casual steps he approached me, homeward bound. A group of teenage boys rushed upto him, smothering his shoulders with affectionate hands. He jerked them off like a lazy cow driving away flies with its tail. He looked up at them, shook hands with a few of the red-and-blue outfit bunch, his opponent team, then reached me without emotion.

"Your team won?"

He looked the other way. It was a question he was tired of listening to.

"Yes...I scored the winning goal/' he spoke routinely. "Didn't you watch me score?" He sounded rough.

"Sorry, Son," I apologized for the umpteenth time, "I arrived late from office."

"Again?" He sounded cold. "Everytime I score, you are late?"

We did not speak to each other till we reached home. I was afraid to open my mouth. My son did not communicate because he felt it was useless talking to an ignorant man.

I cooked chicken roast for him. The toast got burnt. I licked my burnt fingers like a wounded pariah. My son raised his eyes and ignored me. I served his meal hot. With his favourite sauce.

"You must be hungry, dear..." I spread a smile, hoping it would echo. Depayan did not even thank me for it. Maybe a son does not need to thank his father after all.

He ate quietly, dodging the little bits and pieces of school topics I had held out to him. He left the dining table silently, not even waiting for me to finish my dinner.

Ten o'clock. I creakily opened his bedroom door and saw him studying for his Test. He looked full of responsibility. "Goodnight, Depayan."

He was engrossed in thoughts. He did not wish me goodnight. I closed his bedroom door. I passed

the lively photograph upon the patio. I retraced my steps and stood by it, in our sitting-room.

"Supriya," I whispered, and a silent tear rolled down my cheek, "You must return, for Depayan's sake... Will you not forgive me?"

I carelessly held her photo between my palms. I heard a click and looked towards Depayan's room. Two eyes were watching me. I nervously placed 'Supriya' down. Then I briskly walked towards my room and went to sleep.

Parent-Teachers' meeting. I looked like a passer-by. Mr Chapman enthusiastically smiled, drawing me close with his kind words.

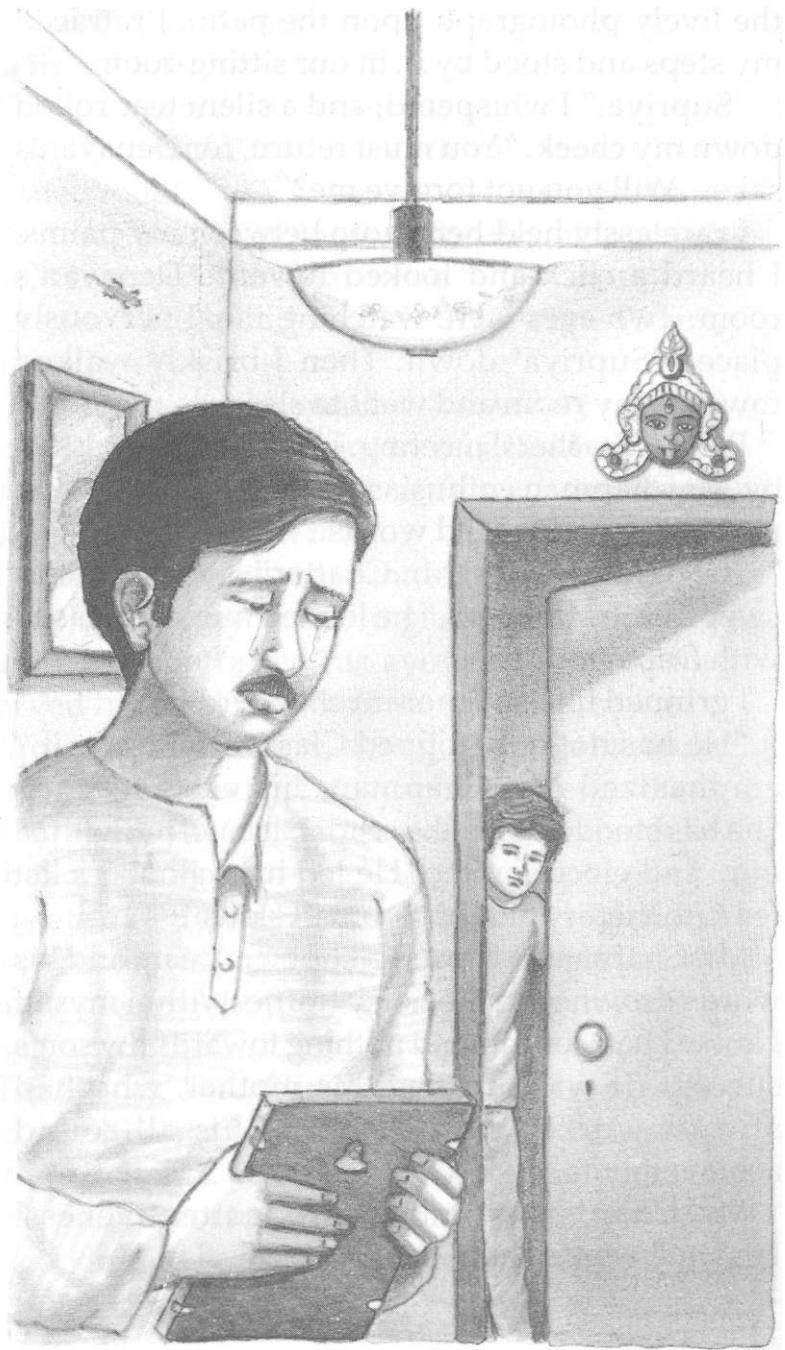
"Congratulations, Mr. Chatterji...your son has swept all the honours," he looked mighty pleased with Depayan.

I grinned like an ignorant shepherd.

"He has not only topped Class IX with merit," emphasized Mr. Chapman, his class teacher, "he has stood First in the school debate, individual quiz and elocution too! He led his school cricket team to victory and his football skills..."

Mr. Chapman's words fell upon my ears and his words drowned in the noisy traffic. Within myself I knew I had contributed nothing towards my son's success. It was Supriya, his mother, who had always worked hard towards his all-round achievements.

Mr. Chapman stumped my inattentiveness. His final words shook me.



"Mr. Chatterji, you are Depayan's father, are you not?"

"Yes.. .yes/" I assured him, "his tutor is brilliant. And of course, Depayan works very hard, as you know."

Stung, shamed and humiliated I drove home and shied away from my son. "Congratulations...! I never knew you had done so well on your own."

He did not answer me. He walked up and switched on the music player. Then he swung his limbs upon the sofa and covered his face from my view with a book.

"Boy, you have achieved so much in school," I told him light-heartedly, "I have not achieved all that even in a lifetime..."

He closed his novel. Then he asked me abruptly. "Do you still love Mum?"

I paused. Then replied, "Yes I do..."

"Well she loves you too!" He raised his voice, as if in desperation.

I charged after him, anxious to know more about Supriya.

Depayan did not continue, leaving my thoughts suspended. The next morning, he asked me for the customary monthly tuition fees for his private tutor.

"Bring home your tutor one day," I told my son. "After all, he really guided you well."

Depayan nodded his head in agreement.

I cleverly slipped in, "Know where Mum lives?"

"I should be asking you that/" he quipped smartly. Then he left for school.

My son had become a hero of sorts in school. I was a proud father, a father only in name. I wished to guide my son in every step of his teenage life. But I found no beginning and no end. My monotonous life dragged on without Supriya.

When I got promoted in my job, letters poured in to congratulate me. How I longed for Supriya to be back and share my joy with Depayan.

But I did not tell anyone. Like a crocodile, I slipped into the routine cooking and later tucked my son intdbd.

Sunday, my birthday, would have been dull like any other day. But believe me, Depayan changed my life with a bouquet of flowers. There was also a card tucked away beside my pillow:

*"I love you Dad for all that you gave me...  
and for all that you could not give.*

*Love*

*Depayan."*

The message touched my heart. It moved me. I always knew Depayan to be a mama's boy. Now life without his mum had brought about a change in his sensitive teen-life, I thought.

I strolled into his room. It was empty. He had always taken special care of all the things his mum had given him from childhood. Even the brown teddy bear, the dinky car and the table cricket game occupied pride of place in his bookcase. There

was a cassette which held his mama's voice, a dusty photo album which held smiling pictures of our togetherness. Depayan, Supriya and me.

I realized the sad truth. While I let the pieces fall apart, my son had risen to hold his mum and dad together in his disturbed, young mind.

That evening, Depayan entered home with a birthday cake in his hand. I had cooked his favourite chicken roast in appreciation of his beautiful birthday message to me.

"Dad..." he smiled as I wrapped him in a hug, "I have invited a surprise guest...my tutor."

For once, I hated an intruder in our house. I wanted to spend my birthday with Depayan who loved me after all.

Then Depayan brought in the honoured guest. Supriya!

I simply could not believe my eyes.

She walked in graciously, erasing the past with a swish of words:

"This house is in a mess. I have got to change everything including that silly man over there!"

Depayan, Supriya and I burst out laughing.

I realized now the inspiring force behind Depayan's success. It was his mother who tutored him, guided him in his debate and elocution, and even inspired him to present me with the birthday card. In fact, she had always taught Depayan to love his father deeply.

In one quiet, hurried moment I whispered to my

wife, "I am sorry, Supriya...please forgive me."

She whispered back in her own calm way,  
"Together we should be sorry for Depayan."

She meant every word and how right she was!  
"Our son rose above our petty squabble and united  
us with his love once again."

Depayan smiled deeply. He knew that of all his  
achievements, bringing together Mum and Dad  
would always rank as his greatest triumph!



## **Tara's Diary**

*Debashish Majumdar*

Only yesterday, I stumbled upon the teens. My birthday celebrations did not touch me once again. The date, the time, the year did not matter anymore.

I have no friends. I stand alone upon empty shores, filling in vacant moments with a painter's brush. I am a painter. I am a painter of feelings. I am a sad painter.

I am Tara Sen. My brother, Tapash, is sixteen-plus. He is a Science bug. He lives, breathes, even sleeps computers. Dad feels he is a whiz-kid. Mum is proud of his achievements. I somehow think he is a robot... he's got a mechanical heart. He has no emotions. He did not even shed a tear when our dear Alsatian, Pixie, died last year.

'Tara,' I tell myself, Took into your mother's eyes. She is so sad. Unhappy. Her happiness died in that fateful spring of 1988. And you were the cause of it. You are a girl today. You will be a woman tomorrow. You are a living dead.'

Painting is such a waste of time, Tapash feels. I want to share my art with him. He never has time to understand. He will never understand.

I hide my paintings from Mum and Dad. Tapash donates a small sum of money to me every month. I buy my paint brushes and pastels with it. With the money I buy canvas too. Tapash brings them home for me.

I use the finished, painted canvas to dust my bedroom. Sometimes even to dry my silent tears... And...I sell my paintings to Bikash. He pays me five rupees for each canvas. I never question what he does with my paintings. It is a secret that Bikash and I share.

Sometimes I stand before the oval mirror of my dressing-table and like the queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* I whisper, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the unluckiest of us all?"

The mirror does not speak. So I return to my writing-desk. I scribble uselessly upon my diary.

Today Dad announced that Tapash is leaving for Florida. Higher education. Something rings within me. He will not come back to India again. Another talent wasted. Who cares...

I am sad. Sad because there will be no one to buy me canvas. No more money for me. Tapash, you are going away breaking my heart...

I have sketched a fresh canvas. I have drawn Tapash...reaching out for the stars, his arms outstretched. The Sen family, proud of his

achievements, cheering him on. I show it to no one. I wait for Bikash to take it away... I open my box containing the canvas. There is only one canvas to go...

Unlike so many girls of my age I read about in magazines, make-up and dandy dresses does not impress me. After all, nothing will ever add to my happiness and I know it...

Tapash left for the United States. Bikash came around to pick up my canvas. I handed him the one which featured Tapash. Bikash is my only art critic in the whole, wide world. He inspects my painting. He laughed and wondered. He told me how silly my painting was—Tapash reaching out for the stars. I wish I could touch the realms of his fantasy. I wanted to explain to him that even Superman can fly. Superwoman too...if given the opportunity.

He scrutinized the canvas cloth. He did not like the quality. He handed me ten rupees. I thanked him and laughed. Yet, within me, I felt hurt. May be Tapash was right. Maybe my paintings are worthless....

I wake up in the night. I contemplate on the theme for my last canvas. A sudden surge of emotion overcomes me. I rush with my paint brush. My palette protests. My pastels are drying up. I have painted a lie. I am possessed by this painting. This drawing is fiction. I wish it would come true...

Bikash ambles to my villa. I hand him my last

canvas. He carefully folds it and tucks it away beneath his arm. I tell Bikash that he can sell no more canvas again. He has to look for a new kind of job for his living. Bikash is sad. He hangs his head in sorrow. Then he slowly walks away...

He does not even pay me for my last work. Probably because he knows it is a lie. And liars do not deserve any money.

A month has passed. Bikash does not come. I am sad. I am disappointed. I sit upon the balcony and watch the heavy rains lash the window-panes.

The rains finally cease. The sun smiles as I sit and chew the end of a paint-brush.

Bikash! I have not seen him so excited. I wanted to paint Bikash... He scrambled into his torn trouser pocket and hurriedly pulled out a bundle of notes which he handed over to me. I counted them with glee. Five thousand rupees! I could not believe it. Bikash explained how he had met a foreigner buying curios outside a plush hotel. He had shown him my painting and...

I eyed Bikash with suspicion. Did he sell it for more? Did he sell my other paintings too?

I confronted him.

He looked shaken. Very upset. His smile died upon his honest face. He shook his head. He had, like a responsible weaver-bird, stitched all my canvas over his hut to protect his little sisters and brother from the monsoons.

Suddenly Bikash turned and left. I called out his

name. I wanted to tell him how sorry I was...but he never came back again...

Chasing a lonely winter away arrived the spring of 1999. Something within told me that the painter in me was dying. Tapash had found himself a super job. He had now moved to San Francisco.

And I, Tara, who has never attended school since the age of eight continued to disappoint my parents, my brother, my relatives and friends. I do not paint my feelings anymore...I write my diary (call it Tara's Diary if you wish).

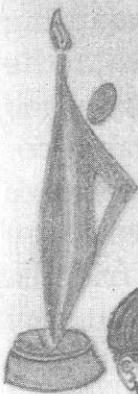
Tapash rang us up one night and gave Mum and Dad the most startling news. He claimed that San Francisco had it written all over that I, Tara had won the Gold Award in the painting exhibition. Tapash was sure it was my painting. I had indeed scrawled my name and address on the reverse. The painting depicted a happy, young girl in a wheel-chair surrounded by caring parents and a loving brother. It was my last painting!

It was too unreal to be true. Tapash, the mechanical heart specialist, my non-appreciating brother, weeping with emotion. This is by far the best day of my life...so far...

I notice my mum's sparkling face. Dad said I had done the Sen family proud. He would provide me with the airfare to San Francisco...my first freedom in bondage...

I have carried Tara's Diary to San Francisco. It is so much a part of me.

# INTERNATIONAL PAINTING EXHIBITION



SAN FRANCISCO - XIX -

- XIYIXIX -



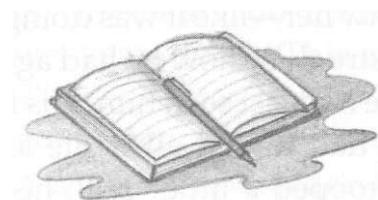
Tapash pushed my wheel-chair to the podium. I strangely forgot to tell the cheering audience about my paralysed legs, a result of polio which had incapacitated me when I was only eight.

Instead, I told the world about a poor rag-picker who lives in a slum near my Calcutta home. Each day he faced a new battle for his survival. Bikash was his name.

Tonight as San Francisco showers applauds, I have decided to end my diary and keep it away, forever. At nineteen I, Tara, am a celebrity... I have found a new beginning. I will be on an Arts Scholarship in San Francisco. Maybe even work someday as an Art teacher. I have re-discovered my lost happiness. But believe me...fame and money does not touch me anymore...

God! You have been cruel... Why is Bikash struggling against life while I am enjoying the happiness he richly deserves? Honestly, it was Bikash who had transformed me from Tara the Miserable to Tara the Joyful.

That is why I, Tara Sen, will never write a diary again. For, life is a diary. A diary where I meant to write one thing but ended up writing another...



## **Present Perfect**

*Lalitha Sridhar*

Sandy (short for Sandhya) got off the train gingerly and looked around, uncertain whether she would like what her eyes saw. She did not. The tidy little village station was a scene out of a picture-postcard. But that was not what Sandy saw. What Sandy saw was the lack of people, the lack of sounds and activity. This place was dead!

Sandy could see the few people there were staring at her. Mom had warned her she would draw attention in her stretch jeans and sunny T-shirt, but there was no way she was going to travel in a *solwar-kameez*. So she chose to ignore the stares. Her eyes were on the familiar face just a dozen steps away. She remembered the straight spine she would piggy-back on and the face which smiled a welcome everytime it saw her—like it was doing now.

Sandy was struck by how he had aged in the two years since she had last seen him. His face had new lines, his hair had turned all white and...had that regal stance stooped a little? Still, his hug was as

strong as ever! She started walking , then ran into her *Dadaji*'s bear hug.

"Well! Well! How my Guddi has grown!"

The two of them made their way out of the station with *Dadaji* insisting on handling both her bag and suitcase. They passed the station master who raised his hand in a half-salute to *Dadaji* but his eyes were on Sandy—her short, blunt cut hair, her hep outfit and her fashionable boots.

Sandy sighed. In spite of her dismissing Mom's requests for conservative dressing, she already hated being gawked at as if she were an exotic parrot!

"Did you have company on the train? What is that you are wearing? How are your parents? When can they come?" *Dadaji*'s many questions distracted her.

There was no point in answering the first part so she said, "They can't make it right now because of their year-end job commitments. I hardly see them at home myself! It is going to be this way for the entire summer hols, which is why they thought I should spend some time in Palgarh with you."

"Absolutely right. How old are you now? Fourteen! And you last came when you were all of eight! Too long. We couldn't do much when I came to the city two years back. This will be more enjoyable, no?"

Sandy did not answer that one either.

*Dadaji*'s trusty old Ambassador bumped and

rattled all the way to their huge, two-storeyed mansion. Everything was the same and yet everything was different. There was no sound of *Dadi* in the kitchen, scolding her for eating too much raw *imli*—she was now a photo on the wall, its garland of *mogra* now dried. Everything looked old-worldly with no special thought given to decor or appearance—even the ancient egg-shaped fan whirled lethargically.

The sunlight filtering through the grill of the courtyard failed to lift Sandy's spirits. Two months here? Away from her favourite friends (who had plans to take on summer jobs for pocket money), away from her favourite music (no pop in P<sup>^</sup>lgarh, Mom's orders), away from her favourite<sup>^</sup>T.V. channels (*Dadaji* didn't even have a cable connection) and away even from her favourite clothes! Mom had packed her suitcase with long skirts and *salzvars*—includung *dupattas*, of course!

The days passed—dragging on at a snail's pace. The caretaker was Kishen *Kaka* and his wife, Shubhadra *Bai* did the cooking. She pampered Sandy with home-made buttered *rotis*, farm fresh vegetables, thick *kheers* and fresh *lassi* by the *lota* full. But how long could Sandy live to eat? *Dadaji* took her on walks, shook his head when she woke up at 8.00 and kept her company at every meal. Sandy let him think her boredom was only loneliness. If only..!

Within a week, her stock of books was finished.

So she started going out with Minu, Kishen *Kaka's* giggling, mischievous, little daughter.

Minu was quite a tomboy, the same age as Sandy but petite in build. She would wear a pink *lehenga* with a yellow top and look like a mismatched neon light. She laughed gregariously, ran around barefoot, climbed trees like a toddy tapper and was as devoted to *Dadaji* as her parents. She thought Sandy was a hoity-toity city slicker, but never showed it.

Minu chaperoned her Sandhya *didi* and even got her to splash around the field pump. Sandy went along because it was anyday better than watching the clock tick, but she was quite determined not to enjoy herself. At the back of her mind she often wondered what her friends would have to say if they saw her adjusting her dupatta, listening to *Dadaji* explain the harvest schedule while clinging to the rear seat of a bullock cart with Minu for company! Ugh!

Then one fine morning *Dadaji* gave her a cardboard box. What could it be? "I chose this for your birthday, Sandhya. It is tomorrow, isn't it? You could wear this for the special early morning *puja* at the Ganesh temple."

'*Puja?* Ganesh temple?' *Dadaji* was watching as Sandy opened the box. It was an exquisite *ghagra-choli* a rich purple with bright mirrorwork. She clucked involuntarily. Her eyes widened and she exclaimed, "Oh, but I had wanted a walkman!"



Sandhya has so far put up with abject boredom. She had been deprived of all the things she considered fun. No party. No eating out. And now this! What a birthday! So lost was she in self pity that she only said a quiet thank you to *Dadaji* and slipped away.

She went out to the garden and let Minu "ooh!" and "aah!" over the 'super' outfit. Her mood sank lower still and she left to sulk alone. Sandy lay in bed feeling trapped. Why could she not just have some plain, crazy fun? Why was she living her life by someone else's rules? When she finally drifted off to sleep, Sandy decided she had had enough. She was going to take the train back the next day.

She woke up with *Dadaji* knocking at her door. "Happy Birthday, *Betil* Time to get ready for the *puja*. I'll be waiting in the garden," and *Dadaji* was off, pretending everything was okay.

Sandy couldn't bring herself to face him. After her bath she decided to wear the purple *ghagra* after all. But where was it? She searched and searched and finally gave it up for her usual skirt. It's dull blue matched her mood. She went out and *Dadaji* was predictably put off.

"What do you mean you don't know? Couldn't you care enough about it?"

For the first time in her life, Sandhya felt *Dadaji* sounded visibly hurt.

Sandy regretted her attitude like she had never done before.

"I am sorry," she began sincerely. "I did not. "She did not know I had taken it," Minu chimed in from behind. Sure enough the box was with her! "I am terribly sorry, *Bade Saheb*. I could not resist it. I will never do something like this again," and Minu hung her head in shame.

*Dadaji* glowered at her and gave Sandy an apologetic hug, "I am sorry I lost my temper. You can change now. I will be in the car."

Too relieved to speak up, Sandy chased Minu to her room. "Why did you take the blame? Where did you find the box?"

"You left it in the garden yesterday. I thought I will teach you a lesson. But what is the point? *Bade Saheb* spent the whole year waiting for you to come. He had bought this dress ages ago. Do you understand how much he cares for you?" Minu's voice was blisteringly honest.

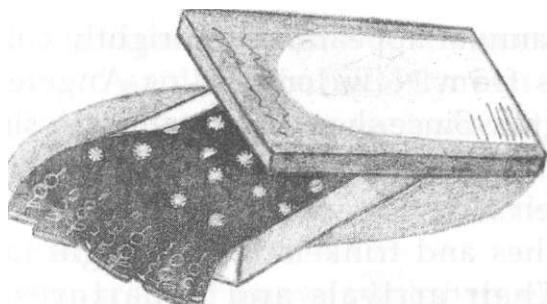
At that moment Sandy really understood. She gave Minu a warm hug. On this birthday she was going to give a present instead of receiving one. She changed into the *ghaghra*, went for the puja, saw *Dadaji* off on business to the town. Later, she had a ball with Minu. She plucked mangoes, milked a docile cow and pulled water from the well. Once she had shaken off her doubts, her spirits soared. Compromise was not so complicated after all!

When she got back home she found a gift-wrapped package on her bed. Inside was a brand new walkman and a dozen cassettes of the latest

pop hits. She turned round to find dear old *Dadaji* leaning by the door with a smile that lit up the room.

"Now my *beti* will not get bored here, no?" he said with a knowing twinkle in his eyes.

"Oh, *Dadajil* Thank you so much! But I think I am going to need it only after I go back to the city!"



## **Back Home**

*Scharada Bail*

They came in flocks in July and Shaila was used to their annual appearances—brightly coloured relatives from New Jersey, Los Angeles and Washington. Since she was a small girl losing her front teeth, then getting large new ones, she had taken their visits for granted, with the chocolates and clothes and trinkets they brought in their wake. Their arrivals and departures were inevitable and unremarkable, like the overseas birds flying overhead, on their way to Vedanthangal sanctuary in a later season.

The rush of lunches and dinners among her relatives in Chennai, which broke out like a seasonal ailment in honour of these kinsmen from the United States, was quite a pleasant diversion. Shaila was usually happy to notice who had got taller, who had become thinner, who had got braces on their teeth, and so forth. But that was as close as she had looked.

When her mother calmly announced over

breakfast one morning that Shiv Kelladi, son of her father's cousin, Jaya and Dr. Manohar Kelladi, was coming to spend a month with them to "know India and his people in India better", Shaila was indignant.

"Why here? Why can he not stay at Aunt Yamuna's house?" she asked, referring to her father's sister.

"Because you know Apoorva is appearing for his Board exam this year. Their hands are already full," said her mother.

"And you expect me to give up my room for him, don't you?" said Shaila, bitterly. Her brother, Sripathi had only recently gone away to study at the Regional Engineering College at Trichy. Before departing, he had handed over his room with great ceremony to Shaila.

Now this scene of many a battle between Shaila and her brother was to be tamely surrendered. No wonder Shaila was bitter.

"No, no, dear," said Shaila's grandmother soothingly from the corner where she was sitting with her prayer books. "There is no need to give up your room. Jaya's son can put his things in my room and sleep on the *divan*."

Shaila's mother looked as if this simple solution was not to her liking, since it involved no effort or sacrifice of any kind on Shaila's part. She would have said as much, if she was not getting late for the school where she worked as a special educator

of children whose hearing was impaired. "Be pleasant about this, Shaila/" she warned, "he's just a year younger to you. It might be fun."

But Shaila doubted it very much. She waited for her mother to get out of earshot, then exclaimed to her grandmother, "You know how much I hate those American kids, *Dhodamma!* I do not even know what to say to them. Why did Papa and *Amma* have to agree to this?"

"Do not worry, Shaila, he will probably be a wonderful chap. Even if he is 'American', as you put it, he is related to us. So getting to know him a little better cannot hurt, can it?"

"I do not need to know him better. I already know," insisted Shaila. "Those American kids make me want to laugh—hiding behind their mothers, clutching their bottles of mineral water, laughing when we have not even made a joke and sitting glum when we have! Shiv can come here if he wants, but if *Amma* thinks I will baby sit him, she is mistaken." And picking up her cycle keys, Shaila made a grand exit for school.

*Dhodamma* sighed.

At first sight it did seem that Shaila's bitter description had been all too accurate. While his mother squealed with delight and hugged everybody at the airport, Shiv hung back, slightly bent under the huge nylon backpack that presumably contained his things. His shoes were branded and his watch looked good too, but he was

built small for fourteen, and he hardly spoke.

His mother, Jaya Kelladi, an executive with a multinational company, had always seemed a larger than life character to Shaila. She had a different hairstyle on each visit to India, this time it was a frizzy perm that made her look vaguely poodle-like. She was spending a few days with Shaila's family before flying off to Bangalore, Mumbai, Delhi, and finally back home to California. Shaila spent the time in a state of utter fascination with Aunt Jaya's clothes, her mannerisms, especially the gestures she made with perfect, gleaming, long red nails. Her conversation was riveting too, about her long drive to work, visits to the gymnasium where she worked out, the organic food she bought, the huge parties she and her husband hosted and attended among the Indian community.

When she left, the house seemed to settle into a silence that closely resembled peace. Shaila came back from school and found that Shiv was playing chess with her grandmother. She was prepared to be irritated by the sight, but *Dhodamma* instantly appealed for her help, so that Shaila enjoyed suggesting crafty moves to defeat Shiv while munching on her cheese sandwiches.

After the game, she attempted conversation with Shiv. "How does your mother keep her nails so pretty when she is such a busy person," she asked.

"Her nails?" said Shiv, sounding surprised.

"They are acrylic ones. She gets them fitted at the salon and they last a few months, I think. When they break, you get new ones filled. My mother couldn't have nails like that of her own. She used to bite them till recently."

"Acrylic nails!" exclaimed Shaila. "How cool! I would love something like that."

"Oh, it is not so great," said Shiv, "my friend, Howie once found one of his mother's nails in the potato salad he was eating. It was really gross you know."

"I suppose so," said Shaila. She was thinking about a place where you never had to wait for anything to grow—seeds sprang up as full grown plants, hair grew as long as you wanted and nails, well, you could have such a long nail that you could slice pizza with it!

She was at home on Saturday, but studying for a test, so she had sanction for remaining holed up in her room while Shiv amused himself watching TV. Her mother had taken her grandmother to the dentist and her father was at the office. The noises from the TV filtered in to Shaila's room and she grinned to herself. Sure Shiv was getting to 'know his people' better in India through his people on Action TV!

The doorbell rang and Shaila let Shiv answer it. Why spoil the chap when he can walk? There was no one to criticize her boorish behaviour anyway.

In two minutes, Shiv was hovering in the

doorway of her room. "Shaila," he called in an urgent whisper, "please come. There is a...a man out here."

"What does he look like," asked Shaila, unconcerned. She knew it had to be one of the familiar characters used to ringing their doorbell for various purposes.

"He is...he is very dark," said Shiv, screwing up his face, as if regretting making such a comment. "And he smells of liquor," he finished delicately.

"Oh, Muniyandi!" said Shaila, getting up. She went to the door and smiled pleasantly at the man waiting there with his lungi tucked upto his knees and a folded gunny sack in his large, grimy hands. "Nothing to sell today," she said, "come next week."

When the door closed, Shiv asked, "Who is he?"

"The man who buys all our old newspapers and bottles, old taps and tin sheets and plastic milk sachets," said Shaila.

"Whatever for?" asked Shiv.

"For recycling, of course," said Shaila. "Everything is used at least twice in India. Often more than twice. And the man who collects our old stuff is everywhere—in every town and city, in every corner of the country."

"What! The same man?" squeaked Shiv.

"No dum..." Shaila caught herself just in time. "Different men, all doing the same thing. Indians reuse and recycle. We do not need Americans to

tell us that it is good for the environment."

"Oh," was all Shiv said. He looked thoughtful.

The next day, he opened the door to Vellaichamy, the fruit vendor. Looking down at a basket of fresh corn, papaya, guavas, bananas and the last of the mangoes, Shiv asked, "Is this stuff organically grown?"

"It is stuffed to bursting with pesticide," said Shaila, ignoring a warning look from her father, reading the paper nearby. "We know it will kill us, but we buy it anyway, because the money comes in handy for the old man."

Shiv looked at the man sitting behind the basket. He was peacefully chewing betel nut, waiting for Shaila's family to decide what they wanted. His arms were plain muscle and sinew, with hardly any covering of flesh. His clothes had faded past any concept of colour and a coiled up piece of cloth next to him was all that protected his head from the weight of the laden basket. He noticed Shiv's stare and gestured towards the basket. "Come, come, buy something," he said.

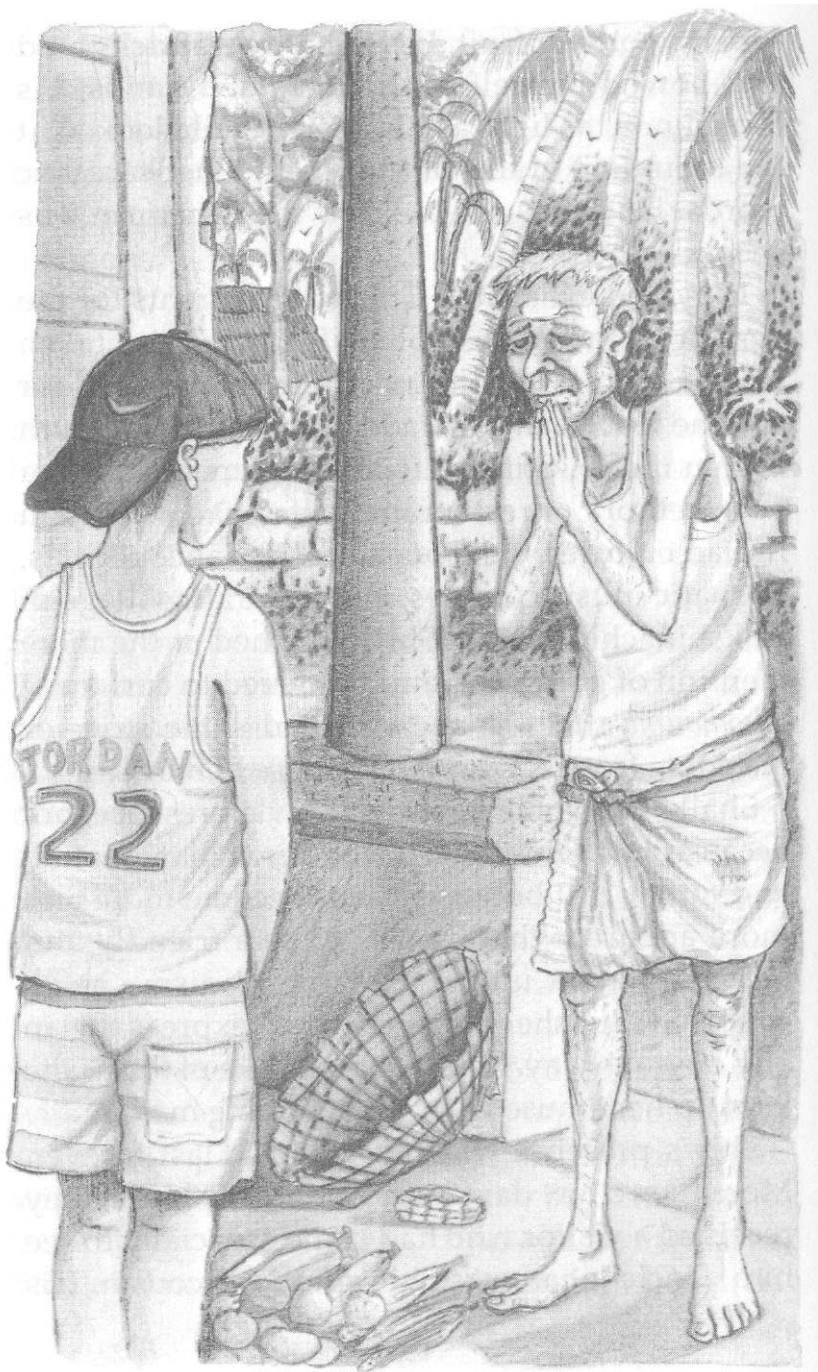
Shiv raced inside to his backpack. His mother had changed dollars into ten thousand rupees for him to use during his stay. Most of this money was with Shaila's parents for safe keeping. But Shiv had some money too. He went back to the front door with his wallet. Picking out nearly all the fruit and vegetables and disregarding the protests of Shaila's family, Shiv bought nearly four hundred

rupees worth of fruit. Vellaichamy was delighted and bowed himself out with folded hands, his basket now as light as his heart. Shaila looked at the mountain of fruit and regretted her sarcastic words. How was she to know the American was so tender-hearted?

They had exhausted Chennai's delights for the benefit of their guest. Shaila's family had taken Shiv to temples and the beach, the billiards parlour and the video games arcade. They had eaten South Indian meals, Chinese food and American Pizza at a plethora of restaurants. They had soaked in Indian culture by the bucketful at dance recitals, Carnatic music concerts, and the crafts village of Dakshinachitra. Now Shiv blanched at the mere mention of going out, and preferred to curl up at *Dhodmnma*'s feet as she narrated some story or anecdote from her vast storehouse of memories.

Shaila had come to accept Shiv's presence, not because it was forced on her by her vigilant mother and father, but because it had become more and more apparent that he was quite a friendly and helpful person under the Americanism she so despised. But she was reluctant to express this in any obvious way. If only for the sake of form, she kept up her amused, superior, pitying manner.

Shiv's presence was not going to last forever. Moreover, a few days before he was to leave, they received a visitor who had come especially to see him. Uncle Jagan was Shiv's father's cousin. His



frame was thin and stooping and his balding hair quite grey. He had the kindest face and eyes. Shaila thought it criminal that such a senior member of Shiv's family should make the effort to come from Mangalore to Chennai just to see Shiv, since His Highness was not going to Mangalore.

Uncle Jagan sat in their drawing room with Shiv next to him. Between mouthfuls of *vangi bhat* and coffee, he patted Shiv on the shoulder. "Will you sing for me?" he asked at length. "I have heard you sing very well."

Shaila got up to take away plates and tea cups. She knew the routine. 'People who settle abroad always cling more desperately to Indian culture than us locals,' she thought. 'Why do they leave, if they care so much? It can not be true caring if it believes in separation.'

She was in the kitchen when Shiv began singing, and the choice of song surprised her. He had begun *Jagadananda Karaka*, the first of Thyagaraja's *Pancharatna Kirthanams*, a difficult song in a *Ragam Nattai*. 'He will flop soon,' she thought.

But the singing gained in strength and feeling. Without any accompaniment, other than Shiv's hand-slapping his knee in rhythmic time to the *talam* of the song, the voice echoed in the house and stilled all movement.

Shaila returned to the drawing room to find Uncle Jagan's eyes closed and a stray tear stealing out from under one eyelid. *Dhodamma* sat rapt in

her chair. *Omkara panjara keera pura hara...sang* Shiv. He seemed oblivious to all else except his song. Not only were the notes falling with practised ease, there was a depth of pure emotion in them that brought goose pimples to Shaila's arms. She felt stunned.

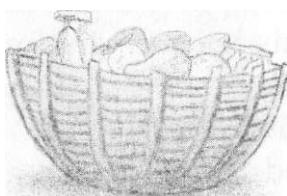
When the song ended, there was silence. Then Uncle Jagan took Shiv's face in his hands and kissed his forehead. "Beautiful, Shiva," he said, "they were right when they said you sing divinely. It is years since I heard such singing from a youngster."

"My guru is very strict, Uncle," said Shiv in modest explanation. Then looking at Shaila he said, "it is also to do with what my father keeps saying to me."

"What is that?" asked *Dhodamma*.

"He says we have to be India's best and America's finest," said Shiv.

Shaila could gladly have hugged him just then.



## Aruna's Request

*Scharada Bail*

The only good thing about the last year at school was that my parents bought me a moped. Black and shiny, with a steady, healthy engine sound; this vehicle meant a lot to me. A sticker on it proclaimed it to be India's largest selling moped, but I did not care whether this claim was true or false. All I knew was that the unremitting drudgery of being in Standard XII, with endless lectures about the importance of doing well in my exams, tuitions for all subjects and engineering entrance papers, was considerably lightened as I drove my moped down the breezy city roads, enjoying my all too few moments of freedom.

My books and papers fit comfortably in a small denim rucksack on my back and I could take an occasional pillion passenger, fellow sufferers like Sathya or George, also on their way to Maths tuition. The moped was such a comfort that I decided to call her 'Ranvijay', after the Indian naval ship that I had visited the summer before,

when it had come to Vizag port. Of course, this christening was only in my mind. I was not going to take the risk of saying the name aloud and inviting ridicule. I already had a few problems in that direction. Being six feet two inches, with a long neck, and large hands and feet invites its share of comment in the small community of school. Ostrich, they sometimes call me, or simply Yeti and other less complimentary names in Telugu.

On Sundays I take extra time to clean and gloss 'Ranvijay' pepping her up with soap water and a special polish for the chrome fittings that a man sells outside Vishakhapatnam station. It was on one such Sunday that I heard the whining and yelping of a small puppy. These agonised cries were punctuated by soft, crooning sounds of reassurance, somewhat like the 'kitchie-koo' noises my cousin, Shyamala makes every time she sees even a poster of a cute animal.

The bathroom of the ground floor flat of our building was close to where I was cleaning my bike and I realized that sometime during the previous week, a new family must have moved in. The earlier occupants were Mr. V.S.N. Rao and his wife, an irascible old couple that other neighbours in our building had happily waved farewell to when they went to join their son in the United States.

The new family obviously had a dog and the ministering voice seemed to be of their daughter. It sounded like she was bathing the animal and

he or she regarded it as a torture.

While I was still figuring this out, the door to the flat burst open at my side and a girl came out, carrying a wet puppy in her arms, bundled in a torn towel. She was slightly built, her hair was bunched into a knot kept in place with a purple cloth hairband. She wore jeans and a loose white T-shirt that had a faded collage of African animals in front, and the statement 'T am wild about animals, aren't you?' written on the back.

As I watched over the seat of my bike from my position sitting crouched on the ground, the girl walked to one of the benches set against the compound wall where elderly residents from our building sat in the evenings and observed the children play. She tenderly laid the puppy down in the sunlight and began drying its coat. It looked ill and miserable to me. It was a brown puppy with a black face like millions of others seen in every street in India. Its fur was missing in patches and there seemed to be red, sore spots in places. Fascinated and repelled at the same time, I watched the girl take out some ointment from a side pocket of her jeans and begin applying it to the sores.

I wiped the bike a couple of times more, then stood up. Immediately she glanced in my direction and I said, "Hello! You have moved in here?"

"Yes," she said. "Well...it was not much of a move really. We lived two streets away before coming

here. I am Aruna. What is your name?"

"Govind," I said. "Is that puppy a new find from somewhere nearby? It looks pretty sick.

"You should have seen it last week. You could not even recognize it was a puppy," said Aruna. "Now that its fur is growing back and some of these horrid wounds are healing, it is quite frisky at times. But the pup is not for me. I am just taking care of it for the Pushpaben Jain Animal Hospital and Shelter. I volunteer for the very sick animals, you know."

It turned out that she was studying Humanities in Class XI, at the girls' school where Shyamala too studied. "You are her cousin!" she exclaimed. "Why, she is a pretty good friend of mine even though she is a year junior."

Aruna seemed very serious and committed about her animal welfare work. I listened as she spoke about the kind of cases they saw at the shelter, how they had received threatening letters that had been traced to a meat shop chain and its proprietor.

She spoke fluently and effortlessly and the cloth with which I had cleaned 'Ranvijay' had almost dried in my hands when I finally turned to go up to the third floor flat where I lived with my parents. I said "Bye!" then turned to go when she said, "Listen."

I turned back. She had picked up the puppy to go back inside and was standing and smiling at



me. "You know the hair on the back of your neck? It curls just like some of the puppies' tails/" she said.

"Really?" I retorted. Did my expression show I \^as taken aback? I do not know. My voice sounded deeper than usual and strange to my ears. The hair that she had spoken of seemed to be standing in sheer embarrassment and the back of my neck felt warm. She really was an unusual girl.

Over the next few weeks it began to seem that Aruna had always been part of our neighbourhood scene. She had a never-ending stream of animal proteges—a dog with both hind legs fractured that she made a splint for with cardboard and scotch-tape, a cat whose stomach had been sliced open in a vicious fight. Some of the creatures were in such bad shape that it hurt even to look at them! Yet, they seemed to produce an inexhaustible tenderness in Aruna, tenderness that nevertheless possessed sufficient steel to fight for their survival.

She would regale me with stories of how others reacted to her charges and their inevitable side effects. Once, when Dr. Vasanth was throwing a fit about her latest sick dog relieving itself on his car—a gleaming, new luxurious one—while the little black creature was cowering in a corner, Aruna went into an attack mode. She pointed out how the dog was recovering from near death. She asserted it was too weak to walk that little extra out of the gate and she herself had gone inside to answer the phone. "How is a dog to distinguish a

piece of metal and rubber to be more precious than its life?" she finally challenged Dr. Vasanth.

The doctor scratched his cheek ruefully not expecting such a question just when he was heading out to work. "Well, if you would only teach it to distinguish between my car and old Mr. Naidu's Fiat, I'll be most grateful," was what he finally said and drove away.

I rejoiced in Aruna's victories as she related them to me. My own relationship with my neighbours had run a troublesome course—of windows broken during cricket matches, music being played too loud late into the night and other misdemeanors.

But for all her friendliness in the chance encounters of daily life—when I was parking my moped, or my bumping into her at the shop where we buy provisions—she became a different person when I made the smallest move to see her for herself.

I went to meet her one evening and spent the entire time listening to her younger brother talk about Formula One racing, the design of various cars, whether he would be able to sell his car designs for crores of rupees when he grew up, and similar stuff! All the while Aruna stayed in her room nursing a sick cat (it died the next day which gave me some satisfaction). What made it worse was, her mother kept humming a little tune and smiling at me in an amused manner, as if she knew I had come hoping to see Aruna and was being

subjected to her brother, Abhishek instead.

When my cousin, Shyamala came over, we both went to call on Aruna and ask her if she would come walking to the beach. She came to the door, showed every sign of great pleasure at seeing Shyamala, but when my cousin asked, "Govind and I are going to the beach. Like to come?" she seemed to visibly retreat. In the next minute she had made her excuse—she was taking Abhishek to her grandmother's house, then going to her friend's place.

I said nothing to Shyamala, of course, and just sitting at the beach was great after hours spent at Physics and Maths. But Aruna's instant rejection of any plans that involved me did hurt. Perhaps it was a special shyness that extended only to me while those blessed animals forever got her complete attention.

The combined strength of all my teachers coupled with a battery of surprise tests, assignments and sample question-paper exercises, took my mind off Aruna's attitude all of the next week.

One evening, as I left the Maths tuition class, a thunderstorm broke over Vizag. The setting sun lit up the clouds from the back, sending errant streaks between the dark shapes. The lightning was followed by impressive booms of thunder. Huge drops of rain began falling on me almost immediately after I started for home. But I did not

want to stop. I wanted to just reach home and eat my dinner which I could almost taste in extreme hunger.

When I was parking my bike close to Aruna's bedroom window, a voice suddenly spoke out of the shadows. "Govind? Did you get wet in the rain?"

"Yes," I answered shortly, holding back a more elaborate and more sarcastic response. I shook my head to clear water out of my eyes and lifted my denim rucksack from the box on the side of my vehicle.

"Lola and I have been looking at the storm," said Aruna, and now I could see the outline of the little striped kitten that had finally arrived to stay. Aruna and she were silhouetted in the light that came from inside the house.

"Good for you," I said. "That is your idea of fun, is it not? Enjoying the grand spectacle of nature with creatures that cannot talk and express themselves. Quite unlike thinking, feeling humans," I finished with some emphasis.

She was silent. I began walking in to take the lift. "What has got into you?" I heard her cry behind me. But I did not turn back to reply.

With a little discipline, she had all but faded from my life. I used the same knowledge of her movements that had led to our bumping into each other so often before, to avoid her now completely. I left earlier for classes, sometimes at 6 a.m.

I revved up the bike and drove, staring straight ahead, if I spied her on the road. The weeks were now leading faster and faster to my Board exams. Would my preparation ever be enough? I thought so, but my elders and betters did not.

And then, the exams had already come and gone. For a few days it felt strange not to have the relentless reminders, the prayers and the pressure, then I began to look towards the future, even look forward to other milestone exams!

My mother asked me to buy vegetables one day, and as I stood at the little shop, in the middle of this unglamorous errand, I spotted Aruna out of the corner of my eye. She seemed to be walking straight towards me.

"Govind," she said, and she was right next to me. "I went looking for you at your place and your mother said you would be here." She was smiling broadly and I felt an answering smile form in a reluctant response.

"Oh? What is the deal?" I asked.

"Nothing. No deal. I am just happy your exams are over. I am asking you to keep this as a gift, please?"

As she spoke, she was thrusting a small puppy at me. A little, black puppy with yellow paws and face, and a pink, hairless stomach. It was the first perfect, healthy, lively creature that I had ever seen her with. As if understanding what Aruna had said, the puppy squirmed in her hands and moved

to jump at me. Its shiny eyes were full of expression and its mouth was open, like in a grin.

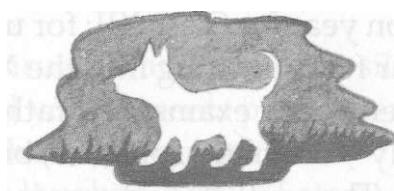
I accepted the little bundle. He felt warm and rubbery in my hands. My head was reeling with thoughts. 'How was I going to look after this fellow? What if I had to go to hostel soon? Had Aruna already spoken to my mother about this? How could I give up something so beautiful, so playful and alive? And how could I keep it?'

I finally tore my eyes away from him to look at Aruna. Even if she is a strange girl, she did look rather beautiful just then. And of course, I decided about the puppy that moment. Even if I had to go away, he would keep my parents company.

"What made you suddenly decide to land me with a puppy?" I asked.

"The thought of you taking this little chap for a walk," said Aruna promptly. "Think how you will both look. Huge guy, thin chain, tiny puppy at the end of it." Her hands made accompanying gestures to exaggerate what she was saying.

I stared at her. Then laughed out loud.



## A Question of Space

*Neera Kashyap*

Despite maintaining a consistent rhythm, Vikrant found himself completely out of breath at the end of the 3.2 km jog. His head pounded with the effort and with thoughts of the pressure his parents were mounting on him to gear up for the medical entrance tests, still a year-and-a-half away? Both successful doctors themselves, his parents were anxious that Vikrant ready himself to cope with the intensely competitive environment that had to be scaled for getting admission into a prestigious medical college.

Class XI had started with his mother's constant harping on the importance of the year for getting a good grip on science and maths; for viewing this as a foundation year for Class XII; for using this as a practice year for launching into the Xllth Board and medical entrance exams. His father quizzed him constantly—on maths, physics, biology—till his head spun. The conflicts had acquired a distinct edge ever since he had met Anuj who had spun

into his life like a new universe, right here on this jogging track.

Anuj was not just a person with dynamic ideas on photography, on the connectedness between human beings and all other living species; on self-improvement as a part of human evolution, on the cosmos. He had turned into a friend very quickly, a much older friend.

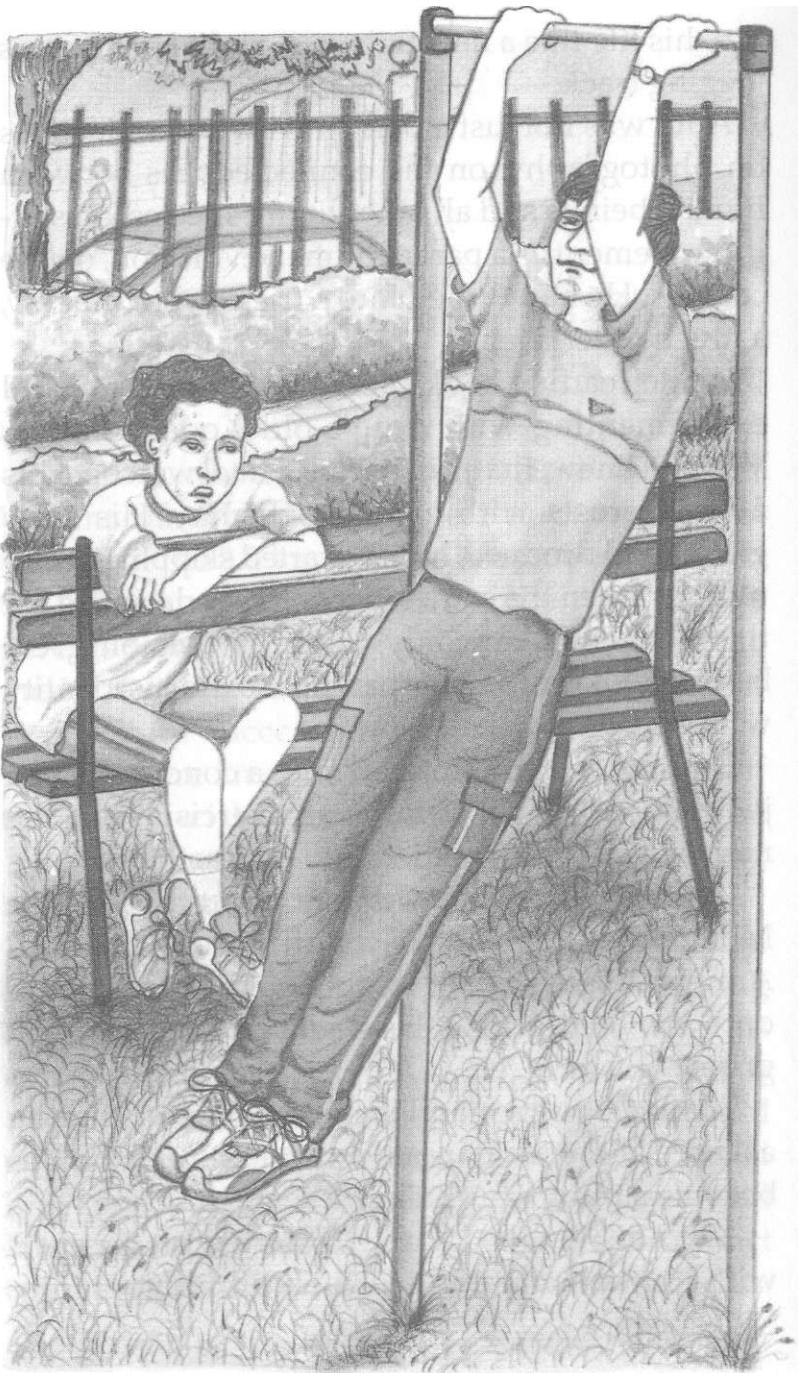
While reading books borrowed from Anuj and experimenting with Anuj's old Kodak camera, Vikrant knew that his parents had watched his new interests with growing dismay. His class grades had dropped; he had started skipping group tuitions, even the extra school classes designed for the weekends. An only child, as tension grew between Vikrant and his parents, so did his identity with Anuj.

Panting, Vikrant flopped onto a concrete bench just beyond which Anuj was exercising on the metal swing bars grouted into the earth.

"Nothing like a good workout under the blue sky. Much better than an air-conditioned gym," said Anuj with satisfaction, leaping off the bars to drop onto the bald grass. "Hey! what's up? You look grim."

Vikrant shrugged and there was silence. Then he asked, "Did your parents put pressure on you to become a photo-journalist?"

"Oh no!" laughed Anuj. "I started on my own with journalism and then took up photography



much later to make the stories alive visually." Then after a pause he said, "Is the pressure at home bad?"

Vikrant tried to shrug, but nodded instead.

"It seems to me that the pressure is worse for children of doctors, perhaps because medicine is considered the noblest among professions and gives prestige. But tell me, how do you react to pressure?"

"Oh, I explain, I argue, I snap! Sometimes I even walk out. It is worse when I lose control."

"Ya, but have you noticed how your body reacts?"

"My body? It... no, not really."

"If you want to get control over a situation, you could start by first observing your body's reactions —your posture, body temperature, muscle contractions, breathing, the taste in your mouth."

"How will that help?" asked Vikrant, doubtfully. "It will help you witness your reactions as if they were happening to someone else. By observing your body and its reactions, you also distance yourself from them. This distance will help you first see, then control your reactions," said Anuj.

"Then why not observe your body when you are feeling happy or excited or adventurous? Why only when you are under pressure?" quizzed Vikrant.

"Sure... Why not? Actually, our range of expression is quite limited. If we get familiar with our full range, we will become aware of all our

habitual expressions. But the next step is to practice expressions when there are no feelings to be expressed. I know this sounds daft, but think, if you can express emotions without feeling them, you can also feel emotions without expressing them," said Anuj.

"Like how?" asked Vikrant.

"Okay. Suppose you get news that you have won a free trip to the US, how would you react?" urged Anuj.

"The US? Wow!" exclaimed Vikrant, giving to his hands, body and face such an exaggerated expression of glee that both collapsed laughing.

Self observation happened on its own much sooner than Vikrant expected. At dinner that night his father asked, "Vikrant, have you found out which is the most suitable coaching centre for your medical entrance tests?"

"No," said Vikrant.

"No? What do you mean, no? If you still have not found out, when do you intend to enrol?"

"I don't know. I am already full up with tuitions—Bio, Maths, Physics, Chem. It is tough. I cannot do another tution." Vikrant noticed that his mouth was dry, his head tight at the temples, his body slightly hunched.

"Tutions for medical entrances are not just another tution. They coach you for a career, for a highly competitive exam. One wrong answer could make all the difference. It would be better if you

turned your attention to investigating a coaching centre rather than spend time with junkies and irrelevant things," finished Vikrant's father.

Vikrant noticed that his father's last remark sent a strong wave of heat through his otherwise weary body, galvanising him to leave the room without another word. Vikrant knew these conflicts were not getting him anywhere. It was not as if he felt Medicine was all wrong for him. He just did not want to be bulldozed like this. Bulldozed into working three shifts a day, six days a week. He felt he needed time to pursue his own interests and pleasures, especially after his meeting with Anuj. Anuj spoke to him on various issues—of the beginnings of life, the places he travelled to, the elements he used to compose, a photograph, self observation. "If you can express yourself without feeling, you can feel as well without expressing," he had said.

When alone, Vikrant tried to practise emotions he did not feel. At first these were of joy, spontaneity, excitement. When he felt more neutral, he practised a wider range—suspicion, hostility, daring, joy, scorn—each with its accompanying posture and gestures.

His experiments with self observation helped him see a whole range of his body reactions, the effect that different emotions had on the body and how the mind got involved with these. But things did not seem to change with his parents who, he

realized, would continue treating him like a child so long as he just chafed and reacted.

"Don't worry too much about change," advised Anuj, noting Vikrant's discouragement one evening. "You cannot really change anything till things are ready for change. Just do your part."

"Ya...h, but it is not helping," said Vikrant with dejection.

Anuj thought for a long while. Then he spoke, "If you really want to get control over a situation, there are two more steps for you to practice. The moment an active feeling comes which you think should be controlled, observe it but don't express it."

"What is the last step?" asked Vikrant, almost mechanically.

"The last one is difficult," replied Anuj. "This step involves expressing an emotion opposite to what you are feeling and can be done only if you have practised the other steps. Suppose you are feeling agitated, you observe this but choose to express calm or warmth instead of coldness."

"As simple as that?" laughed Vikrant, a little hopelessly.

"As simple as that," replied Anuj, quietly.

Vikrant kept up his exercises in self observation, practising emotions he did not feel, even attempting not to express feelings that came up hot and strong. He felt small stirrings of change. He could see things more objectively even when he could not control his reactions. His parents

were pushing less, listening more. He noticed that instead of both of them speaking in one voice at points of control or friction, one spoke while the other refrained. This was leading to much more interaction except on the subject of Anuj.

"Are you still hobnobbing with that character...what is his name?" asked his mother at breakfast one morning. His father's silence was expectant. Vikrant observed his temples tighten, his hunched shoulders straighten out in confrontation, his pulse become irregular.

"His name is Anuj, Mummy," he replied, "Anuj Jain. Anuj is a friend...infact more...he teaches.. .From him I have learnt so many things. Things that are hard to explain."

"Yes, but he will not be sitting for your entrance tests, will he? If you lose your grip on Class XI, you will never catch up in Class XII," said his mother, assertively.

As Vikrant felt his temples throb, a sudden calm entered his heart. "If I am allowed space for new interests, I will also find space for what is important for a career," he said, quietly.

This time it was his father who spoke. "Fine. Try to achieve a balance. We will be with you."

At the end of Class XI, Vikrant enrolled for classes at a coaching centre for medical entrance tests. He did this with an awareness that it was the right thing for him to do.

## The Fairness Syndrome

*Thangam Krishnan*

Pavithra kicked off her shoes sending them flying under the rack. She then went straight into her room and fell on the bed with a thud. She was extremely upset.

The girls Anu, Deepa, Viji and Shahnaz went with her to the same school and lived in the same neighbourhood. That evening they had been playing throwball in the nearby ground as usual. Once when Pavithra had missed the ball, Shahnaz had snapped, "Hey! *kali baingan* (black brinjal), can you not hold on to the ball? Have you got butter fingers?"

"You have no right to call me that," Pavithra had answered, "I am leaving."

"Pavithra, do not mind Shahnaz," cried the others, "just because she has fair skin, she thinks others are inferior."

Seeing that Pavithra was determined, they too got ready to go home. Shahnaz's pleadings could not stop them.

Pavithra was good in sports and games. She was clever in studies too, besides having an excellent voice. Inspite of all her talents, she could never understand how the colour of her skin was so important to some.

"Amma, Pavithra is home," she could hear her younger brother, Saurab's voice. "Let us have dinner. I am hungry."

"Pavithra, come dear," called her mother.

That helped her get rid of her blues. She got up for a wash. Her lovely eyes and silky skin were some of the assets of her tall, slim, lithe 14-year-old body. Her movements were graceful and light—like the gentle waves of a calm sea coming one after the other to touch the sandy shore.

Humming a tune, Pavithra changed into a simple, yellow dress, tied her long hair in a pony tail with the same coloured band and came out of her room.

"Um . . . onion and brinjal *sambhar*, potato roast, cucumber *raita* and *papad*," she inhaled deeply, appreciating the aroma of food as she sat at the table. "My favourite food," she heaped a spoonful of rice onto her plate and added the *sambhar* and vegetables.

The sight of the brinjal on her plate brought back Shahnaz's remark about the colour of her skin. She toyed with her food, her thoughts elsewhere. Shahnaz was very fair with a flawless complexion and reasonably good looks. She was visibly proud

of the fact and arrogant because of it.

"Eat properly, pet," coaxed her grandmother, "We have *payasam* for dessert."

Pavithra quickly finished her food and left the table. The sudden transition worried Granny. She followed Pavithra to her room.

"What happened, dear? You seem upset."

"What is wrong with the colour of my skin, Granny?" tears stung her eyes.

"Nothing." She hugged her little grand daughter consoling her as she cried. "How can anyone hurt you like this?"

As Pavithra recovered, she sat beside her on the bed. "Human beings seem to get sadistic pleasure by passing such remarks. They will call a short person *natu*, a fat person *motu* and if a person is lame, *langda*. It is wrong, insensitive and cruel," Granny sounded helpless.

Pavithra soon forgot the incident, atleast she tried to. But there were others who constantly reminded her of it.

"Be fair in fourteen days!" screamed a commercial, "this cream will transform you!"

Pavithra thought for a long time. The next day, on her way back from school, she purchased a tube of the cream. Closing the door of her room, she applied it evenly on her face after a wash. Quite against her nature, she even hid it from her mother.

After a few days, her mother noticed there was something wrong.

"What is it, Pavithra? You look pale."

"Nothing, Mother."

"I have a hutch there is something."

Unable to deny any further, Pavithra brought the cream and silently held it in front of her mother.

"Come on, Pavithra," smiled her mother indulgently, "you do not have to impress anybody with the colour of your skin when you have so many other qualities. Do not develop a complex."

'Easy to say,' thought Pavithra. However it was Naveen's remark that made her abandon the cream forever.

Naveen was in the same class as Pavithra and her friends. A very good student, he always competed with Pavithra for the top rank. Yet, he was withdrawn and quiet and did not speak much to the girls.

It was the day of the Physics paper during the half-yearly exams. Pavithra had a song in her heart. Her paper had gone exceedingly well. As she was walking down with her friends, somebody called out to her.

"Hey! Pavithra! can you spare a second?"

It was a voice which was new to her. "I want to discuss this paper with you."

Turning around, the girls were surprised to see Naveen walking towards them. As Pavithra and Naveen talked animatedly, Shahnaz happened to pass that way on her bike. She was quite shocked to see them together. Anger and jealousy overtook all

other emotions and held sway over her. She pedalled her bike so hard only to land with a loud crash. She had not noticed the big stone lying on the way.

"Shahnaz!" screamed the girls as they rushed to help her. But Pavithra and Naveen, the good athletes that they were, reached her side faster. Pavithra bent to pick Shahnaz, putting both hands under her arms, while Naveen lifted the cycle. The other girls too were there by now.

"Do not touch me, *kali baingan!*" hissed Shahnaz, looking at Pavithra as though she would strike her.

They were all shocked beyond belief. Anu was the first to recover.

"How wicked and ignorant you are, Shahnaz!" she shouted. "You are obsessed with your fair skin which has made you intolerant and blind."

It was then that Naveen made that remark. "Some people are fair only from outside. Others may be dark from outside but very fair from within...like Pavithra."

With that Naveen and the girls walked away, leaving Shahnaz to fend for herself.

Shahnaz was lonely. Her friends had dwindled. In fact, they avoided her. Weeks passed. Soon it was time for the school's Annual Day Function. Hectic preparations were on.

The Principal was searching for someone to do mono-acting. The character chosen was that of Draupadi from the eternal classic *Mahabharata* and the scene would be 'Draupadi's vow'. In the scene

Draupadi would take a vow not to tie her long hair until the insult meted out to her by the *Kauravas* in the King's court was avenged. The Principal screened all the possible contenders and finally chose Pavithra.

In the meantime Shahnaz, who had heard about the role, was very keen to do it. She loved acting and held secret ambitions of becoming an actress when she grew up. She did not want to miss the chance of enacting the great character from the classic. It would be a challenge. She went to the Principal's office and walked in, determinedly.

"Excuse me, Ma'am," she began, "can I speak to you for a moment? It is rather important."

"Yes, child," the principal was surprised at the uncharacteristic temerity of her student. "What is it?" her eyebrows going up in a question mark.

"Ma'am, please let me do Draupadi's role," she pleaded.

"No, Shahnaz," replied the Principal "You are too fair for the role. We have already chosen Pavithra."

'Too fair? But is that not a quality of beauty? What was she saying?' Such questions raced through Shahnaz's mind.

"But, Ma'am..." she hesitated, "she is dark."

"Exactly. If you read the *Mahabharata* carefully you would realize that the great classical character was a dark beauty whom everyone admired."



Shahnaz's head reeled. She realized that in this case her fair skin was of no use to her. In fact, it had proved to be a handicap! Her pride and ego were punctured.

On the final day everything went on smoothly. It was now time for Pavithra to come on stage. As the queen of the *Pandavas* she looked lovely, dressed in a blue sari with long, silver earrings, necklaces, anklets and a silver waist band. Her long hair was open. When she delivered her lines with blazing eyes and walked round the stage to finally make the vow, the spellbound audience broke into a loud applause.

Shahnaz was stunned. Here was a true actress, Draupadi, in flesh and blood! Pavithra's long tresses and brown skin had added to the glamour of the *Pandava* queen.

At the end of the show she rushed to Pavithra's side hugging and congratulating her. Pavithra was totally taken aback and did not know what was happening. Naveen came too. "Pavithra," he said, quietly, "you were just wonderful!"

This time Shahnaz did not mind.

As Shahnaz walked away, she inhaled deeply with eyes closed. She felt different. A load lifted off her, as though she was rid of a handicap—the fairness syndrome.

She felt lighter and better too.

## A Decision

*Devika Rangachari*

Aruna took a long sip of her orange drink and sighed. "Tara, this is lovely," she said. "It is somehow tangier than the orange squash we buy."

"Oh, that is Mummy's secret!" grinned Tara. "I do not know when she gets the time to make it. But then," she added frankly, "you know me. I am too lazy to care."

"She should send the recipe to a magazine or something," said Aruna, setting down her empty glass.

"Oh, she is really talented," remarked Tara, trying hard to keep the pride out of her voice but not quite succeeding. "She was quite good in studies—my grandmother keeps telling me that. She is good at her job too. And she manages to keep an eye on everything at home. She makes me feel so tired sometimes—rushing about like that all the time!"

Aruna felt a tiny, unaccountable prick of

annoyance and jealousy at this. "My mother was a gold medallist in college," she said, wondering why she sounded so defiant. "She did English, you know. She is wonderful with quotations and grammar and all that."

"Really?" Tara looked duly impressed but Aruna suddenly felt the desire to change the subject. The girls chatted about their school and friends.

"It is quite boring this year, is it not?" said Aruna. "No new girls, same old teachers, same..."

"Not same teachers," interrupted Tara, looking animated, "I forgot to tell you, Mrs. Singh's going away. That will not affect us in the VH1th, but the V11th class will have a problem. I overheard Sister Angela and some other teachers in the staffroom talk yesterday. They said it would be so bothersome to find a new teacher at such short notice. But Mrs. Singh is determined to go to the U.S. to her sister. I am not surprised. You know how stubborn she is."

"Oh well, how does that affect us now?" said Aruna. "It will be funny without her in school, though." She got on to her feet. "I will see you tomorrow, okay?"

"Wait a minute," said Tara. "You said your mother is a gold medallist in English. Why does she not apply for Mrs. Singh's post?"

"What?" exclaimed Aruna. "Don't be silly! She does not have all those degrees you need for teaching. I know that."

"No, but my mother always says that if a person is really good for the job, then other things do not matter. Tell her to try anyway."

Aruna muttered something and walked home, her mind seething with thoughts. Her mother going to work? No, that was impossible! Who would look after her and Varun when they returned from school? What about the cooking and the homework and the maidservant and the keys and Aruna's dance class and...?

No, no. The whole house would be thrown into confusion if Mummy went to work. 'I cannot let it happen/ thought Aruna uneasily. 'It's all right for Tara. She is used to it, but I am not. I would hate a change like that. I am not going to manage Vivek and everything/ And she pushed the disturbing thoughts away from her mind.

Back home her mother said, "I have made your favourite sweet today—fruit cream and custard. Wash your hands and come and eat. Please tell Vivek to hurry up."

Without warning, all the earlier thoughts flooded back into Aruna's mind. She pushed them away again and focussed instead on the lovely dinner she would have. Somehow, she felt irritable and edgy. Vivek gave his elder sister a wide berth that evening, wisely guessing her mood.

The following day, during the Moral Science period, Sister Angela asked the girls what they wanted to be when they grew up.

"I thought we were grown up—well, almost," muttered Tara to Aruna. Aloud she said, "Sister, I want to be a writer."

"That is good," said Sister Angela. "Mind you, pay attention to your spelling and grammar then. And you, Aruna?"

Aruna racked her brain frantically, searching for an answer.

"I...I think I want to be a teacher," she said at last.

"I see," Sister Angela smiled. "Perhaps you will join your own school to teach then?" She passed on to the next girl without waiting for a reply.

Aruna felt her thoughts wandering. How funny that she might be a teacher in this school someday! She had never seriously thought of this. Then she found herself thinking of her mother as a schoolgirl. 'What had she wanted to be when she grew up? Did she feel as confused as Aruna felt now? Or had she decided everything right from the beginning?' She wondered, with a faint feeling of surprise, why she had never thought of asking her mother all this before?

That afternoon Aruna noticed, perhaps for the first time, the way her mother tended to her and Vivek when they returned from school. Their clothes were laid out, their food was hot and ready on the table and a host of loving questions enveloped them as they ate. Homework was next on the agenda and mummy's help was right at

hand. When Aruna left for Tara's place in the evening, mummy was preparing the dinner.

'If I was in mummy's place, I would feel so bored,' thought Aruna with a grimace. 'Just cooking and cleaning and nothing else. What was the point in studying so hard and getting a medal then?' She felt a sudden pang of sympathy for her mother. Did she ever want to go out somewhere and do something by herself or...?

She reached Tara's place even before she realized it. Tara's mother was there, having come home early from her office.

"I have not seen you for a long time, Aruna," she greeted the girl. "How is mummy? Tara says there is some plan of getting her to teach in your school? Is that so?"

"Actually, Aunty..." began Aruna, but Tara's mother went on...

"I hope it works out for her. She need not worry about anything. You are a responsible little girl—more diligent than my lazy Tara. You will work things out well."

Aruna felt a glow of pride at this. No one had ever called her responsible before and it sounded so impressive. She thought hard. Would it be so difficult after all? Yes, it would be a change, but not something she could not handle. All evening she revolved the question in her mind, hardly listening to Tara's chatter.

When she returned home, her mother was laying

the table for dinner. Aruna went up to her and asked, "Mummy, what did you want to be when you grew up?"

"Why the sudden question?" laughed her mother. "Okay, let us see. I always wanted to teach."

"Then why did you not?"

Her mother shrugged her shoulders. "Well, I got married. Then you two came along. I suppose I just let go of the idea." Then she said in a brisker tone, "Papa will be back late today. He is eating out. So let us have our dinner now."

After dinner, Aruna took out some old family albums and settled down with her mother on the sofa. Vivek was busy with his tram set and took no notice of them, for which Aruna was thankful. Mother and daughter turned leaf after leaf and the past came back to life before their eyes. There were photos of Aruna's mother on an elephant, in a fancy dress outfit, in her school uniform and finally, in her college graduation gown with a huge cup in her hands. Aruna did not turn the leaf but watched while her mother laid her hand gently on the photograph.

"My parents were so proud of me," she murmured. "I will never forget that day."

In that instant, Aruna's mind was made up. "Mummy, if you got an offer now, would you work?" she asked, breathlessly.

"What?" her mother was taken aback. "Oh, I do



not know. Who would look after the home and...?"

"Mummy, I am going to be fourteen," broke in Aruna, "why can't I help out? And anyway, with a school job, you would be back in the afternoon. There is no problem if you want to, Mummy."

She was touched to see the glow on her mother's face though all she said was, "Let us see. I will have to discuss this with your father."

Aruna turned away, satisfied. She knew her father would not object to the idea. In fact, he would be very pleased. This would be a chance to show her parents that she could be trusted. Papa was always calling her a little girl and she hated that! Tomorrow she would talk to Sister Angela. Her mother might not join their school but another one. However, it did not matter now.

Perhaps there would be problems with this change, with Vivek, with a whole lot of other things. Arun looked again at the smiling face in the photograph. Now she could talk proudly of her mother—the gold medallist and teacher.



## Dancing Like A Tree

*Swati Bhattacharjee*

Sweat was running down her spine, making her dress stick to her. The bag of *ghungroos* banged against her back painfully as Minnie hurried on. "I am leaving at seven, exactly," Mayur had said. And Minnie knew Mayur would do just that. So what if it was Minnie's first party. So what if she was planning for it for weeks. Mayur would float into the car and ride away to the party, leaving Minnie behind.

Minnie bit her lip as she came to a crossing where cars formed a solid, many-layered wall. Mayur always left Minnie behind. To start with, she had arrived three years earlier into the world. Minnie was left to pick up Mayur's toys, fit into her discarded frocks, read books that had been marked and thumbed.

The red eye of the traffic light glowed and Minnie joined the crocodile that set out to cross the street. 'Mayur', she thought, 'how could one with such a name not be arrogant?' Mummy and Papa had

discussed names for days before they had zeroed in on that one. As for Minnie, Mayur had told her sister, she was so scrawny that Mummy had called her 'Minnie' without a moment's thought. Minnie, like the mouse—the girlfriend of Mickey.

At 13, Minnie knew she would have to live with a silly, funny name—a name that was not she at all, as she would have to live with her plain looks and curly hair.

But today, she would borrow Mummy's golden-yellow silk dupatta. She would wear it over her maroon organza *salzvar* suit. She would look good. She would dance.

'That is one thing you can do well,' Minnie reassured herself as she climbed the stairs to their flat. 'You can dance. Mrs Kutty told you so herself today. Mrs Kutty, the most respected guru in the city, has taken you in her special class, the best twelve pupils among hundreds of...'

"I should have left ages ago."

Mayur's words, delivered with the slight lisp of her favourite screen heroine, jerked Minnie out of her reverie. Her slim legs encased in tight, white trousers, her purple top casting a glow on her heart-shaped face, Mayur stood at the head of the stairs. So proud, so beautiful. Something stirred within Minnie, something she could not put a name to. To this bully who made her feel like a mouse, a doormat, a total mistake, she could only smile and say, "Is it already seven?"

As she peeled off her sweat-soaked dress, Minnie wondered what that feeling could be. Mayur, who never passed off a chance to rebuke her. Who would share nothing but guilty secrets. Who never let Minnie watch a TV channel of her choice. What could one possibly feel for that selfish oaf of a sister?

"Yellow and maroon?" Mayur was standing at the door.

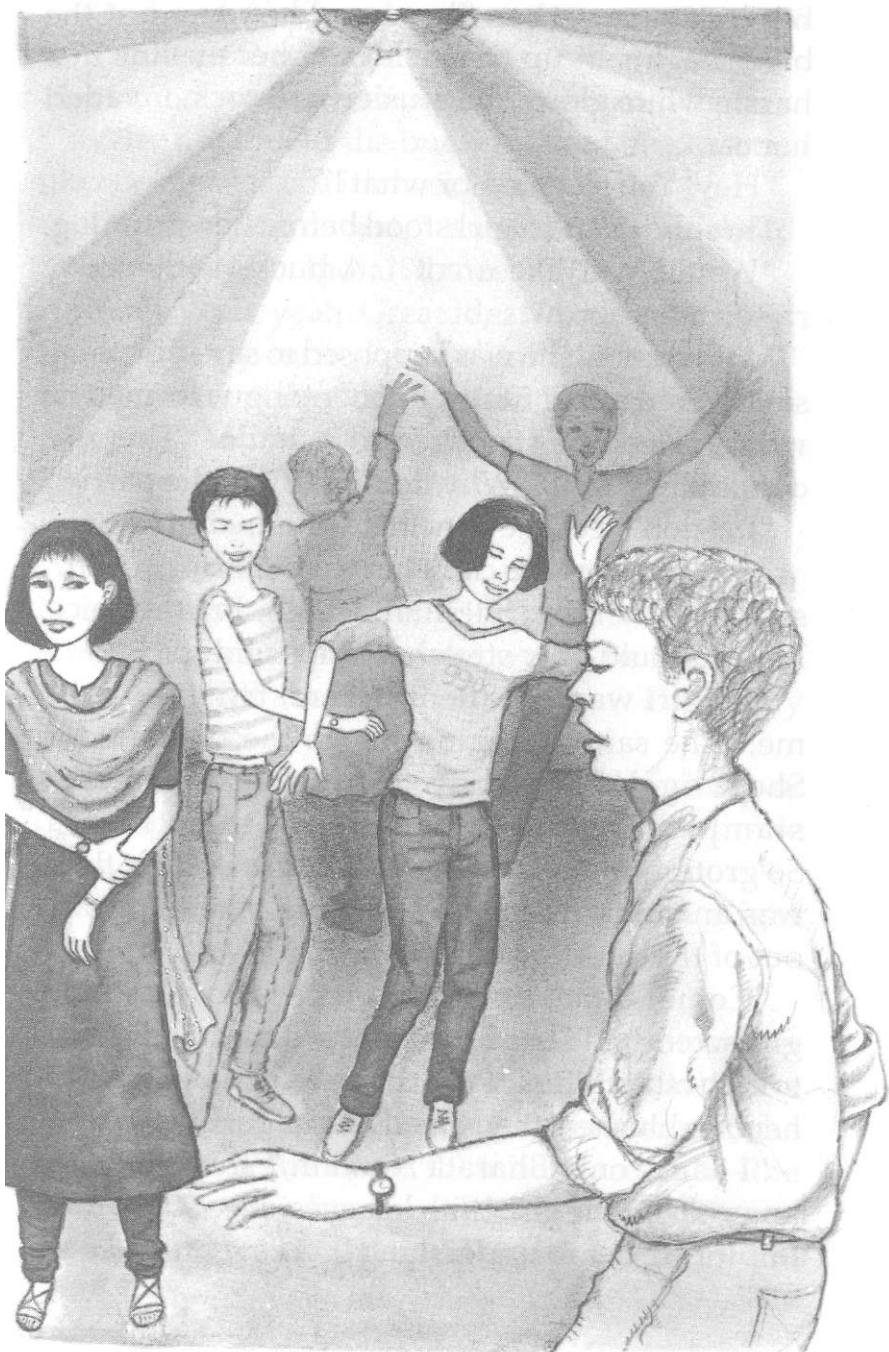
Minnie looked down at her dress, then at the mirror. Suddenly, the combination that had looked so bright and cheerful, so right for a party, seemed too loud.

"And you have smudged the eye liner."

'Thanks!' thought Minnie. There would be no time to do the eyes afresh. She had time only to strap on her high heels and follow Mayur down. She slammed the car door so hard that the chauffeur scowled at her. Minnie turned away and looked unseemingly at the bright shops flashing past.

At the party, Mayur's friends whisked her away. Brightly clad figures jived away all around. Every one seemed to know every one. Minnie knew no one.

'My first party,' thought Minnie. Suddenly she felt tired, empty. She looked for a place to sit but they had removed all the chairs and sofas. Minnie could only creep to the most shadowy part of the room, press her back against the cool wall and beg



her legs to carry her. She closed her eyes but the bright lights lit up the insides of her eyelids in a harsh, white glow. The music, hard rock, invaded her ears.

"Hey! You sleeping or what?"

Three boys and a girl stood before her, grinning. "Would you like a cot?" A buck-toothed boy raised an eyebrow.

Minnie knew she was supposed to say something smart. Something funny. But her tongue formed no words. Her lips stretched to a smile. "This is a dance party, right? Why don't you join the party?"

"I..I don't feel like dancing," stammered Minnie.

"Oh, come on. We can't have people dozing off," snapped the girl. She had a high, brittle voice. Minnie could only stretch her lips wider.

The girl was impatient. "Here, try it out with me," she said, dragging her to the dance floor. She wriggled her body to the music. The boys stamped their feet and threw their hands. So grotesque, so graceless! Merely watching them was an embarrassment. 'Dancing' like them was out of the question.

"Come, come, can't you move your feet?" the girl screeched. The boys laughed and whispered to each other. Minnie knew they were speaking about her. She blushed, then hated herself for blushing.

"I dance only Bharata Natyam," she spoke in a low voice to the girl. With her eyes, she sought hers, imploring her to understand.

"Oh great! You want to dance Bharata Natyam in a dance party?" the girl raised her eyebrows. Her eyelids were green with make up.

"Why not?" said the buck-toothed boy. "Let us have some classical dance, *yaar*."

"Oh yes, fusion art," another boy sneered. "Western music, Indian dance."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Great idea!" laughed the girl. She suddenly turned and shouted, "Attention!" Someone turned off the music. The girl told the party that Minnie would show them some fusion art. Everyone turned to look at Minnie. The floor was cleared.

Minnie was rooted to the spot. She knew Mayur's eyes were among the hundreds of pairs looking at her. She knew she would be reminded of this day till she died. The cartoon. The funny one who gives everyone a good time.

The music was turned on again and it lashed out of the speakers even louder, pouncing on Minnie like an angry animal.

There was a hand on her shoulder. A slight squeeze. Mayur's.

Their eyes met, as never before.

Slowly, Minnie took the *dupatta* down from her shoulders and bound it around her waist. She slipped off her heels. In one fluid movement she bent, touched the floor, then her forehead—the traditional way of paying respect to the dancing arena—and was in the middle of the room.

Her ears, trained by years of *riyaz*, strained the beats out of the music. Beats that make up a rhythm, a *taal*.

"A dancer responds to a *taal* as the river to the moon," Mrs Kutty had told her students. But the beats of hard rock were not like the gentle pull of the moon. They showered upon Minnie like hailstones, whirled around her like a storm, rumbled like thunder...

Suddenly, Minnie became a tree. Like a tree after the parched summer months, she stretched her arms and absorbed the music. She swayed to its tune. Its force had her kneeling one moment, leaping into the air on the next. She became the storm, the rain, the lightning, the fallen nest, the frightened bird. Her fingers gave new meaning to ancient *mudras*, her feet made the floor shake—now with exhilaration, now with fright. Her eyes spoke a language she never knew she possessed.

By the sheer mastery over her body and her art, Minnie subordinated the music that had challenged her. It was no longer an adversary but an accompanist. It struggled to keep up with Minnie. Soon it was trailing behind. It panted, petered away and died. The sound boxes fell silent, exhausted.

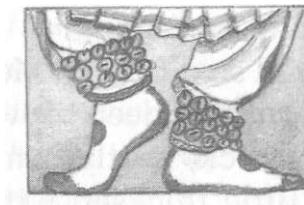
Exactly at the same moment, Minnie was absolutely still. "The perfect dancer," Mrs Kutty always said, "knows when to stop."

For a moment the room was silent. Then cheers

broke out. Hands sought Minnie's hands, eyes tried to meet her eye. Minnie shook hands, exchanged smiles, accepted admiring words.

In the car, Minnie tried to find words for Mayur. But, as usual, Mayur was the first to speak. "Next time you slip out of your shoes, think of your toes first. Peeled off nail polish looks awful. And for God's sake, use an anti perspirant. Sweaty armpits are absolutely ugh!"

Minnie sighed, closed her eyes and leaned back. She could think of a thousand replies but could not utter a single word. That familiar, nameless feeling stirred within her again. At that moment Minnie realized that it would always be like this. Adoration and despair, gratitude and resentment, would always be woven into each other to form that immensely complex thing called love.



## **Shame**

*Vandna Khare*

"Meeta, look after the stall while I meet the manager," Mother said and left the shop in 13-year-old Meeta's and *Didi*'s hands.

"Of course!" Meeta jumped from the counter where she had been hanging paper fans from the ceiling. Their stall was so colourful and pretty with the fans fluttering in the wind.

*Didi* was playing with the fans they had spent all summer in painting. Open-close. Open-close...*phat phat phat phat*...she went. Her mouth hung loose to one side as she concentrated on opening and shutting the fans.

Both sisters looked so different. Meeta was tall for her age, sunburnt to a deep brown with big, round eyes and quick, restless movements. *Didi* was pale, a little thickset, with eyes that slanted upwards.

Finally Meeta intervened, "*Didi* don't. They may break. Then no one will buy them and we will not have any money when we return to Karnal."

But *Didi* continued opening and shutting the fans, oblivious of the rude stares of the customers.

Meeta turned away from her when one of the customers asked "How much for one?"

"Ten rupees," Meeta answered the lady, spreading open a few more fans for the lady to choose from.

The woman bargained "That is a lot for one. Give it for eight."

"No," Meeta shook her head, "I cannot do that. The price is fixed."

"It is only a small little fan, child, make it nine." The woman persisted.

"No, Aunty;/1 cannot do that."

All right...all right...then how much for two of them?"

"Rs 20," Meeta answered.

The lady gave up and smiled, "Okay...you are obviously not from Delhi... Well...you will do well. They are pretty...did you make them yourself?"

Meeta nodded. The *phat-phat* of *Didi* opening and shutting the fans continued.

"What's wrong with her?" the lady asked.

Meeta bristled saying, "Nothing...nothing at all." She was so abrupt that the lady gave her a quick look and left immediately. She hated it when people stared at *Didi* like she was a curiosity. Meeta knew she was different. She had been slow in learning even though she was older and of late she could not do any of the things Meeta could do so easily.

Though she was three years older than Meeta, they had initially been in the same class until *Didi* slipped back. The children in school laughed and teased her calling her *buddhu* or *pagal*, and Meeta was *pagal ki bahan*. Meeta would be close to tears but would turn away so that she was not tempted to retaliate. At times like these she wished *Didi* were not her sister. Then immediately she felt ashamed of her thoughts.

'It was not right to feel that way about her sister,' she thought. *Didi* could not help it. Nor could the doctors at the Government Hospital in Karnal help her. Her mother never said anything, but would look visibly upset when their relatives would so heartlessly say, "Oh! it's such a pity, the elder daughter is quite mad, you know."

Her father would often be angry with *Didi* for failing in class. *Didi* tried her best... But what was she to do if she could not think as fast as the rest of them? She tried so hard to learn the same things over and over again. Meeta wished she did not have to struggle to do things she herself did so effortlessly.

A man's voice shook her out of her thoughts. "Do you have them in green?" he asked, opening a couple of fans.

Meeta shook her head "No, only white."

"That is too bad." He turned to go away but his wife asked, "Can I see some more?"

Meeta went to the back of the stall, opened the

big trunk and rummaging through it, pulled out some more fans. She returned to the counter and spread them out for the lady to choose one that she liked.

She could hear *Didi* telling someone, "Rupees ten for one."

"Look at this one...isn't it really pretty?" the woman held the fan up for her husband to see.

"Meeta, take this money." *Didi* slid a ten rupee note into Meeta's palm.

Concentrating on her customers Meeta asked her, "For how many?"

"For ten fans, Meeta! Ten fans!" *Didi* smiled proudly, "I sold ten fans to this gentleman!"

"Ten for ten?! Hey! Mister...please wait..." Quick as lightning Meeta vaulted over the counter and grabbed his arm as he tried to run away. She could almost see the tears of frustration well up in her mother's eyes when she would hear what had happened. Meeta cried angrily, "You cannot do that! That is the price of one fan!"

"Oh, no! That girl there clearly told me... When I asked her how much for ten, she said 'ten'," the man grinned wickedly, confident he could browbeat this little girl into believing he had done the right thing.

"How dare you cheat her. Can't you see..." Meeta stopped and held back her tears. There was no way she was going to admit to this cheat or to anybody else that *didi* could often not add the

simplest sums... "Give me back the fans..."

"Let me go!" the man tried to prise away Meeta's fingers from his arm.

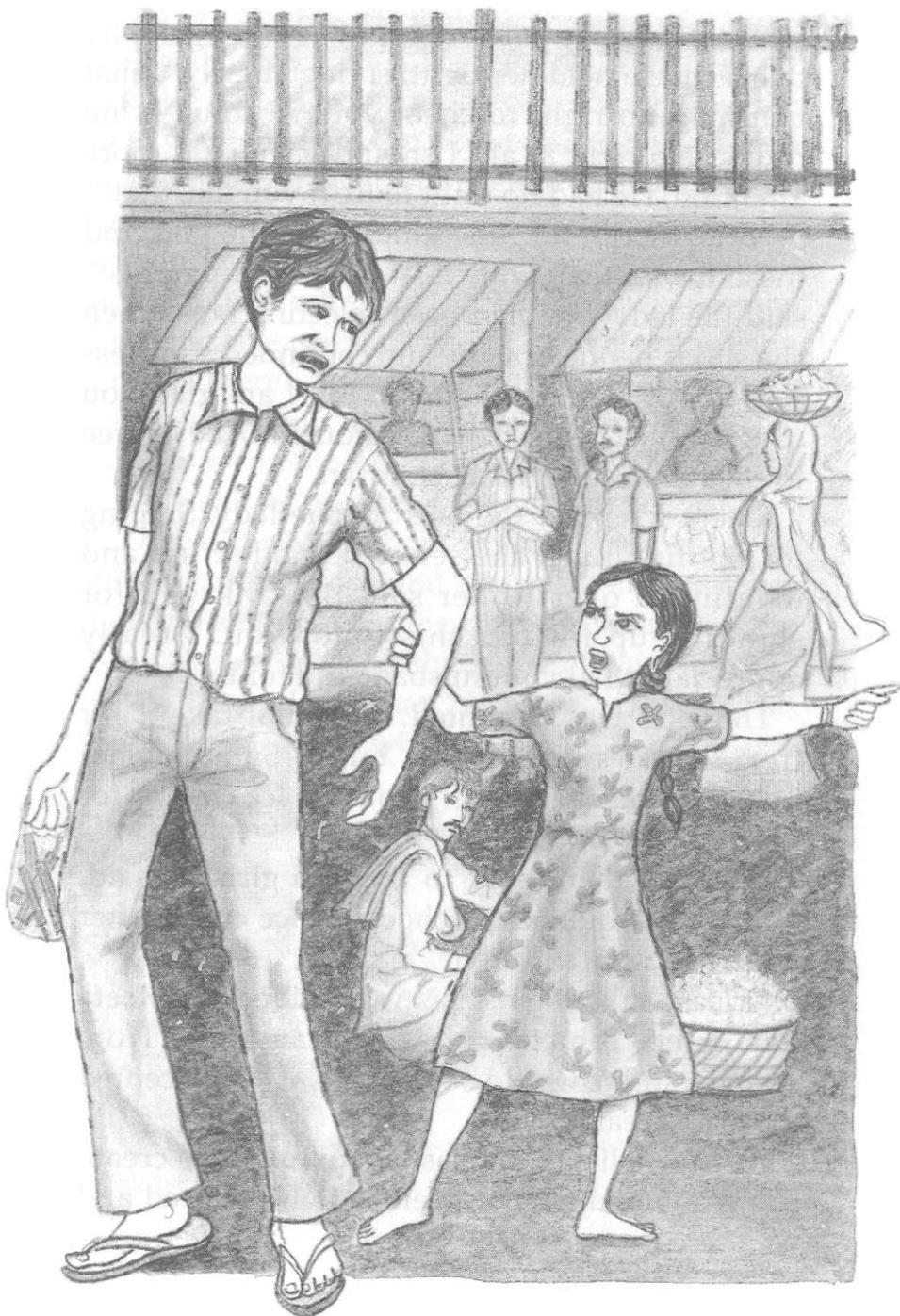
Meeta was so angry, she clung to him, not letting go of his arm. Her fingers dug deeper until he cried out in pain but she held on, crying, "Are you not ashamed of yourself? Cheating us! You owe her a hundred rupees! Not ten! It is ten for one, not ten for ten, you cheat!"

"Come now, *bhaisaheb*, enough is enough," the other customers at the stall intervened. "Don't take advantage of a gullible child. Children make mistakes all the time. You would not try this with an adult now, would you? Hand over another Rs 90 or we will call the manager of this place. Don't cheat these children. They have worked hard to sell their products."

By this time a crowd had gathered round the stall. Every one joined in, chastizing the cheat. Afraid that he would be handed over to the police, the man quickly fished out Rs 90 from his wallet and left.

'Thank God,' Meeta thought. She held the money tight. Then all of a sudden, drained of all energy, she slumped onto the step in front of the stall. She hardly realized how exhausted she was after standing up to the cheat.

*Didi* sat down beside her. "I am sorry, Meeta... I did not realize how much ten fans would cost. You know how slow and stupid I am."



"Don't you say you are stupid! Never again say that!" Meeta held her tight, crying angrily, "That man had no right to cheat you. Absolutely no right... No right at all! I should have paid more attention. He had no right to treat you like that!"

"*Beta*, be careful...the kind of people you find these days...they will cheat their own parents!" said the lady who had been selecting fans. Then she shook her head sadly and continued, "the less said about them the better... But I am glad you caught him. Creeps like him should not be let free to cheat innocent young children."

Meeta wrapped the fans for the lady. Smiling for the first time, she selected another fan and handing it over to her said, "Thank you for standing up for us...this is for you. I really appreciate what your husband did for us."

The lady was delighted. "I cannot take it for free...it is so sweet of you...but..." Suddenly her husband was there with two large ice creams for Meeta and *Didi*.

Handing them over to the two girls he said, "I thought you needed chocolate ice cream after what you went through."

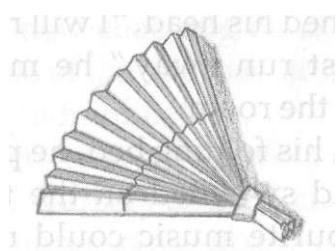
"Please take them," his wife added, as Meeta demurred, reluctant to accept anything from strangers. "We would be so happy if you accepted these ice creams."

As Meeta licked the last spoonful of ice cream she wondered why she felt so light-hearted and

happy. As if a big, fat weight, the size of a huge rock, had rolled off her. Then she realized it wasn't *Didi* she had to be ashamed of... People like the cheat were the ones the world had to be ashamed of; and of those mean children in the village who teased *Didi* and laughed at her. They were the ones who ought to be ashamed of themselves. She felt so proud of standing up for *Didi*, only wishing she had done so earlier instead of mutely witnessing her bewildered pain at being the butt of people's cruel jokes. Then... there were nice people too, like the couple who stood up for them. For the first time in years she felt like celebrating with her sister.

"*Didi*, when Mother returns from the manager's office, shall we go round and see what the other stalls are selling?" Saying that Meeta hugged her sister. "You would like that, would you not?"

"Yes, I would love that!" *Didi* smiled, happy that Meeta wasn't upset with her any longer.



## Like The Rest Of Them

*Dipavali Debroy*

"But why would you not let me go alone?" asked Vineet for the twentieth time.

"Because you are not old enough/" said Mummy, also for the twentieth time.

"I am all of sixteen now, Mummy. Is that not enough?"

"No, and I have told you so."

"But Rahul and Sundar, even Medha—they all come to the coaching classes by themselves. Why can't I?"

"Because you are not yet ready! How many times do you want me to say that?"

Vineet clutched his head. "I will run away some day. I will just run away," he muttered as he hurried out of the room.

Plonking on his folding bed, he plugged on his earphones and switched on the tape-recorder. Even his favourite music could not calm him. Why, oh, why must his mother be so protective about him? Why could she not allow him a bit more

independence? Rahul's mother was not like that. She let Rahul cycle all the way from Yusuf Sarai to Dhaula Kuan—15 kilometres and more along the busy Ring Road!

Babul did the same.

It was not that Daddy was any better. He never stood up for him when it came to this matter. He supported Mummy every time.

And Sundar's father had taught him how to drive the motorcycle! Every now and then Sundar arrived at the coaching class on his father's motorcycle, which certainly was his friends' envy and his own pride.

Only Vineet had to be accompanied by either of his parents, or an uncle or aunt who had chanced to drop in and was going that way. They laughed at him, Vineet knew. In school it was okay since he travelled by the school bus. But whenever his friends invited him over for a birthday party or a table tennis session, they found Vineet being dropped and picked up by someone or the other. They sniggered at him, made him the butt of their jokes. In the new coaching class that Vineet had joined because of the approaching Board exams, it was downright humiliation.

The children here were not old school pals who had attended Nursery and KG classes with you in shorts and name-tags, multi-coloured water-bottles and schoolbags which looked like stuffed toys. They were people you were meeting for the

first time—grown-up boys and girls from various schools and different backgrounds. It hurt Vineet's ego to be laughed at by them.

That day, just as Daddy dropped him, Rahul and Sundar came along riding their bikes. They smirked when Daddy said "Take care!" before reversing and going off. Vineet had seen their reaction and felt awful.

Another day, when Mummy merrily called out, "Don't worry if I'm a little late in picking you!" Medha, who was standing nearby, smiled mischievously and Vineet grew red with embarrassment.

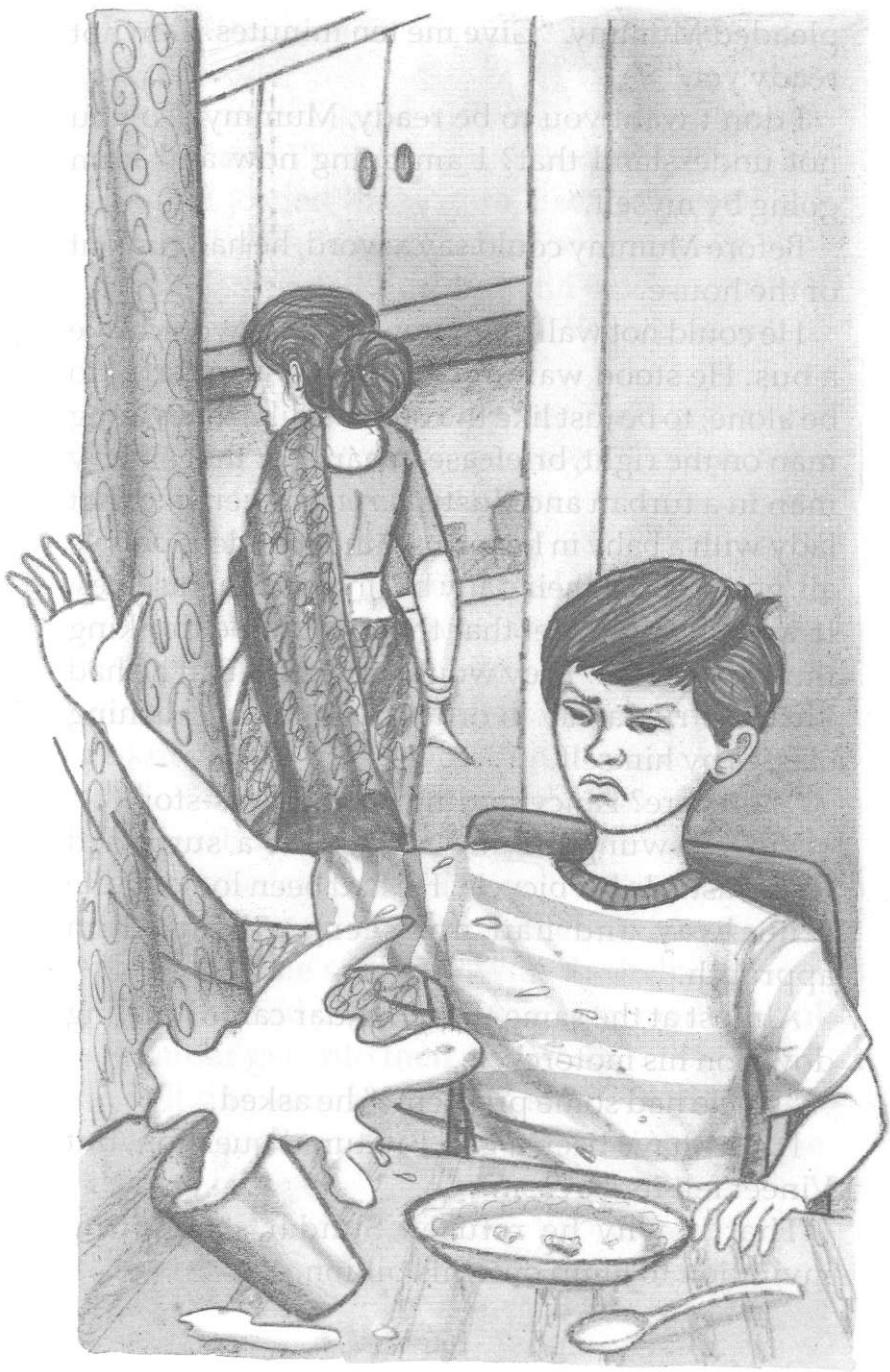
Mummy came in with a steaming glass of milk. Vineet groaned. Yet another of his troubles. Why must he be forced to drink milk even at this age? Why could he not have coffee like Medha or at least some brand of health drink advertised on TV? Milk was archaic!

Mummy ran her fingers through his hair. It did feel good. Vineet held himself in check for a minute, then burst out, "Oh, Mummy, please let me go out on my own. Please let me be like the others!"

The fingers in his hair stopped moving. Mummy moved away, leaving the glass of milk on his table.

"Oh, I feel like bursting!" muttered Vineet and pulled off his ear-plugs. He grabbed his glass of milk nearly spilling it on the table and on his T-shirt. Following Mummy to the kitchen, he shouted, "I am off!"

"But it isn't yet time for your classes, Vineet,"



pleaded Mummy. "Give me ten minutes. I am not ready yet."

I don't want you to be ready, Mummy. Do you not understand that? I am going now and I am going by myself."

Before Mummy could say a word, he had run out of the house.

He could not walk. He knew that. He would take a bus. He stood waiting. Ah! it was wonderful to be alone; to be just like the others—like that young man on the right, briefcase in hand, or that elderly man in a turban and dusty *kurta*, or even like that lady with a baby in her arms... independent people all, going about their daily business by themselves. It was lovely to feel that they would be thinking the same of him. They would not know that he had virtually run away in order to go to his coaching classes by himself.

"You here? Fancy finding you at a bus-stop!"

Vineet swung around to gaze at a surprised Rahul astride his bicycle. He had been looking the other way and had not seen or heard him approach.

Almost at the same time, Sundar came hurtling down on his motorcycle.

"Uncle had some problem?" he asked.

It may have been a good-natured question, but Vineet felt its sarcasm.

That is why he refused Sundar's tempting invitation to jump onto his pillion.

With mischievous grins, Rahul and Sundar moved ahead.

The people at the bus-stop were going forward. A bus at last! Vineet hopped into it, bought his ticket and jostled his way to a seat. 'Simple!' he thought. 'I wish Mummy could see me now!'

It was a crowded bus, hot and smelling of the sweat of tired passengers. To Vineet, it was a wonderful ride.

Ah, there was the bus-stop just short of Daula Kuan where Vineet had to get down. The coaching centre was in a nearby lane, just a few steps from the bus-stop.

As Vineet turned towards the lane, he saw a big crowd. Some people running about, some pressing forward. What was the matter?

Vineet screamed when he saw a tangled mess of smoking steel and iron. Rahul's bicycle and Sundar's motor-cycle had crashed into each other!

The two boys had jumped off in the nick of time and lay in the lane, clutching each other, paralyzed with fear. Vineet charged into the coaching centre and brought the staff out. With the help of some people who had gathered there, they made Rahul and Sundar get onto their feet.

"I will ring your homes and ask your parents to come and collect you," said Mr. Puri, one of the staff members.

"Yes, don't worry," said Mr. Rao, another staff-member, proceeding towards the telephone.

To Vineet's utter surprise, Rahul just broke down.

"My mom...she will love this! She will say she has been proved right. Every day we have such arguments about my cycling all the way here! I tell her nothing will happen and I will be home safe and sound. The next time again she fights. Now there will be no more next time, I am sure."

Why, Sundar was sniffling as well!

"My dad, he will kill me! I have ruined his bike. And he does not even know that I take it out!"

"Say that again?" asked Vineet and Sundar together.

"Well, Dad does not know I have learnt to ride the motorcycle. It is a lie that he taught me. I learnt it from an older cousin of mine. You see, Dad's been away for six months on a foreign assignment and I have been on my own—with this cousin. Now Dad will be back any day and if he hears what I have done to his bike..."

"Do not worry about that, Sundar," Vineet found himself saying, "I will tell Uncle when he is back what a narrow escape you had, and he will forget about the bike. The same goes for you, Rahul."

"Thanks, *yaar*," said Sundar. "You know how these Dads and Moms are."

"I do," said Vineet.

"I will not laugh at you any more," promised Rahul. "I bet you have a tough time as well with parents clinging all the time to your sides."

Wow! Was that Rahul and Sundar? A sense of

warmth and fellow-feeling came over Vineet. He felt drawn into the same circle as Rahul, Sundar and Medha, and all the teenagers the world over, far and near, known and unknown—each one trying to break out of their cocoons and flapping their luminous wings in vain.

"Excuse me, Sir," said Vineet to Mr Rao who had just finished making his phone calls. "Can I too make a call? You see, this is the first time I came here by myself and Mummy must be worried."

"She is," said Mr Rao. "Your mother rang up a while ago. She asked me to inform her as soon as you came in. I forgot in this hubbub. Hurry and give her a ring yourself."

"Mummy," Vineet spoke softly into the receiver.

"Where are you ringing from? Oh, so you have reached safely. Now, just stay put. Wait for me after the class. I will come and pick you. Don't worry if I am late by a few minutes."

"Please, Mummy..." Vineet tried to stem the familiar stream of words. "Please do let me come back by myself," he pleaded.

He looked helplessly around at Rahul and Sundar. There was no sarcasm on their lips today. Only understanding grins.



## **Annathai's Lottery**

*Khyrunnisa. A*

There was great excitement in the village of Kovilpatti as the news spread. Shanku, the village drunk who either begged or borrowed for a living had won a ten-lakh lottery! Annathai, who was selling groundnuts by the roadside near the tea shop heard people discuss it.

"What a person to win a lottery! No doubt he will squander it all on drinking."

"Do you think he will return any of the money he has borrowed?"

"Catch Shanku ever returning a single paisa. Lending him money is as good as kissing it goodbye. Sure, he must have even borrowed the ten rupees he paid for the ticket."

"Look at him strutting about. Why can't someone deserving, like Annathai there, win a lottery?"

Annathai pricked up her ears when she heard this. She lived with her thirteen-year-old grandson, Esaki, in a small hut filled with little else

but love. Esaki was orphaned when he was barely a year old and since then he had grown up under his grandmother's care. There was great affection and easy familiarity between the two. Annathai's main source of income was her cow, Anandhi, whose milk she sold to the tea shop closeby. She earned a meagre extra income by gathering and selling jasmine flowers when in season and groundnuts. Esaki helped her with the cow and often did odd jobs after school. The two were well-liked by everybody in the village.

Annathai was illiterate and did not know much about lotteries. But the news about Shanku made her realize they were something special. After selling her wares, she returned home and waited eagerly for her grandson to come back from school and clear her doubts. When Esaki returned, both of them said at the same time, "Did you hear about Shanku?" and burst out laughing.

"Yes," said Annathai, recovering first. "It seems he won some lottery."

"No, no," said Esaki. "The latest is that he did not. Apparently, Mohan, who checked his ticket, mistook a six for a zero. Poor Shanku! Now he has gone to drown his disappointment in drinks. If he had spent some of his time learning to read and write, this would not have happened. *Paati*, I think you should also learn to read."

"What! At my age! And why should I, anyway, when you are there to help me? Now, my wise one,

tell your ignorant *Paati* all you know about lotteries."

Esaki explained reluctantly, instinctively understanding from Annathai's excited interest that a potential lottery addict stood before him. He was not wrong. When he had finished, Annathai took a box from under her bedding and overturned its contents. A few coins tumbled out.

"Count them," she said.

"Eleven rupees," said Esaki counting them.

"Take ten and buy me a lottery ticket."

"But *Paati*," Esaki protested. "Why don't you save up for the tea shop you have set your heart on?"

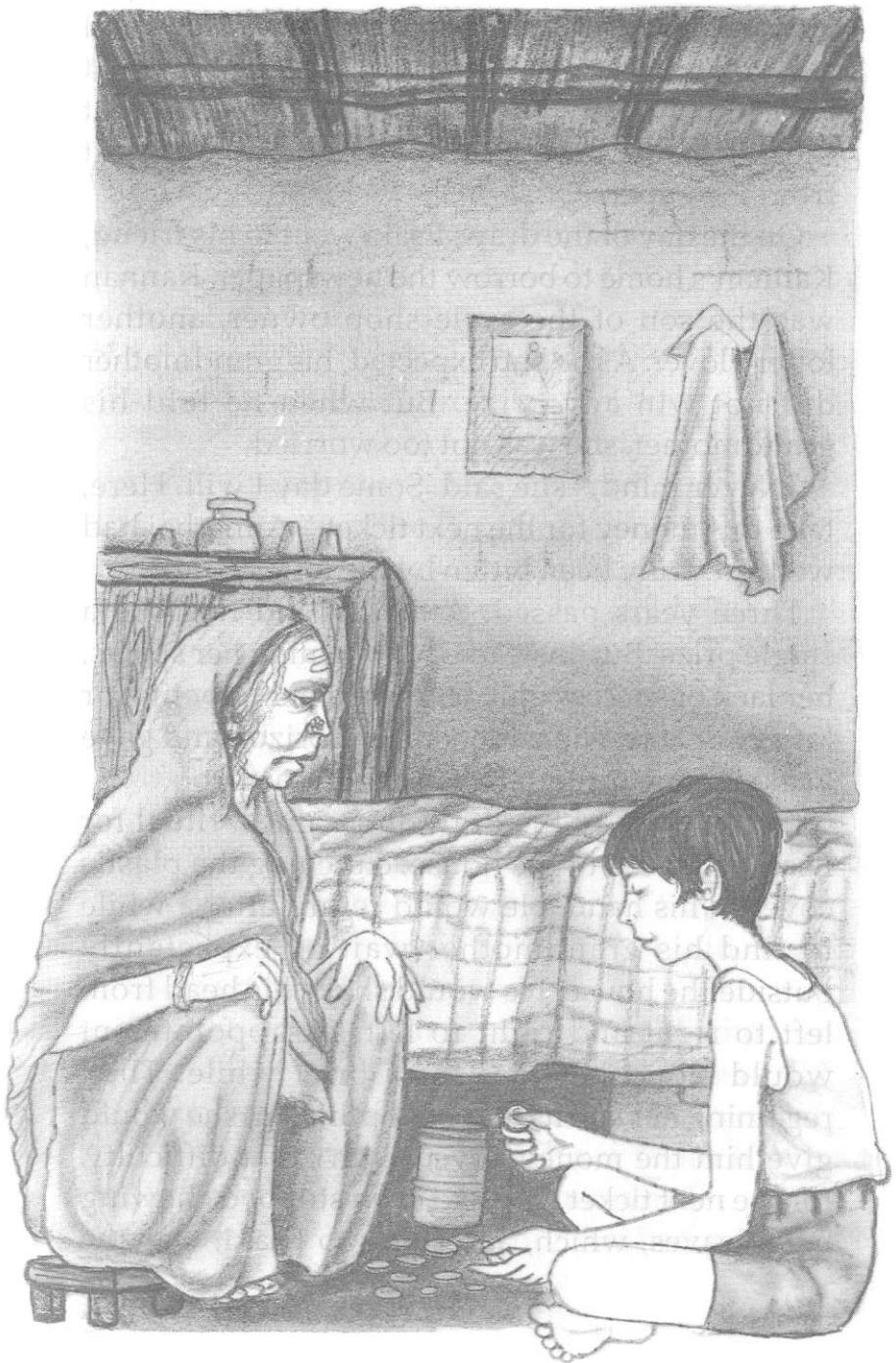
It was Annathai's dream to buy a teashop, a dream that showed no signs of ever coming true. Life was so hard that any money she saved invariably got spent on some emergency. And every rainy spell brought with it such emergencies.

"When have I been able to save more than ten or fifteen rupees? Now I will invest what I save in lottery tickets. When I win a lottery, I will buy not a tea shop, but a big hotel!"

"Five star, I suppose," said Esaki sarcastically.

"Eh?" asked Annathai not understanding why he was talking about stars.

"Oh, nothing," he said and went off on his errand. When he brought her the ticket, she took it reverentially from him and gazed at it for a long time. Then she took the plastic cover in which she kept her betel leaves and put the ticket in. This she



now put into the box that had contained her small savings. She handed it to Esaki and said, "Here, it is in your custody. Keep it safe. And do not forget the date of the draw. You must find out the result from the papers."

On the day of the draw, Esaki went to his friend, Kannan's home to borrow the newspaper. Kannan was the son of the cycle shop owner, another lottery lover. As he had expected, his grandmother did not win any prize. But when he told his grandmother, she was not too worried.

"Never mind," she said. Some day I will. Here, take this money for the next ticket." Annathai had well and truly been bitten by the lottery bug.

Three years passed. Annathai did not win a single prize. But, instead of dampening her spirits, her lack of success only increased her appetite for lottery tickets. She widened her horizon and gave Esaki money for lotteries of other states too.

On the days of the draw, it became a ritual for Esaki to go out of the house, clutching the plastic cover in his hand. He would return after a while to find his grandmother waiting expectantly outside the house. He would shake his head from left to right and right to left. Disappointment would cloud her face for a brief while. Then regaining her spirits and her optimism, she would give him the money, saved with great difficulty, for the next ticket. She had even stopped chewing betel leaves, which, according to Esaki, was the

only good thing to come out of her lottery mania.

The day of Deepavali—the festival of lights—dawned. It was 4.3'0 a.m. and Esaki was fast asleep. Annathai shook him vigorously and the act produced immediate results. Esaki jumped up from the warm, sheet-covered hay that served as his bed and rubbed his eyes.

"Come on, dear, get up. It is time to milk Anandhi. The poor thing has been calling out to you for quite a while."

"Oh, *Paati*, you broke up such a beautiful dream!" Esaki protested. "I was floating on a cloud in a land of sweet-smelling flowers."

"Now you have to sweep out the dung from the smelly cowshed. That is life, my child. But don't you worry about broken dreams. All your dreams - will come true when I win the lottery."

"When I win the lottery" was Annathai's constant refrain these days. She continued, "And remember, today is the day of the Deepavali bumper draw. Something tells me I will win the lottery. And when I win it, I will buy a big hotel.

From its profits, I will buy a TV, a radio, a..."

Esaki started laughing.

"*Paati*, you sound like the milk-maid who went to the market with a pot of milk on her head."

"What milk-maid?" asked Annathai suspiciously.

"It is just a story. I will tell you about it some other time. Now let me go to Anandhi."

Since it was Deepavali, Annathai had prepared

a special milk sweet along with the usual frugal breakfast.

"Mmm, very tasty," said Esaki, appreciatively. "And if you had not wasted the precious fifty rupees on the bumper lottery, we could have celebrated Deepavali in style."

"Once I win a lottery, every day will be Deepavali," said Annathai. "Now take the ticket and go find out the results. I don't know why I feel so excited."

As Esaki left, clutching the ticket in his hand, he noticed Kuppuswamy, the owner of the tea shop, coming towards the hut.

"Is Amma there?" he asked.

"Yes, she is inside," replied Esaki and went on his way, wondering what this unexpected visit could mean.

When he returned, his grandmother rushed to him and said, "Kuppuswamy has just been here with an offer. Apparently his uncle, who died recently, has left him a thriving provision shop in the near-by town. So he wishes to sell his tea shop. He has offered it to me for a thousand rupees. This is a wonderful offer. But where do I get the money? And I suppose I have not won the lottery this time too, have I?"

Esaki looked at her for some time. Then he said, "You have, *Patti*. Come into the house."

She followed him. He took a box from among his few belongings and gave it to her. She opened

it. It was full of notes and a few coins.

"Count them. There must be a little more than a thousand rupees there."

"But...but...where...how...?" Annathai found her speech failing her.

*"Paati, I have to confess something. After the first lottery ticket, I never bought another. It was the first ticket that I preserved in the cover. I carefully put aside the money you gave me all these years. This is it. This is your Deepavali bumper prize."*

For a while Annathai was too stunned to react. Then she started laughing.

"You naughty boy. You have taught me a lesson. But..." she said as a thought struck her, "don't you think I might have won a prize if you had bought the tickets?"

"Not by a long shot. Kannan buys the tickets for his father and if I had bought for you, yours would have been the next. And the closest he came to winning it was to come within 4000 numbers of a prize."

"No more lotteries for me," she said. "Here, put this money I had kept for the next ticket into this 'lottery box'. And after buying the tea shop, there's something else I must do."

"What is that?" asked Esaki.

"I must enrol myself in the adult literacy class. Then you cannot trick me again."

They laughed. It was a wonderful Deepavali.

## **Stepping Out In High Style**

*Santhini      Govindan*

Fifteen-year-old Anya lived with her grandparents. Her parents lived on a remote tea estate where there were no good schools.

Anya liked living with her grandparents. They were very affectionate and granny was a superb cook! She was also rather conservative and old fashioned and at times her archaic ideas irritated Anya. As she and granny left a shoe shop one December morning, she reflected wryly that this was undoubtedly one of those times!

They had come to select a pair of shoes for Anya to wear at the important farewell party her ninth class was hosting for the seniors of class ten. Anya had told the salesman eagerly that she wanted a pair of silver party shoes. He had immediately brought out two pairs. Anya tried on a pair of silver sandals. She was just walking around the shop, checking to see how they fit, when she caught sight of a pair displayed in the shop window. They had been arranged on a revolving turntable that turned

slowly, showing off every angle of their stylish design. They were silver shoes with high stiletto heels and Anya thought, she had never seen anything so chic and elegant before! She pointed excitedly at the shoes and said, "I want to try on those wonderful shoes!"

A moment later, Anya had slipped her feet delightedly into the tall, high heels. When she had seen their reflection in the mirror, she had been thrilled. For they were just the kind of shoes she had seen glamorous models wear in the fashion spreads in expensive glossies! They were sleek, slim and so sophisticated! As Anya stood up rather shakily in them, she felt they added glamour and style and also a few much-needed inches to her small five-foot, one inch frame.

But granny thought otherwise.

"They look ridiculous!" she exclaimed angrily. "The heels are far too high and impractical! You will either sprain your ankle or your back if you wear them! They are outrageously expensive too! I am definitely not buying them for you!"

But alas! Anya had fallen completely under the spell of the silver high heels. She glared angrily at granny.

"I do not want those silver sandals that you liked so much! They are dowdy and ordinary! You cannot force me to buy them," she retorted loudly. "I am going to buy only these. If you refuse to buy them for me, then I shall use up all the pocket

money I have and buy them myself!" she finished defiantly.

Granny pursed her lips angrily. She said not a single word after that. She stood by disapprovingly as Anya quickly paid for the shoes without even walking around in them. Now here they were, walking stiffly out of the shop.

When they got home, Anya hurried straight to her room. She immediately changed into her party outfit, then stepped into the new high heels, impatient to see how they complemented her clothes! They matched her outfit perfectly. Anya felt they made her look tall and willowy and terribly grown-up too! She smiled at her reflection in the mirror with pride and satisfaction and took a step, full of confidence. But the shoes were perilously high and Anya found it impossible to balance on them. As she took a step forward, she wobbled. She quickly put out a hand and held onto the doorjamb to steady herself. She stood there for a few moments, breathing deeply. Then slowly and cautiously, she withdrew her hand and tried to take another step.

Once again she teetered on the heels and could only lurch forward unsteadily, her arms flailing wildly as she fought to keep her balance. Anya staggered to her bed, flopped on it disappointedly and kicked off the shoes.

It was quite clear that she would not be able to step out in these shoes till she practised walking



in them for a while. But she was not unduly worried. Had she not fallen off her bike many times before she finally learnt to ride it? And she had taken many tumbles in her roller skating class before she had actually been steady on her skates. Anya was certain that if she practised walking in her new shoes on all the five days that remained before the party, she would not only be comfortable in them, but also look extremely sophisticated too!

The next afternoon, Anya waited impatiently for granny and grandpa to retire to their room for a siesta. Then she hurried to her room and locked the door before taking out the silver shoes once more. With a determined light in her eyes, she thrust her feet into them and tried to march ahead. No sooner had she taken two steps, when she began to sway dangerously. She quickly reached for the wall and rested one of her palms on it. Then, using it as a support to keep her balance, she moved ahead slowly with tiny, laboured steps. For the next half-hour, Anya practised walking this way. When she heard the sounds of granny waking up, she hurriedly put her shoes away. She did not want granny to know that she could not walk properly in the wonderful shoes she had fought to buy!

When she went for breakfast the next day, Anya was worried. She wondered how on earth she was going to learn to walk on her new heels without holding onto the wall for support? Then, as grandpa came into the dining room, leaning

heavily on his sandalwood walking stick, she had a brainwave! She would borrow grandpa's walking stick and use it to support herself on high-heeled shoes, like the trainer wheels she had used when she learnt to ride her bike! Anya was very excited with the idea.

The same afternoon she crept into granny and grandpa's room when they were napping and spirited away grandpa's walking stick. When she was locked away in her room she found, to her delight, that walking steadily on a pair of stiletto shoes was a cinch when one had a walking stick! By thumping the stick down on the ground and throwing her weight on it, Anya discovered she could surge ahead. But alas! When she had crossed the room thrice thus and felt confident enough to let go of the walking stick, she floundered again and began to rock and sway like a ship on a rough, high sea!

Weary and defeated, Anya removed her shoes and sat on the ground. Her feet ached too, from the uncomfortable posture they had been forced into, and as she flexed and massaged them gingerly, tears sprang to her eyes. She realized, finally, that there was no way she could wear the glamorous stiletto heels to the party. They made her look as if she was walking on stilts and reduced her gait to a ridiculous shuffle! But what was she going to wear instead? She had used up all her savings already and it was absolutely unthinkable

to go to granny with her problem. Anya was sure that it would only result in granny letting off steam and delivering another of her "I told you so" lectures. There was only one thing to do. She would have to ask her friends if they had a pair of shoes to spare that she could borrow for an evening.

Anya was so deep in thought that she did not realize that granny and grandpa had woken up and discovered that grandpa's walking stick was missing. It was only when granny rapped urgently on her door that she scrambled to her feet, aghast, and hurriedly thrust the walking stick and shoes under her bed.

"Grandpa's walking stick is missing," said, granny tiredly, "and he is getting more peevish by the minute."

"Well you can hardly expect me to know anything about that," Anya exclaimed with an air of astonishment. But it was of no use. The eagle-eyed maid standing behind granny had spotted the head of grandpa's walking stick poking out from under Anya's bedcover. She pulled it out with a flourish!

"Look!" she said excitedly to granny, "here is the walking stick! I wonder how it got here! And look at these strange shoes!" She held up one of the stilettos. As granny looked from the shoes to the walking stick, a sudden flash of understanding came into her eyes.

Without looking at Anya who was flushed with

embarrassment, she quietly took the walking stick from the maid. But as she left the room, she looked over her shoulder at Anya.

"There is something for you in my cupboard," she said, softly. "I had not planned on giving it to you till later, but I guess this is as good a time as any."

Anya hurried to the cupboard. As soon as she opened it, she saw on the top shelf, a pair of silver-coloured sandals she had tried on in the shoe shop! She took them out slowly. As she held them in her hands, she was filled with guilt and shame. Granny had so kindly bought them for her, despite the fact that she had defied her to make an utterly foolish purchase! She hurried to find granny and hugged her.

"Thank you for buying me the silver sandals!" she said, happily. "They are just what I need."

Granny laughed and added with a twinkle in her eyes. "They may not be 'high' fashion you know, but at least you will not need a walking stick to move around in them!"



## **Friends Beyond Compare**

*Santhini      Govindan*

One morning, during the summer vacation, Naresh's mother told him, "A new family will be shifting soon into the house next door. They are moving to Bangalore from Mumbai," Mother continued. "They have a son your age, too. In fact, when they phoned me this morning, they said that he would probably be joining your school."

"Oh, good!" said Naresh interestedly, "it will be great to have someone of my own age next door!"

Naresh met his new neighbour, Praveen, two weeks later. They became friends quickly. Naresh listened with avid interest as Praveen told him all about the fast moving and crowded city of Mumbai he had lived in for years. In-between relating interesting anecdotes of how he had actually met Shahrukh Khan and Sachin Tendulkar, he also enthralled Naresh with thrilling tales of the underworld dons!

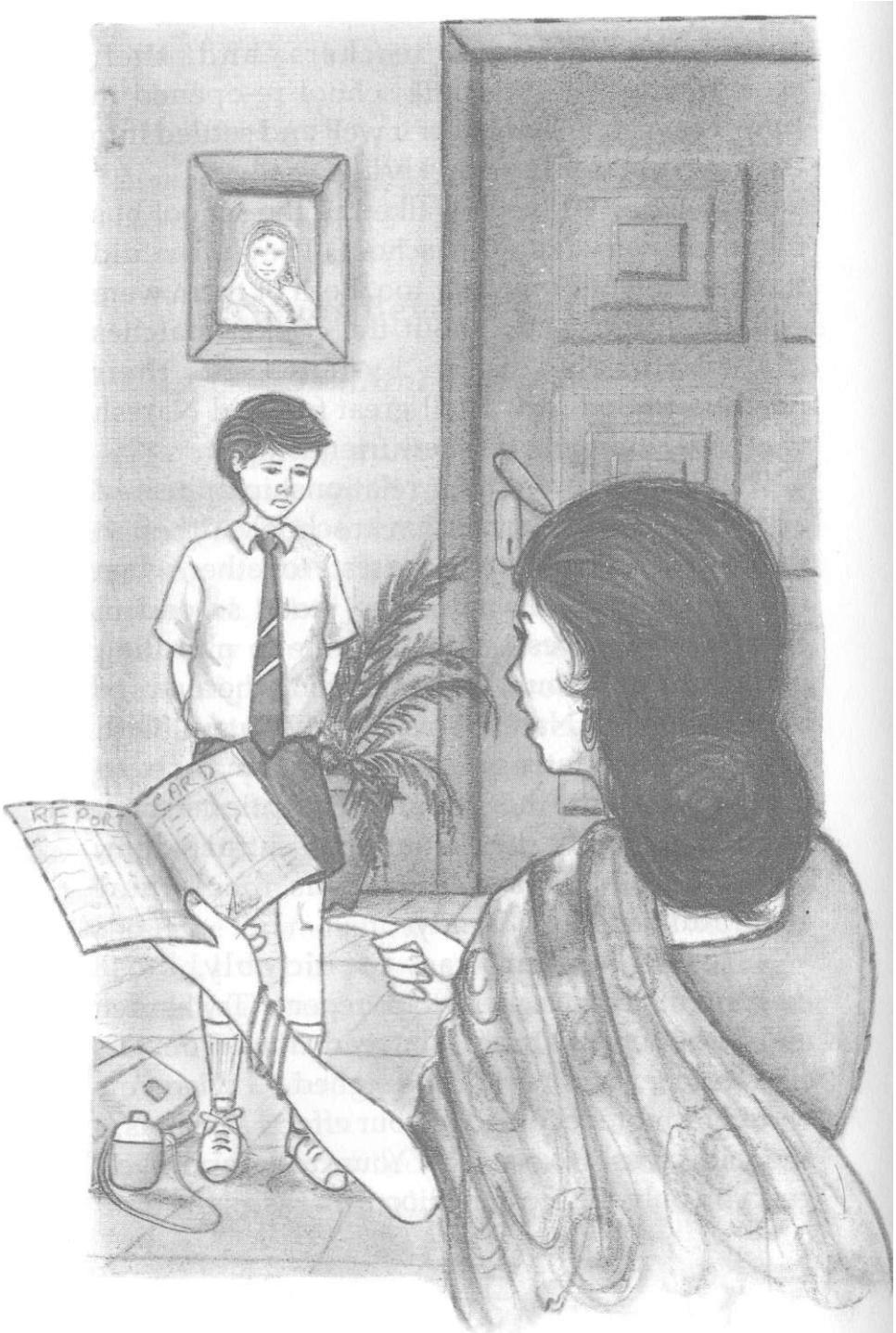
Naresh in turn filled Praveen in with details of their school, amusing little nuggets of information

about the different teachers and their eccentricities. By the time school re-opened in June, Praveen felt he knew it well and settled into the new routine very quickly and easily.

Naresh and Praveen walked to the school bus together everyday after school. They often did their homework together, too. Both of them were equally enthusiastic about the cricket matches played in the quiet by-lanes of their neighbourhood. It was all great fun and Naresh was really enjoying this new friendship.

The first hiccup in their relationship appeared after the first mid-term exam at school. Although the boys had prepared for the tests together, when the results came, Praveen had stood second in class, while Naresh, with his fair to middling marks had only found a place among the average boys. Although Naresh was slightly put out with his own undistinguished performance in comparison with his friend's exceptional one, he tried hard not to be jealous or resentful of him. He thumped Praveen on his back and congratulated him, warmly.

Naresh's mother was, predictably, most disappointed when she saw his report. "Try harder and do better next time," she read aloud from the class teacher's remarks. She sighed. "I wish you would be more focussed in your efforts at exams," she said, crossly to Naresh. "Your casual approach gets you only the most mediocre marks all the time



and that just won't do!" She went on in this vein for a few more minutes before lapsing into silence. Naresh saw his chance to escape. But as he was slipping quietly out of the room, mother snapped out of her reverie as a thought suddenly struck her.

"How did Praveen do in the exams?" she called out, curiously. Naresh stopped in his tracks.

"Well?" Mother was persistent.

"He did well," Naresh mumbled.

"Really? What was his rank in class?" Mother continued the probe relentlessly.

"Second," Naresh replied in a low voice after a long pause.

"Second!" Mother's voice rang out as loud as a pistol shot. "He came second in class when he only joined the school two months ago! That is really creditable! What a clever boy he is! How I wish you were more like him!" she concluded in heartfelt tones. Naresh did not wait to hear anymore and hurried out of the room as fast as he could.

Naresh's spirits were low for the next couple of days, especially since mother never missed any opportunity of praising Praveen and telling Naresh how disappointed she was with him. Praveen noticed too, that his friend was much quieter than usual. He commented on it one morning.

"Hey!" he said, "how come you have become really serious nowadays? What is on your mind?"

Naresh shrugged and brushed aside the comment without replying. Mercifully, as days

passed, there were other, more pressing things that cropped up to occupy mother's mind. Naresh's marks were no longer the centre of her attention. A relieved Naresh reverted to his usual, relaxed routine with Praveen and the next few weeks passed off peacefully.

Then the spectre of the first term exams began to loom large on the horizon and Naresh's mother was suddenly galvanized into action.

"I am not going to allow you to go out and play cricket from now on," she announced dramatically one evening, just as Naresh was getting ready to leave the house. Naresh looked at her in surprise.

"Why not?" he asked, completely nonplussed.

"Have you forgotten that your term exams are just round the corner?" Mother asked sarcastically. "From now on, you must stay at home and study hard in the evenings."

"That is not fair!" Naresh protested, vehemently. "You have always let me go out for a couple of hours for relaxation everyday! You have told me yourself that everyone needs time to unwind after a day's work! So why can't I return after playing cricket and study as usual?"

"I have seen the kind of marks your usual study brought you at the last mid-term test," mother retorted caustically, giving Naresh a withering stare. "No! From now on, you will work hard and try to get excellent marks like Praveen."

"Praveen! Praveen! I am really sick of hearing

about how clever he is!" Naresh shouted furiously. "Now, because of him, I am not allowed to play cricket either!" and he stalked out of the room.

The next morning when they met the first thing Praveen asked his friend was, "Why did you not come to play cricket yesterday?"

"I wasn't feeling well," Naresh muttered shortly.

"But you were fine at school when we made plans for the match," Praveen persisted, looking rather puzzled, "so how come..."

"I told you I was not well. Why don't you just drop the topic?" Naresh snapped back.

Praveen was taken aback to see anger blazing in Naresh's eyes. Then he dropped his gaze and muttered a confused "I am sorry" before walking stiffly ahead.

There was no laughter and talk between the two boys as usual on the bus journey—only an uneasy silence. At school, Naresh avoided Praveen in the playground and in the tuckshop. Once or twice he caught Praveen looking at him in pained bewilderment, but he resolutely looked away. He could not help feeling that his friendship with Praveen had brought him more trouble than it was worth. It was because of Praveen that his mother was always criticizing and berating him and had stopped him from playing cricket, too!

In the run up to the exams, the rift between the boys widened. Naresh started going to the bus stop early to avoid walking with Praveen. While sitting

in the bus, the two boys never exchanged even a glance. After the exams were over, Naresh's mother told him magnanimously, "You can play cricket as much as you like now!"

But Naresh shook his head despondently. He did not want to go because he would have to meet Praveen there. So he just moped around the house and watched TV.

Then one morning, just two days before Diwali, the doorbell rang. Naresh opened the door. There was Praveen standing in the doorway, holding a plateful of sweets in his hands.

Naresh stared at him in surprise. He did not know what to say.

"My mother sent these home-made sweets for all of you," Praveen said, breaking the silence. Naresh took the plate from him.

"Thank you," he said, quietly. Praveen nodded and turned to leave. Then he stopped and asked, "Coming to play cricket today?"

"Okay." The words tumbled out of Naresh's mouth instantly.

That evening, for the first time in many weeks, Naresh played a great game of cricket with his friends. After the match Naresh and Praveen automatically fell into step as they made their way home together.

"Why did you suddenly stop talking to me?" Praveen burst out. "Did I do something to offend you?" he sounded hurt and puzzled.

"Of course not! You did not do anything to offend me/' Naresh replied contritely. After the mid-term exams, my mother was angry that I had secured average marks in comparison to your excellent performance! She kept praising you all the time and scolding me. Finally, she even stopped me from playing cricket. This got on my nerves so much that I..." his words trailed off.

"Is that the only reason why you stopped talking to me?" Praveen asked, amazed. Then he chuckled. "I should have guessed! Mothers are the same everywhere!"

"What do you mean?" Naresh asked, surprised.  
"Does your mother also..."

"Of course!" said Praveen wearily. "She always tells me how helpful you are and how you run so many errands for your mother! She praises you all the time. She often tells me why I do not learn a few good things from you?"

Naresh flushed in pleasure. "Did she really say all those things about me?"

"Of course," said Praveen, "and a lot more! but I don't remember them now!"

The two boys smiled at each other, warmly, as they basked in the glow of their shared secret.

"I wonder how our mothers would react if we compared them to other mothers," Naresh said suddenly. Praveen laughed as he took his friend's hand. "Maybe we should try it sometime!" he exclaimed.

## The Mole

*M.S. Mahadevan*

When I was nine, ten, eleven, there was nothing mixed about my feelings. Pain, fear, anger, hatred... I felt each one separately, unalloyed. And the fifth, the worst of them all... Loneliness.

Like the others, this too was physical. Like being out in the cold for too long. Benumbing, it was.

It had been that way from the start, from the day I entered the hallowed portals of De Nobilis High School. De Nobilis. It was meant for the nobility. For the sons of the rich and illustrious.

My father was neither rich nor illustrious. He was a driver. He drove the green and white school bus that ferried the pupils between their posh homes and the school.

What place did I have in this rarefied environment of bright classrooms, computer laboratories, tennis courts, film appreciation society, literary and debating clubs? By right I should have gone where other rag-tag like me went—to a crumbling, dilapidated, noisy,

neighbourhood municipal corporation school. But the management of De Nobilis had lofty ideals and egalitarian views. They put them into practice by offering to educate one child from every employee's family, free of cost. My father had taken the job so that I could have the best education. In his own simple way he believed that all I lacked was opportunity.

It did not take me long to find out that I lacked a lot more. The right address. The right accent. The right descent.

No one picked on me. But no one befriended me, either. At best I aroused a mild curiosity. My initial shyness hardened into withdrawal. When it was my birthday, I told no one. I could not afford to treat my classmates to chocolates.

In the beginning I was invited for birthday parties. But the agony of what to wear, what to give, was altogether too much for me. I began to refuse. The invitations stopped. Somehow that hurt even more.

Fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh. I moved on from class to class without much interest, performing indifferently in studies and with an increasing sense of loneliness. I shunned company, at the same time, I desperately wanted a friend.

And then, as if by miracle, I acquired a friend.

When I came to the eighth standard, the teacher allotted us seats for the year. She placed me next to George Mani.

George. Till then he was one of the forty-five boys in my class. Like them he belonged to the different world. A world which bred confidence and cheerfulness and a sense of ownership.

I wonder what would have happened if George had brought his Hindi textbook that day. And what if he had chosen to share it with someone else?

When the lesson began, he asked casually, "Will you let me read from your book?"

Before I could think up the right words to refuse, he had picked up the book and opened it to the new lesson. The next day he offered me a sandwich from his tiffin box. "Take it," he urged, "then I will not feel bad about asking you to give me a piece of your *alu paratha*."

*Alu parathal* Seeing the shocked look on my face, he grinned. "I wish our cook would make as delicious *parathas* as your cook does."

To my surprise, I found myself saying stiffly. "My mother cooks for us."

"Lucky you!" he said and he seemed to mean it.

I shared the *paratha* with him that day. And the next day too. I asked my mother to give two extra *parathas* every day because George did not seem to tire of them. He would hand me his tiffin box without even looking into it. While I grew accustomed to the taste of iced cakes and soft white bread with cheese and lettuce, he wolfed *parathas*—*alu, gobhi, mooli, methi*—with *shalgam* or mango pickle. He would pass my tiffin around,

extolling my mother's cooking. Before long, I was being invited by the others to share their tiffin boxes!

On George's birthday, he invited a few of his closest friends to his family's farmhouse outside the city. He insisted that I come. He simply would not take no for an answer and came to pick me up in a chauffeur-driven Mercedes Benz.

What can I say about that day? It was perfect. We swam in the private pool, played croquet, joked and laughed without a care. We were waited on hand and foot by an army of liveried servants. Though we were only about a dozen of us, there was enough food for twice that number. It was served piping hot from gleaming silver dishes. It was a feast that I will never forget.

With George as my friend, I discovered a new side to myself.

George was intelligent, popular and articulate—the obvious choice when it came to representing De Nobilis at inter-school debates and elocution contests. And he chose me as his team-mate!

Together we won prize after prize. We were famous. It was a nice feeling to be recognized.

While I had started doing well in extra curricular activities, I remained average in studies. Not so with George. He was among the top three in class—the most likely to win the prestigious Best Student Shield.

Final examinations came round. There was tension in the air. Competition was intense,

especially among the first three. They were neck in neck in the marks race. Every mark mattered.

I did not realize how much it mattered to George till I saw him cheating.

It was the third examination—Chemistry. The portions were vast. The paper was tough. As soon as it was given out, there were loud, despairing groans from the class.

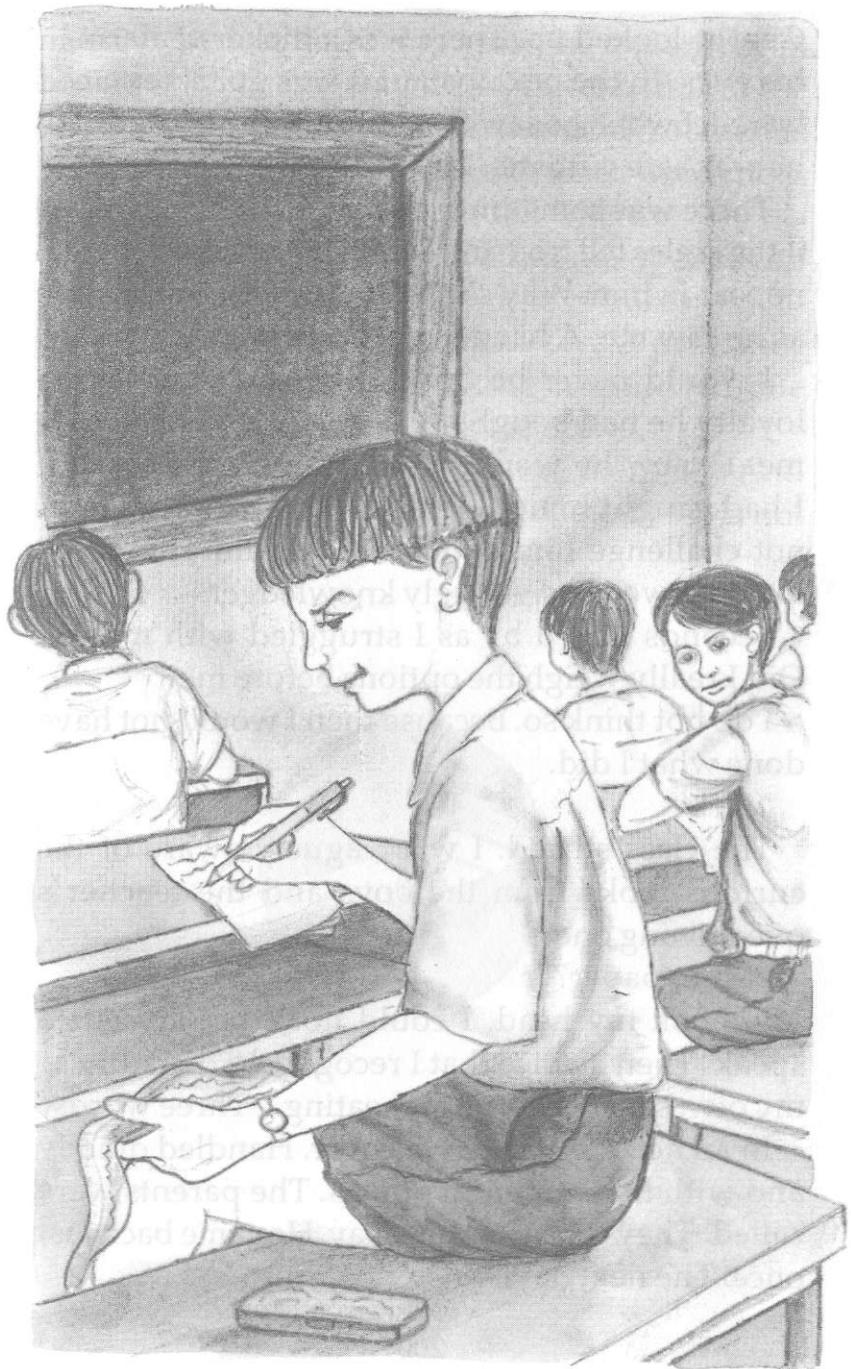
The Chemistry teacher, Mr. Nath, gave us a small pep talk about keeping cool, thinking and answering and doing our best. In the end he warned us against cheating. They were rather strict about that at De Nobilis. In the junior classes if you were caught cheating, you were punished in the school assembly. In the senior classes, your parents were summoned to the school and handed your school-leaving certificate. That was it. No second chance.

There was another thing. If you saw anyone cheating, it was your duty to report him. I do not know of even one boy who reported on his classmate. Maybe George had banked on that.

I was half-way through the paper, when a slight movement caught my eye. Without raising my head, I looked sideways.

It was George. He had pulled out his handkerchief and placed it on his thighs. He was looking at it. I saw that the white cloth was covered with tiny writing in black sketch pen.

Before I could even absorb what I had seen,



George looked up. There was a flicker of alarm in his eyes. In the next instant it was gone, replaced by relief when he saw that it was only me. He knew he was safe with me. I would not tell.

There was something else in that look. It was as if the scales fell from my eyes. There was no shame, no fear in him. Why should there be? I saw myself as he saw me. A hanger-on. I was not his equal.

I would never be. I was just someone whose loyalty he had bought by bestowing his grace on me. I knew he would never refer to the act that I had caught him in. And he knew that I would not challenge him about it. It would always lie there between us. An ugly knowledge.

Seconds ticked by as I struggled with myself. Did I really weigh the options before me?

I do not think so. Because then I would not have done what I did.

"Sir!"

The class stirred. I was vaguely aware of the curious looks from the boys and the teacher's questioning one.

"More paper?"

I shook my head. I could not trust myself to speak. Then a voice that I recognized distantly as my own said, "George is cheating." Three words.

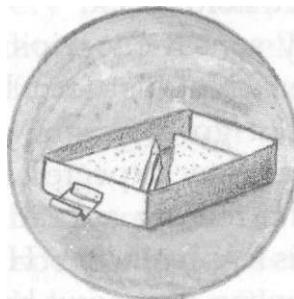
In an hour or two, it was over. Handled quietly and with the minimum of fuss. The parents were called. They took George away. He came back just once. The next day.

After the last bell rang, I left the classroom in silence. I made my way down the corridor to the stairs and out into the field. Suddenly, someone blocked my path. Even before I looked up, I knew. A fist crashed into my face. I fell. Silence.

Everyone saw it. No one picked me up. I got up slowly. I made my way to the line of buses.

They call me the mole. When I walk past, they make high-pitched squeaking noises. No one shares my tiffin. No one talks to me.

Pain, fear, anger, hated...I feel them all. And loneliness. That too. That, most of all. But it is not as bad as I imagined it would be.



## 200 Metres

*M.S. Mahadevan*

The loudspeaker bellows across the field: "Boys in the 200 metres race, get to the start please."

Suddenly, the air crackles with excitement. Around me, the spectators sit up straight and the hum of conversation dwindles. All eyes are focussed on the boys assembling at the starting line.

He, the boy Jeet, holds back.

A cold, empty sensation grips the pit of his stomach. It is fear. Not just fear, but the fear of losing. He cannot go through with this race! He cannot win as they expected of him. Like a seismic wave the feeling spreads through his entire system. His legs feel weak. He has lost races in the past. It happens. He knows he cannot expect to win every single race. But, what if he were to lose this one...? Nausea sweeps over him.

The Sports Master throws him an inquiring look. Bracing himself, Jeet walks to his position in the inner lane. The other runners are in place. They stamp about to control their nervousness, make

last minute adjustments to a shoelace or a headband and eye one -another warily. Jeet avoids everyone's eyes. He tries to blank his mind, to think of nothing. Seconds toil by.

Like a whiplash, the Sports Master cracks out:  
"On your marks..."

Static silence.

Like the other runners, Jeet drops to the starting position. His toes, his muscles are taut and quivering, his heart pounds painfully. Then a calm confidence descends on him. As if his body and mind have reached a state of harmony and are now united in the face of the forthcoming challenge.

The Sports Master raises the pistol...BANG!

His head jerks back. His legs move in long strides, toes barely touching the ground, arms pumping alongside. Every part of him moves with the smooth co-ordination of a well-oiled machine. It is going perfectly till now. He is fourth at the bend, steadily closing in on the runner ahead. Now Jeet is past him.

Aware of his approach, the second runner is worried. He speeds up. Jeet settles in his stride, fast but easy. He knows he will need every ounce of his strength for the crucial final seconds.

The second runner has increased his pace too early in the race. Now it tells on him. Fatigue gnaws. He slackens. Jeet notices this with growing satisfaction. A few more yards and he slips past the second runner.

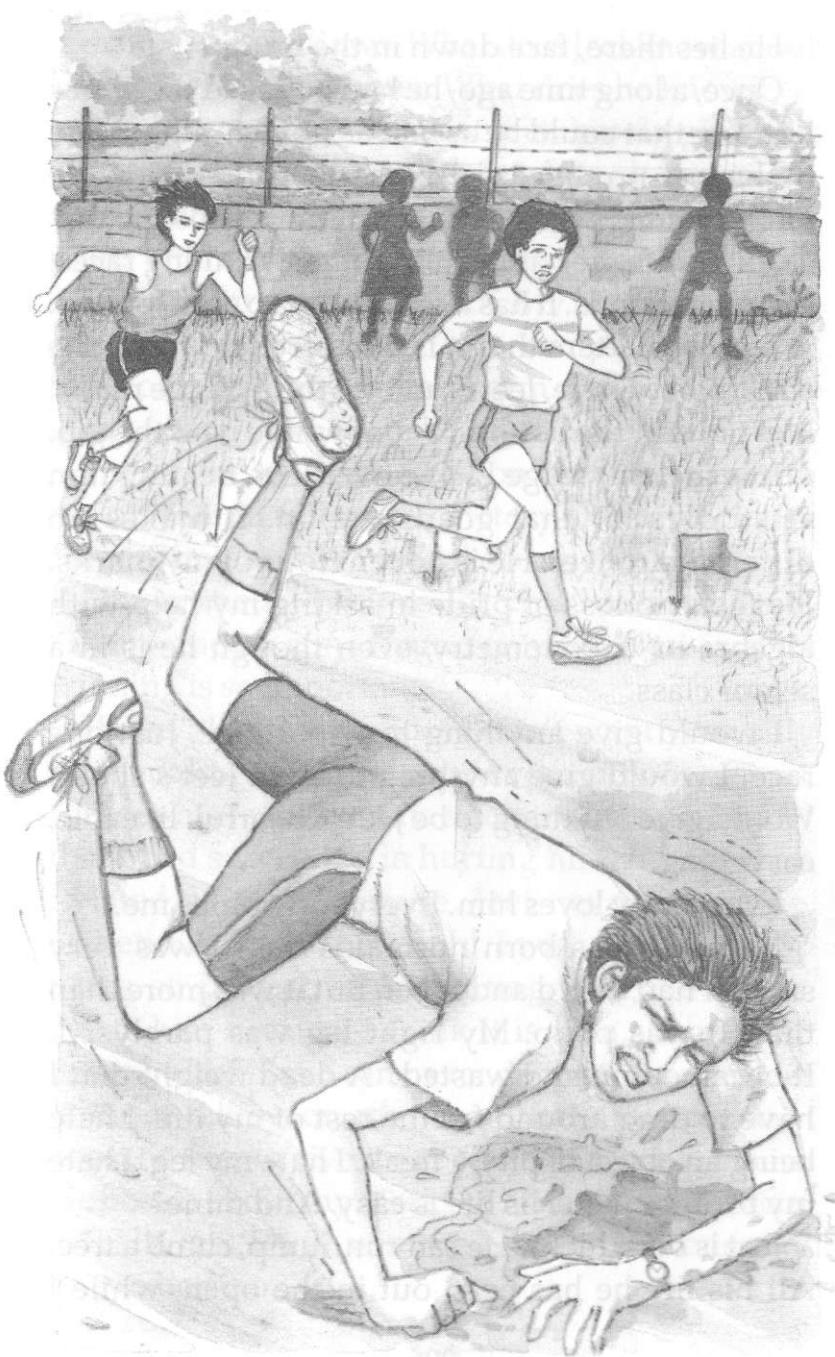
One more to go.

The lead runner is Jeet's toughest challenge. The gap is wide, the runner steady. His strides are powerful. He can go on. But Jeet is beginning to feel a numbing weakness creep up his legs. His feet turn into lead. Two words run in his head, on and on: You must, you must. He wills himself, fists clenched, face grim, for that last desperate effort, that final burst. You can catch up, he tells himself. You must. Surely the gap is closing. You must, you must.

Then suddenly, brilliantly, he surges ahead. He is in the lead. Recharged, he increases the gap. He is alone now, alone and ahead of all the rest. His nerves, his sinews, his heart, his mind are singing with joy. He can run on and on... This is what it is all about, this wonderful moment in which he knows that the race belongs to him. He deserves to win.

And then it happens. How? Why? Nobody knows. Jeet stumbles.

There is a huge, horrified gasp from the watching crowd. Frozen, they watch as he tries to regain balance. He fails. At that speed it is impossible to recover. Jeet falls. He hits the ground. The entire crowd seems to feel the impact and flinches, as if sharing his unbearable, frenzied pain. Every eye is riveted on the fallen figure. They barely pay attention to the runners who swing past. First, second, third, fourth, fifth...



He lies there, face down in the mud.

Once, a long time ago, he had believed there was nothing that could be as bad as not winning. Now he knows no defeat is worse than this. Now he knows what I know. Jeet. His name means Victory.

All his life, he has been a winner. Winning races, winning friends. It has always been so easy for him. It hardly matters that it is a different story in the classroom. There, Jeet is among the average ranks. Not quite at the bottom, but nowhere near the top.

It is the only edge I have over Jeet. Beating him at studies is what goads me on. It makes no difference to Jeet. He is not envious of my marks. He feels no loss of pride in asking my help with algebra or trigonometry, even though he is in a senior class.

I would give anything to win a race. Just one race. I would give anything to be in Jeet's shoes. Would give anything to be Jeet. Cheerful, likeable, easygoing.

Everybody loves him. Everybody pities me.

I limp. I was born normal. When I was very small, I had a cold and fever. But it was more than that. It was polio. My right leg was paralysed. It became thin and wasted. A dead weight that I have to drag around for the rest of my life. I hate being an object of pity, a freak. I hate my leg. I hate my brother Jeet. His life is easy. And mine?

Jeet is born lucky. He can run, jump, climb a tree. All his life he has been out in the open, while I

remain in the shadows. What does Jeet know about struggle? He is a winner. What does he know?

The last runner goes past Jeet, barely glancing at the prone figure, still lying face down in the mud. Jeet lifts his head. His eyes are dazed with pain. There is mud on his face. There is blood. Beside me, my parents watch. My mother's hands are clenched tight, her face completely white. She holds onto my father's arm. There is sorrow in my father's face and a heartbreakingly tender look.

They came to watch their son win. They came to see him stand tall on the victory stand, applause ringing in his ears, a medal on his chest.

"Every medal I win is for you," Jeet had said. "Every race I run, I run for you. That is why winning is so important."

"Sure," I had sneered. "I don't want your silly tin medals. And I don't want your pity,"

From his face, from its sudden stillness I knew that I had succeeded in hurting him. It gave me a twisted sort of pleasure. Jeet never hurts me. Sometimes, I wish he would. I wish he would stop being so protective and caring; so good to me. I hate him because I think it is all a sham. I can never be like him. I can never do the things he does without falling on my face. I hate this constant boost he tries to give me specially in front of others. He boasts about my marks to his friends. Einstein, he calls me. I will win the Nobel prize one day, he predicts.

Jeet needs help. He is reeling with pain. He can barely stand. The school doctor is heading for him at a steady trot, medical bag in hand.

Jeet pushes them away. He stands up, swaying on his feet. His hands and knees are bleeding. He grimaces with pain. And then, to everyone's amazement, he starts off. He starts running. On my parents' faces, I see pain mingled with pride. Such pride.

Slowly, the weaving, reeling runner fights the haze of pain, fights the feelings of hopelessness and loss. He battles through the loneliness. Inch by pain-filled inch, he struggles closer to the finishing tape. He is dimly aware that they have started clapping. They are pounding out his name. Jeet. Jeet. Jeet. His name throbs like a pulse. It swells to a drumbeat. It fills the entire stadium.

Over the loudspeaker, the announcer yells encouragement. "You can do it, Jeet." And then he shouts joyously, "Oh, good show! WELL DONE!"

The boy Jeet breasts the tape. Friendly hands reach out to him. Someone hugs him. Voices congratulate. He only knows that it is over. That he ran the race to the end.

The crowd is on its feet. They give him a standing ovation.

There are those who won the race. First, second, third. They won the medals. But the real winner is Jeet. Only I know why he did it. He did it for me. Jeet, my brother, ran for me.

## **Daughter's Daughter**

*M.S. Mahadevan*

Ragini's grandmother passed away last May. The Headmistress broke the news in her office. Abandoning her usual starchy look, she spoke with gentleness, warmth and sensibility. Conventional, soothing words. When she stopped, Ragini got up, thanked her and left the room. Her uncle would be coming to pick her, she had been informed.

'She went to her dormitory, took her suitcase out and set it on the bed. Her room-mates came in with expressions of awkward sympathy. She looked at them and felt that she did not know them at all.

To get away from this world, her everyday world that now seemed to belong to another life, she retreated into the Library. She took a book from the shelf, sat in the quietest corner and opened it. Her eyes scanned line after line, her hands turned the pages, but it was as if the connections between her senses and her brain had been snapped.

"*Nanima* is dead, *Nanima* is dead," a voice in her brain chanted meaninglessly.

On the drive back home, Ravi *Chacha* told her that *Nani??ia* had passed away in her sleep. It was quick. A single massive heart attack *Nanima* was all of seventy eight. Like the Headmistress, Ravi *Chacha* too said all the right things.

'Seventy-eight/ Ragini thought. She had known *Nanima's* age, but never thought of her as old.

By dusk, they were home. Ravi *Chacha* drove straight to *Nanima's* house in the suburbs—the grey stone house with white shutters and a red-tiled roof. As always, at the first glimpse, Ragini's heart did a happy back flip. Everything was as it had always been. A white fence with jacquamantia spilling over in a profusion of blue and green. Plants, greenery, life everywhere! Now, the front door would fly open and *Nanima* would emerge, a beautiful smile lighting up her gentle, lined face. The special smile she reserved for Ragini.

The front door opened. Revant, her younger brother ran out with Sheroo, *Nanima's* eight-year-old Apso. Her parents followed at a slower pace. No *Nani?na*. For the first time, no *Nanima*. To hide her disappointment, Ragini bent to pat Sheroo.

Over the next few days many people came to the house. They looked at Ragini's *Nanima*, now framed in a big garlanded photograph that hung on the drawing room wall. They looked at her unsmiling photo-studio face. Some shed tears, some talked and some were silent.

That is not my *Nanima*, Ragini wanted to say.

My *Nanima* is not an old lady in a pale sari, staring out of a frame. Her eyes are alive. Her smile is warm. It curls itself around your heart and gives it a tiny squeeze.

To get away from the sad, sober faces, Ragini went out into the backyard.

Here everything was as she remembered. *Nanima's* tulsi plant thrived. Sheroo slept on a mat under the mango tree.

The roots of that mango tree went deep into *Nani?na's* life. Its ancestor had flourished beside the cottage on the mountainside where *Nanima* had been born. When she was married and moved to the farm in the plains, the first thing she did was plant a mango sapling. When *Nanaji* had died and the farm was sold, she moved to this house and again she planted a mango sapling.

The sapling grew into a beautiful, bountiful tree. Its mangoes were the sweetest in the world. It bore fruit every other year. And when it did, *Nanima* made pickle. That year, before she died, *Nanima* had made mango pickle. And in the hot, mid-day sun in the courtyard, the big, brown and white jars sealed with cloth caps absorbed the slow, steady heat, and the mango pickle in them ripened to perfection. Somehow, the sight of those jars reassured Ragini.

A week later, Ragini's parents gave her the news. *Nanima* it appeared, had left the house to Ragini. 'To my daughter's daughter'.

Grand daughter, yes, but 'daughter's daughter'? Why had *Nanima* phrased it like that? What had she meant?

All Ragini's friends admired her mother. Ragini's mother was smart and polished. She was a successful professional who ran her own advertising agency. In fact, she looked and sounded like an advertisement herself. "Maximise your potential," she would say to Ragini. "You can be anything you want to be. Just do it."

But Ragini, just average in studies and not terribly good at anything in particular, was not sure about what she wanted to be. Her mother, she knew, had dreams for her. A great career, fame, money, success...All the things that she herself valued. But did Ragini value them too? At times she felt she and her mother would never speak the same language, would never understand one another. She said this to *Nani?na*.

"She is so different from you. And I am so different from her. How is she your daughter?"

Now in that house, the house that belonged to her, to the 'daughter's daughter' she asked herself this question again. In reply, there was only silence. Not the assuring silence of *Nanima's* understanding, but the empty, echoing silence of her absence. Her growing absence. The growing, deepening, widening black hole inside Ragini.

The day that was to be her last at *nanima's* house came. She was going back to school the following

morning. By the next vacation, this house would be sold. Her father and mother had told her that. Her share of the money would finance her studies abroad. America, England, Australia...wherever she wanted to go. Wasn't that wonderful?

Ragini had not said a word. What could she say? That the house was the only link she had with *Nanima*. And if that link was snapped, what would she have? Would they understand? She doubted it very much.

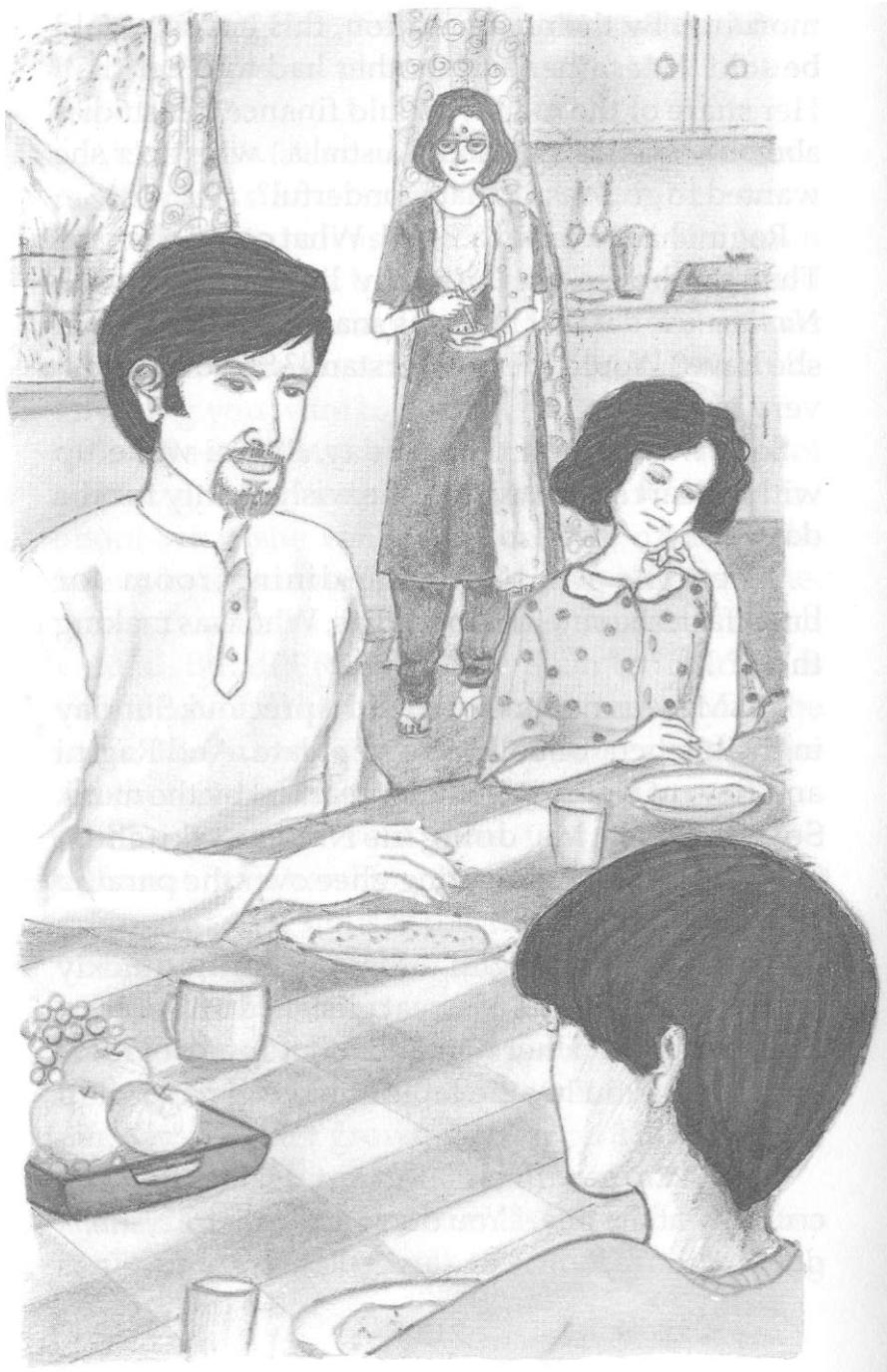
So it was that on the last day, Ragini woke up with a heart so heavy that she wished only for the day to end.

When she went into the dining room for breakfast, she smelt *alu* parathas. Who was making them? Ma?

But Ma was not one to spend a precious Sunday in the kitchen. Usually, she slept late. And Ragini and Revant were given their breakfast by the maid. So what was Ma doing in *Nanima's* kitchen, at *Nanima's* stove, spooning ghee over the paratha sizzling on the tava?

"Oh, it is you, Ragini," Ma looked up quickly from the tava. Beads of sweat glistened on her face. She pushed back her hair and left a streak of flour on it. "Will you lay the table? I have given Malati the day off."

"Why *alu* parathas?" Revant asked, looking critically at the pile. "You don't make them, *Nanima* does...did."



"*Nanima* made them. Now I do," Ma said evenly. "They may not be as perfect, but eat them all the same."

"But why *alu parathas*?" Revant persisted.

"Because the pickle is ready. You can taste it today. And *achaar* and paratha go together, don't they?"

*Aam ka achaar*. Revant looked interested. So did Papa.

For, as she remembered, the first tasting of the Mango pickle had been a family event. It had become a tradition. With *Nanima's* passing away it too would pass...

Ma passed the glass bowl with the pickle. Ragini took a piece and kept it on her plate next to the paratha. For a long moment she looked at it.

The oil it had been steeped in, spread in a golden puddle around it. The aroma rose up to her nostrils. Her eyes blurred. 'Never again,' she thought bleakly. 'No one to make *aam ka achaar*.' No *Nanima*. No grey house with white shutters and a red roof.

She tore off a bit from the paratha, put it into her mouth, then nibbled at the *achaar*. It was perfect. Amazingly it was as wonderful as it had always been. She looked up. She looked straight at Ma, as if seeing her for the first time.

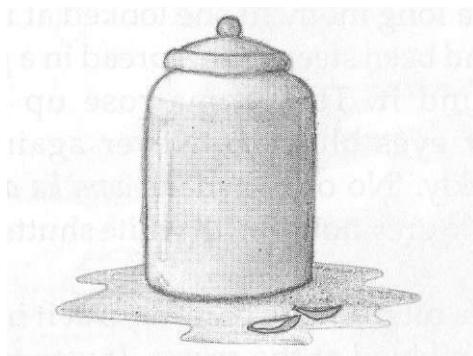
Ma was looking at her, her face a question mark. Her face that suddenly seemed so like *Nanima's* face. The same expression. The same eyes. Light

brown. *Nanima's* eyes. Ma's eyes. Ragini's eyes.

Suddenly Ragini knew. Yes, *Nanima* was there with them. In the colour of their eyes. In the colours of their memories. She was there. Connecting them, binding them though they were so different. Even though they would continue to argue and believe that they would never understand one another—she and her mother.

*Nanima* had passed on, but she had not left them.

How could she, when she was in them? In her daughter. And in her daughter's daughter.



## The Enemy

M.S. Mahadevan

"Want to see a Pakistani?"

The whisper slices through the drowse of a Sunday afternoon in March. My eyes fly open.  
"Sajal, my brother..."

"Well?" he asks impatiently. "Want to see one?"

"You are bluffing," I say. "There are no Pakistani here. They would be caught."

"They are caught," he retorts triumphantly.  
"Wounded Prisoners Of War(POWs)."

"Where?"

"Over there."

Beyond the hedge is a mustard field. It separates our bungalow from the ruined barracks that were once part of the Military Hospital.

"Let us go," I say, even though I do not quite believe his story.

At night the mustard field is a mysterious mass, broken here and there by the ghostly shapes of *kikar* trees. Jackals hide in the field and howl at the moon. Now, as I follow in Sajal's steps, I tell

myself that it is daylight and there are no jackals around.

Sajal freezes. Without warning, he drops soundlessly to the ground. I follow suit. "Sentries!" he whispers hoarsely.

I bury my face in my arms. I fight the urge to sneeze. The smell of crushed mustard is powerful. Signalling to me to wait, Sajal belly-crawls to the edge of the field. I catch a glimpse of a green trousered leg. A man with a rifle. He stops, strikes a match. The footsteps move on. Sajal parts the green stalks.

We are face to face with an ugly barbed wire fence. There are two rows of it, separated by a six-foot ditch. The fence stretches on either side. There are high thatched outposts with huge searchlights fitted on them. There are armed sentries in the outposts. Behind the fence is about three hundred yards of bare land. The abandoned barracks have been white-washed. The donors have been repaid. Every window is tightly shut. Not a soul is in sight. The place has the silent, oppressive air of a prison.

"Who are they guarding?" I ask.

"Could be General Niazi," Sajal whispers. "See the security. It is someone really dangerous."

My heart misses a beat.

General Niazi. So close. This is a scoop. I can see myself holding audience at school.

The war of '71 brought me unexpected instant

fame. From being one of forty-five girls in class VIIB, I became the girl whose father fought in the famous tank battle at Basantar. The rest of the girls, daughters of businessmen, lawyers and lecturers in this sleepy university town listened with rapt attention as I gave a blow by blow account of the war, based largely on my overactive imagination. I revelled in the attention. My classmates vied to sit beside me, to share their lunch boxes.

But public adulation is fickle. The next week, a girl from a different class was the heroine. Her uncle, a Naval Captain, had chosen to go down with his ship rather than desert it. Who could compete with that?

Now I have a story that they will be compelled to listen to. I can see myself spinning it. In my imagination, I describe the enemy. "Seven foot tall. A thick, black moustache. A thin, cruel mouth. Red eyes, like gimlets. Of course, he was kept in chains. A dangerous war criminal like that."

Beside me, Sajal stirs. "They come out in the evening."

"Who?" I yelp.

He gives me a withering look. "Who else? The POWs."

"But why do they let them out?"

"For exercise. Geneva convention. They have to be treated properly."

"What if they escape? They might murder us in our beds."

He looks at his wrist-watch. "They come out at four-thirty. There is still an hour to go. Let us go back."

The wrist-watch is covered with mud. He takes it off, dusts it carefully and puts it on again. The watch is *Baba's*. It is an Indian make. *Baba* gave it to Sajal just before he left for the front. That was in October. Me, he gave a quick, hard hug and a kiss on the forehead. He picked up Vir, my younger brother and said, "Be a good boy. Don't trouble Ija."

Vir said, "Get me a Patton tank."

Even back then we knew that there might be a war.

*Baba* writes regularly. Mostly he asks about us. He says very little about himself. All letters from the field area are censored. There was a time when there were no letters for days. No news. That was in December. Soon after, the war started.

All the windows in our house and in the neighbourhood were covered with black paper. Every evening the siren would go off to mark the beginning of the blackout.

When the war began, enemy fighter planes came right up to Agra. That is only four hours away by train. The military police were very strict about the blackout. They would patrol the silent lanes after dusk. A team of labourers dug trenches in the children's park. We had mock air raid drills. They were very exciting. We waited for a real air raid. But the enemy planes never came this far again.

Those days we would eat our dinner early, light lanterns and sit huddled under the quilt in Ija's room and listen to the radio. When the fighting was at its worst, Ija would sit up all night waiting for the hourly bulletins.

One evening, Major Verma, who lived four houses away, was announced missing in action. Two days later we heard that he was dead. Rohil Verma is Vir's best friend. Rohil's *Nanaji* and *Nanima* are staying with them. They have come because Rohil's mother is about to have a baby. The baby is born one evening in early April. A little girl, Ija tells us. She is going to see the baby.

"Can I come with you?" I ask. Ija is surprised. Babies! She knows what I think of them—messy at both ends.

"Are you sure you want to?" Ija asks as she runs a comb through my hair. I nod, squashing the tiny worm of guilt. The baby does not interest me.

The Maternity Ward at the hospital is just across the road from the POW ward. Who knows, I might see the enemy! My burning curiosity to see the enemy (from a safe distance) has not waned.

The rose bushes outside the ward are in bloom.

This baby looks like a little pink doll. Her eyes are wide open. Bright eyes. "She hardly cries," her mother says, smiling through her tears.

Ija tells me to go out for a while. I walk around the rose garden. An ambulance roars down the road. Two nurses walk past. Old neem trees line



the road. The earth beneath is covered with dead leaves. Above, the branches are throwing up new ones. Tears prick the back of my eyelids. Suddenly I miss *Baba*. And I think about that little girl who never did know the thrill of being thrown up in the air and caught, always in time, by strong arms. Her father will not be around to teach her how to ride a cycle or help her with a difficult mathematics problem. He will not hear her recite the tables as he shaves. He will not be there to point out the *Saptarishi* in the immense night sky. He will not be there to clap when she runs her first race. He will not be there. Ever after.

I run along the road. I run away. I run till I am out of breath and forced to stop. I stop below a tree. As if on cue, a koel hidden in the branches, bursts into a song. The first koel of the season. The noises of the hospital are not heard here. There is a deep, almost eerie silence.

A few feet away is the barbed wire perimeter around the POW ward. I feel a strange mix of fear and fascination. Then I see him. The enemy.

He stands leaning on the wooden railing that runs the length of the long, open corridor. The ward is nearly empty. The exchange of prisoners is over. They return our men. We return theirs. It takes a few seconds for my brain to grasp that I am face to face with the enemy. No demon, no red-eyed, fire-breathing monster. A thin, lonely man.

Does she remind him of his home? His garden?

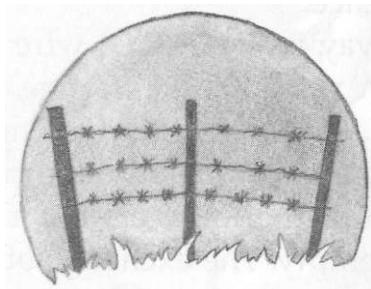
His field? A family across the border, waiting for his return?

*Baba* once told me about evolution. About how the human body is a miracle of evolution that took millions of years to happen. "The limbs," he said, "See how perfect they are. The hand is a marvel of engineering."

It took millions of years to shape. It takes only a few seconds to destroy. To reduce this marvel to a pulpy, ragged mass of flesh, blood and bone.'

I see the enemy behind the barbed wire. I see that he had no arms. Just two bandaged stumps where once his arms grew.

He was my enemy, once. Not any more.



## **Earthquake**

*M.S. Mahadevan*

Greetings, traveller. You look tired and cold.  
Are you a stranger to these parts? Waiting for  
the bus to Badrinath? Perhaps you are a pilgrim  
or a visitor to the Valley of Flowers?

Anyway, whoever you are, come with me. Wait  
at my teashop. It is just past the bend in the road.

As you can see, I am carrying this can of milk  
to the shop. In ten minutes, I will have a fire going.  
While you warm yourself, I will prepare for you  
the best cup of tea in all Garhwal. It will chase  
away the pinched, blue look from your face.

Here we are. Welcome to my humble roadside  
teashop. Make yourself comfortable on this  
wooden bench. It looks rickety but it will hold your  
weight.

My name, *sahib*? I am called Brij. I am seventeen-  
years-old I started this tea shop two years ago.

Before that I worked in a roadside *dhaba* outside  
Panipat. The heat, the crowd, the pollution—it was  
all too much. I had saved most of my earnings.

I came back and with a little help I started this shop. By the grace of Badri Vishal, it provides me a decent enough livelihood.

Here, your tea is ready—strong, sweet, flavoured with cardamom. Enjoy it, *sahib*, while I get on with my chores. This is my daily routine. At sunset, I will shut my shop and walk back the three miles to my dwelling on the hillside.

The name of my village?

It was my village. The village of my ancestors. It is no more. Molthi is gone.

What happened to my village?

It was four years ago, in the month of October. One night the earth quaked. Yes, tremors are common in these parts. These snows may seem eternal, the Himalayas may look solid, but the truth is, deep down they are unstable. We, who live here, are accustomed to tremors.

But what happened that night was more than that. It was a terrible earthquake. Its effects were felt as far away as Delhi and Lucknow.

Can you imagine the devastation at the heart of the earthquake?

The epicentre was in a valley not far from here. There were six hundred and seventy villages in the valley. Six hundred and two were destroyed. The earthquake lasted less than five minutes. Time enough to set these centuries-old mountains crashing, to reduce our villages to rubble, to snuff out hundreds of lives.

It was sheer chance that I was away that night. I had gone to Pauri to buy my school books. I stayed the night at my uncle's house. We felt the tremors. We ran out into the open. Again and again the tremors came. We spent the entire night outside. Pauri lived through the night. Molthi did not.

For the living, the nightmare began at daybreak when the news trickled in of the large-scale devastation. There were dozens of landslides. Huge boulders thrown haphazardly across motorable tracks and roads. Precious time was spent in blasting the rocks and clearing the way for Army rescue teams. It was all of four days before help arrived for Molthi.

I was among the first to reach the village. My uncle accompanied me. We feared the worst, but nothing had prepared us for it. Every single house, every wall, every roof had been flattened. Stone, rubble and dust were all that remained. Our house was a two-storeyed stone building with a slate roof. My great grandfather had built the house. We were a small family. My father had died after an illness, just fourteen months ago. My mother took care of us. We were three children. I was the oldest. My brother Nilu was ten. Bhuli, my two-year-old sister was the baby of the family. My grandmother lived with us.

When the soldiers began to clear the debris, my uncle led me away. I was in a complete daze, too numb to feel anything. The soldiers had set up a

makeshift camp. Someone gave me tea and biscuits. I don't know how long I was there. Suddenly it was evening and uncle was standing beside me. "They have taken the bodies to the river bank," he said gently. "Come, you must perform the last rites before sunset. Tomorrow, we will go back to Pauri."

I had last seen my family while leaving for Pauri. They stood at the doorway and waved. Ma, *Daadi*. Nilu and Bhuli. That is the way I will always remember them—smiling and waving at me. Not as the white-shrouded lifeless figures I saw.

Bhuli? She was not there.

"They have not found her," my uncle said. "The wild animals... Brij, don't look like that! She is dead."

"But we must find her," I shouted.

"Brij... Get a grip on yourself," Uncle pleaded.

But I was beyond reasoning. I ran back to the village, to the spot where my house had stood.

There was still so much debris. I scrambled around shifting the earth and stones. How long I was on my knees searching, crying, searching..."

Boy, it is no use!" a voice said. I looked up. The speaker was the Army officer who had supervised the relief operation. "There is no one alive in there," he said, "whom are you looking for?"

"My sister, *sahib*," I said, fighting to control my tears. "All I want is to give her a proper cremation."

I stopped, conscious that I was babbling. I could



see that he was bone-tired. He looked as if he had not slept for days. His uniform was covered with dust, his face was grimy, But through all the dust and grime, I saw that his eyes were kind.

"My men have been on their feet for days," he said softly, as if talking to himself. "They have done all they could here. Tomorrow, at daybreak, we go to another village just like this, then another... He looked away at the sun setting behind the peaks. Down, in the valley, the pyres burnt, row upon row. The officer muttered something, shook his head and turned away. A terrible despair engulfed me. I lay there among the ruins of my house and cried.

Ten minutes later, the officer was back. With him were three soldiers armed with spades and crowbars. Without a word, the men began, removing the debris. They laboured doggedly. When it was completely dark, someone brought a few lit petromax lamps. Two hours later, a soldier called out, "Sahib!"

He stood in the middle of a small hollow. The wall had caved in at that spot. I recognized a part of a door. Beneath it, a small foot.

Feverishly the soldiers began to clear the hollow. Then, they lifted the door.

"She is alive!" someone said.

It was a miracle. She had been buried under the debris for a hundred and sixteen hours. She had survived the earthquake, the cold nights and the

wild animals. A ragged cheer went up as the soldier wrapped her in a warm blanket and carried her to the tent where a makeshift hospital had been set up. Bhuli lived. The next day I went to thank the Army Officer. But he was gone. I did not even know his name.

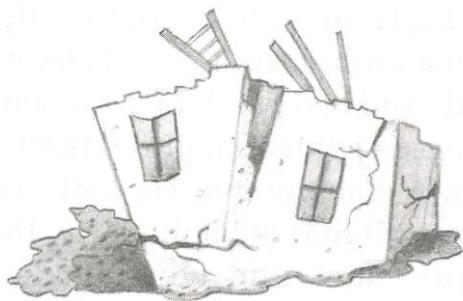
My sister and I went to live with my uncle. Soon after, I got a job at a *dhaba* near Panipat. Bhuli stayed back. She started going to school. It weighed on me that I never thanked that Army Officer. I hoped that one day I would run into him again. Every time I saw an Army man, I would hope it was him. For months I would search for his face in every crowd. And one day, I did find him.

It was late on a winter's night. A truck stopped at the *dhaba*. A man got out. He looked familiar. When he stepped into the light, I saw that it was not him, just someone who bore a strong resemblance. The man was tired. He asked for a cup of tea. As I served him, *sahib*, I felt this strange lightness. This sense of joy. When the man offered to pay, I did not take the money. The next day, it happened again. Every day, I would see someone, a complete stranger, a tired traveller, who reminded me of that officer. It was as if he was everywhere. And every time I served him tea, I felt a surge of sheer joy.

A month later I quit my job at the *dhaba* and returned to those mountains. The *dhaba* owner was quite relieved. He had no use for a waiter who kept

forgetting to present the bill to the customer.  
Now I am on my own. And I am at peace.

Here is your bus, *sahib*. No, no money... You were tired. All I offered you was a cup of tea. May be it was the best tea in all Garhwal. Maybe not. But I am happy I could do you this small service. Wish you a safe journey, *sahib*. May God be with you!



## **Don't Want You Back**

*Akhila      Girirajkumar*

One warm, Saturday afternoon Sukanya dashed into her home. Face glowing she announced, "Arup and I are getting married."

Her parents Raghunath and Susheela stared at her in stunned silence. After all, this was the biggest nightmare for all teenagers' parents.

"What nonsense!" her father exploded.

Her mother stared at her in shock.

Sukanya was puzzled at her parents reaction. They were open-minded, friendly people. They allowed any number of her classmates, boys and girls, to come home to study. They joined in their chats. They did not insist on '*churidar-kurta only*' rules. Her father took her swimming and skating, her mother listened to Backstreet Boys and Shania Twain with her and bought her funky nailpolish! Her friends called them the best parents any fifteen-year-old could have!

They ought to have been really happy to get a son-in-law as handsome as Arup. Instead, why

were they so upset? Perhaps they needed some reassurance.

"Appa, Arup and I didn't play silly tricks on each other like in the movies. We simply enjoy each other's company. We have talked about our future together. We will be doing CA and work together. I am not going to stop studying if that is what is bothering you! I am going to work harder to make our lives a success."

This earnest speech made her father's blood boil. Controlling himself with difficulty he said, "Do you have any idea how silly you sound? Suki, you are only fifteen years old! That is no age to be making decisions that could affect the next fifty-sixty years of your life!"

You did not say that when I decided to do Commerce! That also affects the next fifty-sixty years of my life!"

"That is a ridiculous argument! There is a vast difference between a life career and a life partner!"

"Why?" insisted Suki, "Appa, in the olden days girls became mothers at fifteen."

"Your talk makes me sick! Appa in the olden days girls became mothers! Anyway, those girls didn't choose their partners, their parents did!"

As Suki's mother watched in dismay, tempers ran high in the normally peaceful household! Unable to contest her father's point Suki said, "Then why did you let Arup come to do joint study with me?"

"That is the point! You were meant to study/not to act silly. You have studied with so many boys earlier without any nonsense! Why are you acting like this with that boy alone?"

"Let me get this straight. Are you objecting to my falling in love or my falling in love with *Arup* or my falling in love with Arup at fifteen?"

"Right now I am objecting to your talking in that insolent tone with your father!" interrupted Susheela sternly. "Drink your milk and go study for your quarterly exam."

"Very clever! Asking me to drink milk to show me I am still a baby. It won't work!" she said, stalking out of the door. Then she turned, "I used to be so proud of you! When several girls at school chased Arup, I used to ignore him! Still he chose me over the others and convinced me to marry him. Whatever you say, I will still marry him!" The door slammed!

Her parents stared at each other in dismay. Her father said, "When she talks of marriage, I feel like slapping her!" Then jumping up he said, "I am going to that boys house to warn him!"

"No, sit down and think, first!" pleaded his wife.

"Okay, I will go and weed the garden! I am sure this problem will get solved by itself," retorted *Appa*, angrily.

"If you get angry, you won't be able to think clearly! Now calm down," said *Amma* persuasively.

After giving the situation deep thought they

asked Suki's school headmistress for advice.

"Sometimes level-headed girls like Sukanya do lose their heads/" admitted the headmistress. "First of all, do not fight with Arup!" she advised. *Appa* looked sheepish.

"Apart from the unnecessary publicity, that will make Sukanya tilt more towards Arup. Moreover, do not lecture to her. Teenagers hate listening to parents. Ask someone you trust to talk to her. If possible, take her away for a few days. Out of sight might also help push this absurd idea away from her mind."

The next few days were, strangely, normal for Suki. Her parents did not say anything more on the subject. Still she was uneasy. For, Arup was annoyed when she had told him that her parents knew about them.

"How will I face your parents now? How can I come and study with you?" he had asked.

"Why not? We are not doing anything wrong!"

Even so, Arup stopped going to her house to study. That upset Suki.

When her Uncle Govind came on a visit, Suki was relieved. Govind was her mother's brother and her best friend. Suki poured her heart out to him. He teasingly asked her, "So can I meet this perfect paragon?"

Suki giggled and went to the phone. Dialling Arup's number she said, "I never said he was perfect!"

"So what are his faults?"

"That is disloyalty. I can't tell you!"

"Not even me?"

"Not even you," said Suki, smiling but firm.

To her surprise, Arup refused to meet Govind despite her reassurances. He was playing cricket, he said and no, they could not come over because his parents did not know about her.

Suki was confused. Arup never played cricket. He always complained about the heat and spent hours watching TV in an air-conditioned room.

Govind was watching her closely. He didn't seem to mind that Arup could not come. He asked casually, "When are you planning to get married?"

"Soon...Arup has to tell his parents."

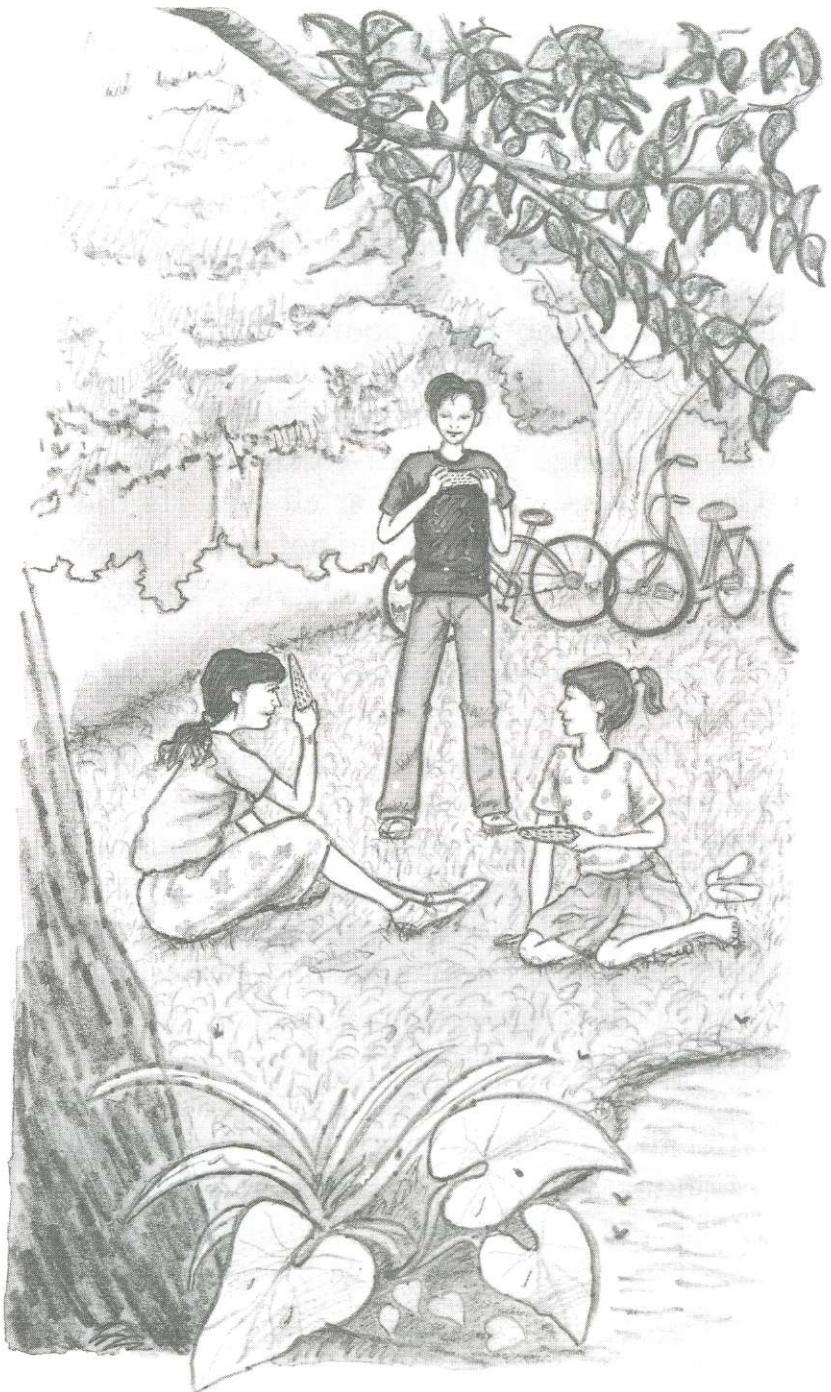
"Hasn't he done that yet? And how are you planning to survive till you start earning?"

"We haven't thought about that!" Then her forehead creased. "Won't *Appa* give us money?"

"As much as you want, as long as you are his daughter. Once you are married, it's natural to expect your husband to pay for everything?"

Suki felt cornered. She wished earnestly that Arup had been there to answer these questions. 'How dare he ditch me like this,' she thought, annoyed with him.

After that, Govind dropped the topic. "Spend the holidays with me at Kodaikanal," he urged. He was Manager at one of Kodaikanal's bigger hotels. Suki went with him gladly.



In Kodaikanal Govind's wife, Sundari, and his small son welcomed her warmly. She met their neighbours, Dileepan and Devi who had come from Sri Lanka recently. They became good friends. They rode the hired cycles around the lake, shared favourite places and hogged corn on the cob. But one thing about Dileepan and Devi puzzled Suki. She asked her aunt, "When they are not talking or laughing they have such a scared look. And the slightest, unexpected sound upsets them. They try to cover it up, but it is there. I wonder why?"

"I'll let you into a secret. A few months ago they were in their uncle's house watching TV. Suddenly, they heard a loud sound and rushed out. Their uncle was on the floor, shot in the chest. There was blood everywhere."

"Oh, my God! The poor things!" exclaimed Suki. "We have spent two whole days together and they have not said a word about it."

"They could have wallowed in self-pity, but the fact that they do not complain is what makes them so likeable," replied Sundari.

'Arup keeps grumbling,' thought Suki. 'He cannot tolerate the slightest discomfort!' With a start of surprise she realized she had not thought about Arup since coming to Kodaikanal. 'Well, why worry about my problems now,' she thought, shrugging, unaware that she had classed Arup as a problem.

The next few days were glorious. All three were

very sad when she had to leave. On the journey home, Suki's heart was heavy. The very thought of facing Arup filled her with dread. 'I have made a prize fool of myself,' she thought. 'I can see it all so clearly now. I was a challenge to Arup as I did not run after him and I could teach him accounts. So he just fooled around. Like an idiot I took him seriously!' Her feelings were in a turmoil.

Govind, who was watching her, understood and did not interrupt.

Suddenly, Suki looked up. Realization dawned. "You know everything, don't you?" she asked him.

"Why else do you think I came dashing at the beginning of the second season?" he smiled.

Leaning against her uncle's shoulder she said in agony, "I can't believe I acted so stupidly."

"Don't make such a big fuss about it, Suki!" said Govind, sliding a comforting arm around her. At your age it is hard to have enough experience of human nature. At least you came to your senses before it was too late!"

"What will *Appa* and *Amma* say?"

"Don't you know them? They will be relieved to know you are all right!"

"What will I say to Arup?"

"Nothing. Be normal. If he asks you to explain something, ask him to come home."

"He will run away!" laughed Suki.

"Exactly," said Govind.

And Suki went home happily!

## **Cheer From The Dumps**

*Kannan      Somasundaram*

"I am really exasperated/' yelled Vikram.  
His mother was unmoved, "No, you are not.  
You are only irascible."

"*Amma*, I am sure you are wrong. Absolutely.  
Even my worst enemies will tell you that I am quite  
'assible...' Why, last annual day I got a medal for  
that."

Mrs. Krishnan's frown dissolved into a smile.  
"You poor dear, you don't know what the word  
means, do you? But serves you right for throwing  
'exasperated' at me like that."

"Oh, *Amma*, I was just showing off what I learnt  
at Mrs. Gujral's class. Anyway, that is not  
important right now. I just cannot understand why  
you want me to come with you. You know my friends  
laugh at you. You don't care, but I get angry."

"Vikram, you will also learn not to care some  
day. It is not just your friends. Yesterday, when I  
was going across the park, I saw Mrs. Nair with  
that girl, Cheryl, the one who recently moved into

the third floor of our building. They greeted me, then giggled as they walked off. But come on, is what we do really that weird? You know it is not. So let us get going. And please check your bicycle tyres."

\*

What exactly did Mrs. Krishnan do that caused young Vikram so much embarrassment? Since he cannot tell us, we will have to peek into his diary. Will you feel bad about it? No no, we shall skip the secret parts. Okay, here we are. It should not be difficult to find the right entry. Yes, found it:

*Dear Diary,*

*I am sorry I have not been too regular in writing. The World Cup kept me really busy. There were so many Competitions to enter. So many matches to see. I sort of just forgot to write. But I won a prize you know. Here is my report:*

No. of quizzes entered                    33

No. of grand prizes won                    01

The prize                                      A shiny red cap

*I know it does not seem much. But my father says that these things depend on something called 'probability'. I suppose it means that anyone who enters a Competition can probably win. But the problem is that, as more people start taking part in a contest, you have to keep adding the number of 'probabilities' you say about each person. So I must have had a million 'probabilities' against my name., yet I won a washable cap. I mean, that is amazing. There was*

*a guy who won a car. But what would we do with another car? Amma says that in apartments like ours, parking space is already a problem. And it is our civic duty to see that our things do not cause trouble to others. And I do not need a chowkidar with a zuhistle to direct me when I am putting my cap in the right place: "...little bit to the right, sir. That's it, sir." (By the way, I must remember to collect all my jokes and send it to some magazine one of these days).*

\*

Really! Vikram is some character. If he had not won the cap, the World Cup probably would not have happened for him. All that is fine, but where is the information we were looking for? He seems to be going on about probability, his talent as a comic... Hold on a moment, though. Vikram is in the balcony of his flat. Looks like he is about to take one of the two bicycles leaning against the balcony railing. Yes, that is right.

Hello!

Mrs. Krishnan has also come out to the balcony now and has grabbed the second bike. She is staring at the park that lies across the building. She seems to be letting the colour and air from the park envelop her. Vikram is nudging her now.

"Come on, *Amma*, what are you hanging around for. And why are you looking so pleased? Smiling and all. You look like a kid who has been excused from a RT. class or something."

"Vikram, the next time you use 'and all!' in a



sentence, I will box your ears 'and all' like anything. Come, let us go."

\*

Such wonderful scenes from a home. Now let us quickly get back to the diary, because it will be nice if we can prepare ourselves for what the mother and son team is about to do. Maybe we should scan through some of the later pages... Hey! here is something familiar:

*.. .and. that left me really exasperated. I mean, Amma did not have to take the litter so seriously. We have been taking morning walks in the park for months and it has always been dirty. Today she suddenly decided to do something about it. When father asked her, she replied and I quote: "I lecture my students on civic duty but walk around muck in real life. I do not know why I did not realize it earlier. Maybe I got used to rubbish."*

To that my father answered: "I think so, Vijaya, perhaps you are going into Vikram's room too often!"

*My father has my comic genes, I tell you. Anyway, from that day on, Amma carries and makes me carry a huge bag, and as we walk, we go around collecting empty ice cream cups, plastic bags, half-eaten lollipops, bus tickets and even...I am not sure how to say this...a few corns of cob? Oh, it has been terrible. Our neighbours smirk at us, my friends ask me if I am collecting stuff for my room. Even my father joins in the fun. He once told Amma that since she cared so much about recycling, the next time we wanted to go*

*out for dinner, zve could just pick things up from the park. "We can take candles along. It will be a marvellous buffet."*

*Amma sent me out of the room. She said she wanted to, "have a quiet word with father."*

*It must have been really quiet, because I did not hear anything. When Appa came out, he had a dazed look. "I am worried about her students, my boy," he said.*

*But it was not like that at the beginning. Folks in the park actually stopped by and helped us. Even the president of our Residents' Association asked the staff of our block to be more diligent at work.*

*I think the whole thing got messy when the bicycle thing happened. You see, after we collected the trash, I cycled to the nearby dump to throw it azvay. That gave Amma a new idea. She thought accompanying mewould give her greater satisfaction. "I should take the whole thing through to its conclusion."*

*That is when the taunting began. "She will not soft-pedal on this issue, will she?" laughed Colonel Mulchandany, the man who lived just above us.*

*Appa was distressed too. "She will put me into her rubbish bag if I tell her, but I'm afraid, dear boy, your mother is being taken as a faintly comic figure."*

*I was feeling more and more miserable. But I sort of knew what we were doing was right. Amma is going overboard. I do want to support her. Also, I feel scared to say no to her. I have my own ivay to shozo a little protest. After dumping garbage, when Amma has taken her cycle up, I race around the park three times.*

*At the end of the third lap, when I am directly under the balcony, I ring my cycle bell furiously. The noise irritates Amma, and when she comes out I give her a mock salute. By now she has accepted it like a ritual. Nozvadays she comes out just for the salute so I zwill stop the racket. That has...*

Sorry. There has been an accident. So the diary had to be shut abruptly. While getting her bike down, Mrs. Krishnan slipped and fell. It is feared that her leg is broken. Mr. Krishnan and Vikram took her to the hospital. It was a tense ride.

Mr. Krishnan said, "Something like this was bound to happen."

"Now there will be more jokes," added Vikram.

"Okay, if it will satisfy you both," Mrs. Krishnan spoke indignantly, "I was wrong! Let people use the park as a garbage bin. From now on, I will just throw rubbish from the balcony. And Vikram, you can put me on a wheelchair and take me through all that filth. Let people know that I have paid a price for being such a busybody."

The next morning was bright and cheery. Mrs. Krishnan, although her leg was immobilized by plaster, was in better spirits. The whole family had risen late, partly because it was Sunday and partly because of the exhaustion of the previous day. The Krishnans were sipping tea in their balcony when Mrs. Krishnan said, "Don't think I am obsessed, but the park seems clean today. I was expecting a sad sight."

Vikram was amazed, "Amma there is a limit..." He was cut off because suddenly the air exploded with the sounds of bicycle bells and people clapping.

What happened? It will be appropriate if we read Vikram's comments entered into his diary just hours after the event:

*I could not believe it! Col. Mulchandany had cleaned his 1950 antique bicycle for the occasion. Mr. Nair had borrowe it from the presszoallah. The chozvkidar had lent his to Mr. Gupta. Others (there were at least fifty of our neighbours) had simply jogged.*

*They had cleaned the park and dumped the rubbish before we woke up. They were waiting for us to come to the balcony. Giving us a few minutes to settle down, they congregated at the spot where I usually ended my bicycle laps. Then they started the noise, exactly the way I did. When Amma got close to the railing, the din reached its peak and suddenly it stopped.*

We all looked down. They were organized in a neat column... *And they were saluting Amma!*

*As she turned to look at us, she kept her chin up so that we did not see her tears. But we saw. We also saw the smile. Then Appa and I got up at the same second. It seemed as though we had rehearsed our movements for months. When we saluted Amma, I knew there was nothing mock about it this time.*

*Amma let her chin down.*



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