

LUNCH

‘**W**hat is for lunch, mom?’ Reena asked while checking herself in the mirror. She wanted to make sure that she looked perfect in her school uniform. The shoes were shining; the pleats of the skirt bore razor-sharp creases, the sweater without wrinkles in the body, but with deliberate wrinkles in the sleeves. How important it was to look perfect to be counted in the *kool* category!

“*Paranthas* and *achar*, dear. Don’t forget to put your lunch-box in the school-bag,” Mrs. Rai replied, struggling as always against the clock. She had to prepare breakfast and lunch for everyone and then get ready and go to work. As if that was not enough, she would also have to run odd errands like passing the towel to her absent-minded husband in the bathroom, helping her children find books at the last minute, etc.

“Not *paranthas* again, mom! I told you to prepare something else na...” Who would explain how *unkool* and unappetizing *paranthas* were and, anyways, who ate *paranthas*

every day! All her friends either brought different items for lunch or brought money. She had made up her mind. She was not going to take *paranthas* for lunch.

"Ok *beta*, this Sunday, I will prepare your favourite *alu-chop* for breakfast."

"No mom! I want *alu-chop* today!" Reena howled. Her mom always made an excuse. Sunday, Sunday, Sunday..... Was Sunday the only day she deserved good breakfast? And what good was a good breakfast if she couldn't show it off to her friends?

"Beta, it isn't possible today. You will be late for school," Mrs. Rai replied, busy frying the *paranthas*. Reena would never understand the struggle. She would never understand how difficult it was to be a working mother, particularly in India. It carried double the responsibility with no privileges. The day started at 5 am and there was not a minute's rest till 9 pm.

"Then I want money to buy some lunch. I will not take *paranthas*."

"Reena, this is not fair. What will I do with these *paranthas*?" Mrs. Rai wanted to tell Reena that money was scarce but she stopped herself. She did not want her children's lives to be darkened by the shadow of penury.

"No mom! I will not take *paranthas*, means I *will* not take *paranthas*! If you won't give me money, I will not eat lunch," Reena said, tears brimming in her eyes.

Guiding her children through adolescence was becoming extra-ordinarily difficult for Mrs. Rai. She did not know when to be firm and when to let go. It was getting late and she did not have time to argue. She handed a ten rupees note to Reena. She would probably have to walk back home to make up for the ten rupees.

With the ten rupees note in her pocket, Reena quickly washed her face and hurried to school. It wouldn't do her plans any good to be late.

It was her turn to sit on the first bench this week. And the new monitor of the class was to be selected today. She hoped the class-teacher would notice her. How *kool* it would be to wear the monitor's badge. She was too excited to even contemplate the powers and privileges that would come with the coveted badge.

First period had elapsed. The class-teacher seemed to have forgotten about the selection of the monitor. Worse, Reena did not attract the attention of the teacher. The fifth and sixth periods were also to be taken by the class-teacher. Hopefully, things would be better then, Reena thought.

Slowly time passed and the bell for the fifth period rang. This was also the last period before lunch. May be there will be a reason to celebrate, she already had the means today, Reena thought.

The class-teacher arrived, looked Reena straight in the eyes and said, "Reena, please return this pen to Sanjay Sir and thank him on my behalf for letting me use it."

Reena was pleased. This responsibility would sure be a harbinger of better things to come. She looked at the pen. It was an ordinary red-ink ball point pen, but it was invaluable to her.

She went to the staff-room. How grand the room looked ... ! Each teacher had an individual table and chair; there was no need to share a desk. There were flowers on some tables, teacher's day cards on others. Entry to the hallowed room was considered a privilege.

Sanjay Sir's seat was vacant. Next to him sat the dreaded Biswas Sir. Nobody dared to whisper in his class. Doing his subject's home-work was the first priority for all students, and that too in their best handwriting. Forgetting to bring the textbook or copy ensured a severe caning.

As Reena was about to flee, Biswas Sir looked up from the copy he was correcting. "What are you doing here?" he growled.

"N-N-Nothing Sir. I was looking for Sanjay Sir. Ma'am asked me to give him this pen and thank him for letting her use it," Reena managed to say through her parched lips.

"He has gone for his class, give it to me." Reena obliged. She turned on her heels and did not look back till she had reached the safety of her classroom.

She related the event to her class teacher. The teacher was not happy. She expected Reena to be more responsible. If Sanjay Sir was not there, she should have brought back the pen and it could be given to him later. "What if Biswas Sir forgets about the pen? Go and bring the pen back."

Internally, Reena was being torn. On one side was the dreaded confrontation with Biswas Sir and on the other side was the position of the monitor. The lure of becoming a monitor finally tilted the balance, but only just. As she treaded towards the staff-room, many horrors visited her mind. What if Biswas checked her nails (she had used nail-polish on one of her thumbnails), what if he noticed her fancy hair-clip? What if...?

She felt a little relieved to see that Biswas Sir was not in the staff-room. He was taking class. She rushed towards that classroom. She just wanted to get it over with. The terror was in full display in that class. Biswas Sir had a cane in his hand and was severely chastening a boy. By the gestures she felt that the poor thing had forgotten something. Her courage left her and she bounded from the scene.

After catching her breath, she took stock of the situation. What would she do now? She did not have the guts to approach Biswas Sir and could not go empty-handed to her class-teacher. She had to show her efficiency and prove herself capable of responsibility.

What wretched luck to run into Biswas Sir... What should she do now? In this state of desperate indecision, the bell for lunch-break rang an idea in her head.

Yes, that is the only way out, she decided. She would have to forgo lunch, use the ten rupees to buy an identical red-ink ball point pen and give it to Sanjay Sir. Although the original pen was a used one, hopefully he would either not notice or think that Ma'am had returned a new pen, and not mind the change. The situation could still be salvaged.

She bought the pen from the nearest shop, and with an empty stomach but a relieved heart, she set out to execute the last stage of the operation. While waiting for Sanjay Sir, the cramps in her stomach reminded her of her lunch box of *paranthas*. She could not believe she would ever miss the *paranthas*.

Finally, she caught hold of Sanjay Sir. "Ma'am asked me to give you this pen and thank you for lending it," Reena said triumphantly.

Sanjay Sir looked puzzled. "Didn't you give the pen to Biswas Sir?"

Reena was speechless. After a long pause, Sanjay Sir conveyed this short but shattering message to Reena – "It was Biswas Sir's pen originally. I had borrowed it from him and later lent it to Ma'am because she urgently needed the red pen to enter marks in some report cards and there was no one else in the staff-room."

Reena was dazed. She was left with a red-ink pen, for which she had no use, she was hungry and had lost the opportunity to enjoy bought lunch.

Her heart skipped a beat, she was late for class, that too English literature, the subject taught by her class-teacher. She rushed, but it was too late...

“Why are you late? I will report this,” Savita said in a tone matched in sprightliness only by the badge of monitor on her tie.