

KHYRUNNISA A.



OF COURSE IT'S BUTTERFINGERS!

'Like a good game of cricket, this book
keeps you hooked till the very end!'

Mithali Raj, captain, Indian Women's Cricket Team





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KHYRUNNISA A.

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Illustrations by Abhijeet Kini



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OF COURSE IT'S BUTTERFINGERS!

Khyrunnisa A., prize-winning author of children's fiction, loves reading, writing and children. She created the popular comic character Butterfingers for the children's magazine *Tinkle*. Her five previous books in the Butterfingers series include three novels, *Howzzat Butterfingers!* (2010), *Goal, Butterfingers!* (2012) and *Clean Bowled, Butterfingers!* (2015), and two collections of short stories, *The Misadventures of Butterfingers* (2016) and *Run, It's Butterfingers Again!* (2017). This book, like the previous collections, includes stories that have appeared in *Tinkle* in comic-strip form.

Some of her stories, for children and for adults, have been published in various anthologies. A collection, *Lost in Ooty and Other Adventure Stories*, was brought out in 2010. Her stories appear regularly in *Dimdima*, and she had a fortnightly column, Inside View, in *The Hindu MetroPlus*.

She worked as associate professor of English at All Saints' College, Thiruvananthapuram, and is now a full-time writer. Visit her at www.khyrunnisa.com and connect with her at khyrubutter@yahoo.com.

Praise for the Series

‘Khyrunnisa A.’s Butterfingers series has bowled over readers, cricketers and celebrities alike’—*The Hindu*

‘The adolescent antics of the hero of the Butterfingers series are subtle primers for real-life challenges. At an age when superheroes and mythology rule the roost in children’s literature, writer A. Khyrunnisa is a trailblazer.

[Butterfingers] has a unique style . . . It is witty, based on the theme of sports and has real-life situations. However, it also has social criticism and attempts to develop interest in literature in a subtle way. Interestingly, the Butterfingers series is enjoyed by adults too, especially those interested in sports’—*Times of India*

‘Butterfingers has indeed been attracting many young readers with his clumsiness and ludicrous schemes that take him right into the heart of trouble and then somehow out of it as well. The author truly knows how to keep her readers entertained’—*New Indian Express*

‘Ever since his appearance in *Tinkle* magazine, [Butterfingers] has been much loved by young readers’—*Sakal Times*

Advance Praise for the Book

‘The imaginative world conjured by Khyrunnisa in the Butterfingers stories is charming, witty and boisterous, full of good-humoured mischief and benign fun, stylishly and effortlessly evoked through the clear-eyed magic of her captivating prose. With sports at the heart of many stories, the Butterfingers books are delightful and make school sound like so much fun. Khyrunnisa’s Butterfingers is a gift to the children of our nation!’— Shashi Tharoor, member of Parliament and bestselling author

‘Whether your favourite subject in school is physics, English or PE, you’re bound to enjoy the charming and hilarious exploits of Butterfingers and his eclectic bunch of friends. Like a good game of cricket, it keeps you hooked till the very end!’—Mithali Raj, captain, Women’s Indian National Cricket Team

‘Who’s at his every-disaster-has-a-silver-lining best? Who can snatch defeat (almost) from the jaws of victory? The Wizard of the Woeful . . . the Foremost Lord of the Foul-Up . . . the Bumbling Baron of Blunders . . . of course it’s Butterfingers! I laughed, loved it and look forward to the rematch’—Robin Jeffrey, academic and writer, co-author of *Waste of a Nation: Garbage and Growth in India*

*For three lovely and beloved people—my aunts
Dr K. Lalitha and Mrs Devi Mohan, and my sister Chand Begum.
Their love and encouragement have meant a lot.*

The Historic Girls vs Boys Cricket Match

‘We believe in honouring the words of the dead.’

‘Eh?’ Mr Jagmohan, principal of Green Park Higher Secondary School, gulped, goggled at the computer screen and read the message again. He pressed a hand to his head, urging it to make sense of the cryptic mail. *What words? Who is dead?* He wondered if he was delirious and heading towards a relapse.

The last thing he had wanted upon his return to work after a three-week bout of viral fever was such a message. It was lunchtime, and his appetite seemed to have deserted him. That had put him off and, after jabbing at his food like an impatient woodpecker, he had decided to check his pending emails. The huge backlog awaiting his attention hadn’t improved his spirits. With a growl of annoyance, he had decided to start from the latest and work his way down to the earlier mails, but this ghoulish communication had spooked him and put paid to his plans.

He checked the sender’s address: trgtglhschl@gmail.com. ‘Trgt . . . gl . . . hschl . . . trrgslhsl?’ His tongue almost got entangled with his vocal cords in his efforts to pronounce the word. *Which language doesn’t have any faith in vowels? German? Russian?* Was a Russian spy trying to reassure his dead German counterpart? Could it be Polish? He took a deep breath and read the mail a third time. A late brainwave made him scroll down for a clue, and he was rewarded with two more sentences—to his relief, rather intelligible ones: ‘The girls vs boys cricket match must take place. I’ve been waiting for your reply.’

Ah, so the earlier mails hold the key to the mystery! But he didn’t feel up to sifting through them. He needed help. He read the mail again. The crucial words ‘cricket match’ hit him between the eyes. *Cricket!* Mr Sunderlal, the PT master, would have to be his saviour.

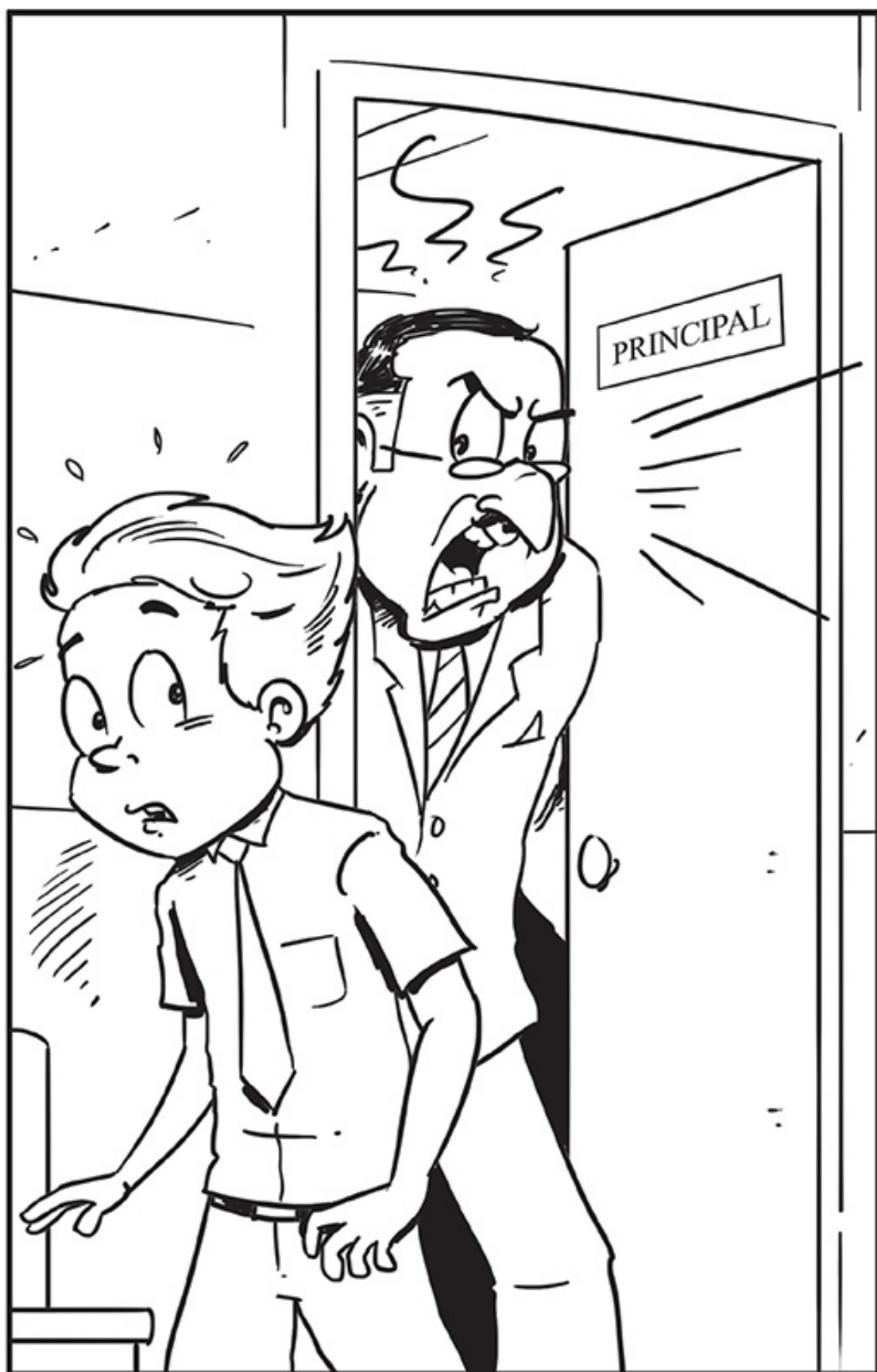
Brightening up, he rang the bell to summon his peon, Shekhar. There was no response. ‘That greedy Shekhar and his elaborate twelve-course lunches! Does he think it’s his last lunch on earth, that he’s spending so much time on it?’ Thinking some more uncharitable thoughts about his peon, Mr Jagmohan

decided to seek a student's help instead.

He opened his door just in time to see Amar scuttle past. It wasn't the best of choices but, finding no one else in sight, he bellowed, 'Amar! Come here!'

Amar stopped in his tracks, startled. Now what had he done? Nicknamed Butterfingers for his amazing ability to drop things, Amar Kishen was Class VIII A's prime architect of disaster, well known for getting his class—and himself—into perpetual trouble. Being summoned by the principal was a regular occurrence.

'Take that guilty look off your face, Amar . . . no matter what you might have done!' Mr Jagmohan continued his vocal impersonation of a bull. 'Go tell Mr Sunderlal to drop everything and come here immediately.'



‘Drop everything, sir?’ Amar grinned on hearing his favourite word.

‘I meant put everything else aside. Don’t act silly.’ Mr Jagmohan gave him one of his withering glares. ‘Tell him it’s a matter of life and death. It’s to do with a boys vs girls cricket match!’

The moment he said those words, Mr Jagmohan wanted to bite his tongue. How indiscreet of him! But the deed was done. Amar gaped and, like a shot, rushed to the staffroom, where Mr Sunderlal, back from the grounds after settling a fight between two groups of class VI boys over a cricket bat, had just settled down to lunch. Before he could begin, Amar came to a noisy halt at the open door and, sighting the PT master, shouted, ‘Excuse me! Sunderlal Sir, Mr Jagmohan wants to see you immediately. Matter of life and death, boys and girls!’

Before anyone could react, he had vamoosed, keen to broadcast the news to his class. The word spread faster than a forest fire, and by the time the lunch interval came to an end, the whole school had heard about the boys vs girls cricket match.

None of the teachers could make any sense of Amar’s words, though, except that Mr Jagmohan wanted to see Mr Sunderlal at once. Nobody liked an interruption at lunchtime and, pleased it wasn’t them who had been summoned, the teachers urged Mr Sunderlal to go immediately. Munching lunch, they would speculate about the reason. The PT teacher gave his colleagues a pained look and went to the principal’s room, hungry and angry.

‘Ah, Sunder, so good to see you! Hope you’ve had your lunch.’

Mr Sunderlal flinched, but Mr Jagmohan continued without noticing. ‘I couldn’t eat much. Fever stole my appetite. And now this. Look at this email. Can you make head or tail of it?’

Mr Sunderlal couldn’t and said so. He added, ‘Some earlier mails might tell us something.’

‘Exactly, my dear Sunder! That’s why I called you. Look through the unread emails and fish out the relevant ones,’ Mr Jagmohan ordered, beaming, his good humour restored. ‘My head is reeling and I don’t feel too good. My doctor told me to take things easy.’ He sought refuge in an easy chair in a corner and dozed off while Mr Sunderlal, looking like a prospective martyr fasting for a noble cause, went through the emails meticulously.

At last he located the right ones. ‘Mr Jagmohan! Here they are!’ he shouted

At last he located the right ones. Mr Jagmohan. Here they are. He shouted into a sleeping Mr Jagmohan's ear and was pleased to see him jump.

'Eh? Who's come? Where?' Mr Jagmohan looked about him like a startled bulldog. 'Why did you shout? The doctor said no excitement!'

'Not possible in a school with Amar in it,' Mr Sunderlal commented.

Mr Jagmohan soon found his bearings and ambled over to read the mails. They were from Mrs Priya K., principal of Target Girls Higher Secondary School, a school on the outskirts of town.

'Target Girls Higher Secondary School! That explains the ridiculous email address,' Mr Jagmohan exclaimed, rolling his tongue to see if it was still there.

The first mail from Mrs Priya was explanatory. She was Colonel Nadkarni's distant relative, and he had sent her an email from London after Green Park School had lost a match to Blossoms School. The latter had had girls on its team during the Colonel Nadkarni Under-15 Cricket Tournament.* He hadn't approved of the complacent attitude of the boys and wanted her to arrange a match between a girls' team from Target School—known for its sporting skills—and the Green Park under-15 team, so that the boys would learn to respect the cricketing talents of girls.

Unfortunately, his mail had been sent to an old address that she hardly ever checked and she happened to chance upon it only recently. Very guilty that she hadn't responded and dejected over Colonel Nadkarni's passing in the meantime, she wished to make amends. 'The match,' she declared emphatically in her mail, 'MUST take place.'

When Mr Jagmohan hadn't replied, Mrs Priya had sent two more mails. In one she explained how they could still honour Col Nadkarni's request since he had wanted the contest to take place on 15 March—'The date he had given was 15 March, and that is only approaching.' In her next, she sounded a little peeved at Mr Jagmohan's silence: 'Why the silence? I thought you were Col Nadkarni's friend and well-wisher. Just in case you have any doubts, I'm forwarding Col Nadkarni's mail. I'll give you a call once I hear from you.'

The final mail was the mystifying one that had made Mr Jagmohan break out in a cold sweat. Reading the previous mails and understanding their implication now made him break out in apoplectic rage. His face turned a deep mauve.

'What does she mean? Another cricket match?' he fumed. 'And on 15 March! What about the exams? This school is worse than a sports school! Didn't we just

have that Crackpot, Crackwhat match to commemorate six months of Nadkarni's death? Now he's plotting matches from the other world!'

Mr Sunderlal was shocked. 'Mr Jagmohan, calm down!' he urged. 'Remember your doctor's advice. Besides, you're being unchar . . . er . . . rather unfair to Nadkarni.' He forgot the pangs of hunger and rose to the defence of Col Nadkarni, the school's benefactor and a close friend. 'He isn't arranging matches from his grave! You know his death was most unexpected, and he must have planned this in advance. We don't know why he had chosen 15 March, but that actually gives us the chance to honour his wish, as Mrs Priya said.'

'Then you take care of it, Sunder,' said Mr Jagmohan, always pleased to delegate work. 'I'll forward all the mails to you. You may inform Mrs Priya you are doing this on my behalf.'

At this moment, the bell rang just as Mr Sunderlal's stomach rumbled, and he exclaimed, 'I haven't had my lunch, and Class V A has PT now!'

Mr Jagmohan, brimming over with the milk of human kindness now that the cricket match problem had been solved, looked concerned. 'Not had lunch? Very bad for your health, Sunder, missing meals! Go have it. The boys can play in the meanwhile. And let's not tell the students about this now.'

Mr Jagmohan opened the door to find a group of students outside.

'What are you hanging about here for?' he thundered. 'Didn't you hear the bell? Go to your classes!'

Instead of obeying him, the group responded with a barrage of questions.

'Please, sir, when's the boys vs girls match?' asked Isaiah, a class VII boy.

'Sir, what is this boys vs girls match?'

'Sir, do girls play cricket? Can they hold a cricket ball?'

'My mother says girls should play snakes and ladders, sir.'

'Sir, is it a match between the boys and Minu, Reshmi and our lady teachers?'

'Can I also play, sir?' John, a class II boy, looked hopeful.

'Can we all watch it, sir?'

'Will we get a holiday, sir?'

'Is it a battle-of-the-sexes match, sir?' Hemant of VIII B asked cheekily.

'Get lost, all of you!' Mr Jagmohan's stern command bore instant results and the boys vanished from the scene. The principal turned to Sunderlal, his bonhomie replaced by annoyance. 'That Amar! A walking public broadcast system! I don't know what madness made me mention the match to him. Now

system. I don't know what madness made me mention the match to him. Now what?'

'Now we should make an official announcement. The students have only a hazy idea and they'll start spreading wild rumours. Let me speak with Mrs Priya in the afternoon and tomorrow you can tell the students at the assembly.'

'Oh, must I do that? All right.' Mr Jagmohan returned to his room, looking morose. He realized that as the principal, he couldn't escape complete responsibility and, though his doctor had advised an absence of excitement for some time, he sensed a lively time ahead. He sighed, feeling sorry for himself.

The next morning, Mr Sunderlal met Mr Jagmohan before the morning bell and updated him. 'I spoke to Mrs Priya and the school's sports teacher. The date, according to Mrs Priya, has to be 15 March, since that was Nadkarni's express wish. But she doesn't know why he had chosen that date.'

'So that it clashes with the exams, why else?' Mr Jagmohan snorted. 'Nadkarni always placed cricket and sports above exams. All play and no work was his philosophy.'

Mr Sunderlal looked annoyed at yet another slur on his friend's memory. 'Whatever it is,' he responded, curtly, 'we've decided to stick to 15 March. Mrs Priya wanted to know if their team should come here or we should go to Target School. I thought we should be the hosts since that's what Nadkarni would have wished and she agreed; so that's settled.'

Mr Jagmohan nodded absently. Mr Sunderlal continued. 'Next, I spoke to Anuradha, the sports teacher. We have decided on a Twenty20 under-15 match. The match can start at two in the afternoon and end by 5 p.m. Our Nadkarni trophy matches are twenty-five overs a side, but we thought we'd reduce this special match to twenty overs. Not because we need to give the girls a handicap . . .'

The word 'handicap' caught the attention of Mr Jagmohan, who had all but stopped listening, and he sat up, agitated. 'Eh, handicapped? Who is handicapped? And you should say "differently abled", Sunder.' He looked at him with disapproval.

Mr Sunderlal shook his head, exasperated. 'No, Mr Jagmohan, no one is handicapped. In a sporting contest, a handicap is an advantage given to a weaker side or person to make their chances at winning more equal. Surely you must have heard of a golf handicap?'

Mr Jagmohan tried to appear bright and well informed.

‘According to Anuradha,’ Mr Sunderlal continued, ‘the girls are well up to playing even fifty overs. But—’

‘Anuradha? Now where did this Anuradha spring from?’ Mr Jagmohan interrupted again.

‘She’s the sports teacher.’

‘Ah, a lady sports teacher for girls. Excellent idea!’ Mr Jagmohan clapped his hands.

Mr Sunderlal threw him a reproachful glance. ‘Shall I continue?’ he asked and, without waiting for an answer, went on. ‘We decided on a Twenty20 match since it would get over in three hours—2 p.m. to 5 p.m. would be just right. Even if we allow some time for the prize distribution ceremony, by 5.30, at the latest, the programme should get over.’

‘Over? Excellent. Right on time!’ The principal looked relieved. ‘There’s the bell. Let’s go for the assembly.’

The students were restless, waiting eagerly for an announcement. Amar, especially, being the bearer of the news but not having much more to offer when he was quizzed for details, looked forward to some enlightenment. If they hoped Mr Jagmohan would tell them about the match, they weren’t disappointed, except that Mr Jagmohan’s version was way off the mark.

‘Boys and girls,’ he said, his eyes picking out Minu and Reshmi, the only girls in the school, who were students of VIII A, ‘I have some exciting news for you.’

‘Yaay! The cricket match!’ The deafening chorus startled Mr Jagmohan into knocking his hand against the mike, which protested with a grating screech. This wasn’t doing his nerves any good. Taking a deep breath, the principal barked, ‘Be quiet and listen! Colonel Nadkarni wanted a cricket match between girls and boys and since he’s no more, the principal of . . . er . . . Torrent School, Mrs Priya—or is it Anita?—wants the match to take place. She believes in humouring the dead. It’ll be on 10 March, no, on 13 March, no . . . er . . . some day in March, around the same time as your exams . . .’

‘Yaay!’ The students were delighted.

‘It’ll be fifty overs a side because of the handicap. Right, Sunder?’

‘What gibberish is Princi spouting?’ Amar whispered to Kiran, who was looking equally baffled.

‘He must have had brain fever,’ Kiran whispered back. ‘He’s gone cuckoo.’

At this point, Mr Sunderlal decided to take matters and the mike into his own hands and, relieved at being saved from this self-inflicted torture, Mr Jagmohan retreated to the rear of the stage. In a matter-of-fact tone, Mr Sunderlal gave the students the background information in brief as well as the decision taken about the match. When he finished, the students had all the facts—it was the last wish of the late Col Nadkarni that an under-15 Twenty20 match with an all-girls team from Target School be held on 15 March. The team and other details, he assured them, would be decided soon.

This was enough to send the school into raptures. Anything to do with sports, especially if it concerned cricket, won their whole-hearted support. The normally quiet assembly turned into a babel of high-pitched voices. The smaller boys stretched their necks to catch a glimpse of Col Nadkarni's bust in the grounds. For some time, Mr Jagmohan's standard admonitions—'Be quiet!', 'Silence!', 'No talking!'—were ignored until the furious principal roared into the mike, 'STOP IT OR I'LL STOP THE MATCH!'

The ultimatum worked and the school fell into an uneasy silence. Mr Jagmohan slipped in his favourite exit line, 'Now go to your classes!' and exited the stage with Mr Sunderlal. As they came down the steps, Rehan, a class IV student and a diehard cricket lover, broke free from his line to run towards them and ask in a breathless voice, 'Sirs, I am under fifteen. Can I play in the match?'

The patience of the teachers was sorely tested in the forenoon, with most of the students very distracted, inviting liberal showers of threats and punishments. Amar and his friends collected a record number of warnings and were ultimately thrown out of class, which wasn't a very bright idea on the part of the teacher, Mr Keshav, for they were only too pleased to continue their conversation outside the classroom.

The lunch interval finally arrived and after a super quick lunch, the whole class joined in the discussion. The class had a special reason to be totally involved for quite a few in the under-15 cricket team were from VIII A.

Amar began the proceedings. 'Isn't this a bonus, having a special kind of cricket match, and just when we thought it'd be only exams and exams all the way from now on?'

'But why did Colonel Uncle want us to play a girls' team?' Thomas, who was famous for asking questions, looked puzzled.

'That's easily explained,' said Amar. 'I figured that one out during the maths

That's easily explained,' said Amar. 'I figured that one out during the match period. We had lost a match against Blossoms, who had girls on the team, and maybe he thought we lost because we took it easy, because we thought girls didn't know much about cricket.'

'You, especially!' Eric laughed, recalling Amar's airy assertions that the game would be a cakewalk. 'If I remember right, you said we'd finish off the game in a jiffy and go fishing!'

Amar blushed at the memory and, trying not to glance at the two girls who were looking daggers at him, steered the conversation away from that embarrassing recollection. 'Um . . . hum . . . can't really remember. But, and here's the poser, why did he plan the match for 15 March?'

'That's exactly it!' added Kiran. 'I've been thinking about that all morning. What's so special about the date?'

'What date? Who's going on a date?' asked Arjun, who lived in his own dreamworld of songs and tunes, only occasionally waking up to the day-to-day realities.

'Nobody, Arjun, unfortunately!' Eric commented with a chuckle.

Arjun looked vacuously at him and tuned out.

'My dear, illiterate companions—you are super dense. Don't you remember your Shakespeare?' Kishore, who had remained silent all this while, spoke. He loved the English language and its literature and had enviably advanced reading skills. He now raised his hands and flapped them like a theatrical condor checking its wingspan. Having secured everyone's attention, he quoted in a hollow voice, "'Beware the ides of March!" said the soothsayer in act one scene two of *Julius Caesar*. And 15 March is the ides of March!'

Thomas looked puzzled. 'Sooth sayer? What did the sooth say?' he asked.

'Not sooth. Soothsayer, my dear Thomo. One who foretells the future. I'll explain its origin later. And also tell you more about the ides of March.'

Thomas looked dismayed at this alarming threat and moved away from the language maven, who continued, 'The soothsayer warned Julius Caesar to beware of the ides of March and, sure enough, Caesar was murdered on that day.'

'So?' Amar didn't look convinced. 'Who's going to be murdered on the day of the cricket match? Don't act brain-dead, Kishore. Anyway, do you really think Colonel Uncle knew Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*?'

‘Everyone knows *Julius Caesar*, with some exceptions here, of course,’ Kishore observed.

‘Maybe there’s something in this,’ Ajay, the devourer of crime thrillers, speculated. ‘Remember, Colonel Uncle was in London at that time. He must have got wind of an international plot to bump off the head of some country on that day.’

‘And how does having a cricket match on that day help? Stop talking rot, you extraterrestrial morons!’ Amar frowned.

‘I wish I had known Colonel Uncle,’ Minu commented, looking wistful. The two girls had never met Colonel Nadkarni.

‘Yes, same here,’ Reshmi added. ‘I like it that he was fond of girls.’

‘I’m not so sure about that. He never got married.’ Eric winked.

‘Be serious, everyone!’ Amar banged on the desk. ‘Don’t deviate from the topic.’

‘The *Julius Caesar* angle must be explored,’ Kishore was adamant.

‘Fine. You do that. And that’s what I think each of us should do—find out why the date is sang . . . sing . . . er . . . sack something, eh, Kishore?’ Amar appealed to his erudite friend.

‘Sacrosanct,’ pat came the reply from the human thesaurus. ‘It means sacred and comes from—’

‘Never mind its comings and goings,’ Amar brushed the explanation aside with a nonchalant wave of his hand. ‘Thanks, anyway. So what is sacrosanct about the date? If mobile phones weren’t banned in our pre-historic school, we could’ve discovered something right away. Anyway, let this be our homework for today. We’ll do a Google search and any kind of search to find out what events are going to happen on 15 March or have happened on that date, other than Caesar’s murder, of course,’ he added.

‘What we seem to forget,’ observed Reshmi, ‘is that Colonel Uncle died suddenly. I bet he never expected it. Had he been alive he’d have told us his plans. I don’t think he wanted to make a mystery of this.’

‘Maybe. But listen to my explanation,’ Kishore persisted. ‘Uncle did not want us to be complacent when playing against girls. In *Julius Caesar*, that is just what happened. No, Caesar wasn’t going to play cricket with girls,’ he explained

hastily when he saw Thomas open his mouth. ‘Julius Caesar thought he was invincible . . .’

‘Invisible? How did they kill him then?’ Arun interrupted.

Kishore threw him an exasperated glance and continued. ‘Caesar thought he was indestructible, almost godlike. Remember his last words?’

“‘Et tu, Brute!’” chorused Jayaram, Kiran and Minu, pleased they knew that one.

‘No, no, before that. Okay, I know they aren’t his last words then, but let’s say almost last words. He said “Hence! Wilt thou lift up Olympus?”’

‘Wilt thou lift up Kishore? Let’s throw him out! Why a Shakespeare lesson now?’ Amar looked impatient.

‘Olympus is the abode of the Greek gods and Caesar believed he was one. Because he was smug, he was killed on the ides of March. We were smug too and Uncle wanted us to find out on the ides of March that girls can defeat us.’

‘Ingenious!’ remarked Eric. ‘But as far-fetched as trying to shoot an arrow to reach Mars, my dear Shakespearean scholar. I can’t imagine Colonel Uncle thinking all those complicated things. There must be a simpler explanation.’

‘Correct!’ said Amar, grateful there was at least someone sensible in the group.

‘But the most important thing is the match,’ announced Ajay. He had just remembered he was the captain of the under-15 team and had certain responsibilities. With a twinge of regret, he put aside his love for murder mysteries and declared, ‘We must begin practising without wasting any time. There aren’t even two full weeks to go for the 15th. Unfortunately, we don’t have a PT period this afternoon. So we’ll have to wait till tomorrow to discuss the details with Sunderlal Sir.’

‘Aye aye, captain, well spoken!’ Amar patted him on the back. ‘And today we should also find out whatever we can about Target School’s cricketers—their names, strengths and weaknesses. Surf the Internet, do a deep search, scour Facebook, ask your sisters, your cousins hundred times removed, discover from their friends, relatives, from whoever, whatever, wherever. So, tomorrow then!’ said Amar with a cheerful wave of his hand, knocking his water bottle off the desk.

That evening, at dinner in Amar’s house, Mr Kishen, Amar’s father, asked irritably ‘Why are you sitting on the edge of your chair Amar? Preparing to run

immediately, 'Why are you sitting on the edge of your chair, Amar? Preparing to run a race? And eat slowly, without making those savage noises. Why is it impossible for you to have your meals like a civilized human?'

Amar grinned, as if his father had paid him a compliment. 'Dad, Ma, I'm in a hurry; have a lot of stuff to do on my computer. Some cyberspace-shaking searches have to be conducted.' He told his parents about the cricket match. 'We're having a boys versus girls cricket match on 15 March. Colonel Uncle arranged it.'

'Colonel Uncle? You mean Colonel Nadkarni?' Amar's mother was justifiably astonished. 'But isn't he dead?'

'Is he speaking from the grave?' Mr Kishen gave a sardonic smile.

'More or less that,' said Amar and gave them the details.

'And your crazy principal has given in to this ghostly request in the middle of exams?' Mr Kishen raised his bushy eyebrows. 'It's high time he was removed from his post.'

'No, no, Dad, he's actually quite a good sort. Anyway, playing a cricket match is like writing an exam—a far, far better exam than this world dreams of. Actually, poor Princi couldn't help agreeing to the request from the Target School principal. She's Colonel Uncle's relative.'

'All are mad!' Mr Kishen pronounced. 'But, come to think of it, I remember something about a battle-of-the-sexes tennis match, between Bobby Riggs and Billie Jean King. Amar, do you . . .?' But Amar had left the room.

'So, what have you discovered?' asked Amar during the lunch break the next day, pulling out some papers from his bag. Immediately, his friends also delved into their bags and brought out sheets of paper to share their 'research'.

'Quite a bit,' said Jayaram, consulting his papers. 'Why, every path-breaking event in history seems to have happened on 15 March. For one, Christopher Columbus returned to Spain on 15 March 1493 after discovering America.'

Now voices began to ring out in quick succession.

'The first-ever cricket test match began on 15 March,' announced Eric. 'In 1877, between England and Australia.'

'Bismarck was dismissed on that day in 1890!' said Abdul. 'Given his marching orders. Left! Right! Go!'

'On 15 March 1907, Finland became the first European country to give women the right to vote,' announced Reehmi, looking pleased, as if she'd had a

women the right to vote, announced Reshmi, looking pleased, as if she had a hand in that momentous decision.

‘Why?’ asked Thomas and got a dirty look from Reshmi.

‘Lenin suffered his third stroke!’ Kiran banged on the desk thrice.

‘Actress Theresa . . . er . . . Sal . . . Saladana was stabbed repeatedly by an obsessed fan,’ Minu stumbled over the information.

‘And guys, listen! Jimi Hendrix, the one and only Jimi Hendrix, was declared the “most spectacular guitarist in the world” by *Life* magazine on 15 March,’ Arjun sang, swaying and strumming on the tiny scrap of paper as if it were a guitar. He had actually remembered and begun a search but stopped the moment he came across this piece of information.

‘Funeral service held for Olof Palme, murdered prime minister of Sweden. Bang! Bang!’ Ajay added his macabre contribution.

‘Hu Jintao was . . .’ began Arun.

‘Who cares?’ Amar shouted. ‘Stop, all of you! Looks like we all accessed the same source. But what would an actress getting stabbed or Bismarck being dismissed have anything to do with why Colonel Uncle chose 15 March? Talk sense.’

‘And I hope all you sensible people noticed the first event on that list,’ Kishore sounded complacent. ‘The murder of Caesar. I tell you, the ides of March is the key.’

‘How?’ Amar sounded sceptical. He checked his papers. ‘I think the first test match beginning on 15 March could be a reason.’

‘I think so too,’ said Eric, pleased he had chosen the same incident. ‘Colonel Uncle must have thought it an excellent date for the first-ever cricket match between boys and girls.’

‘Don’t forget that women got the right to vote in Finland on that day. It’s only right that girls get the right to play against boys on 15 March too,’ Reshmi contended.

‘Doesn’t sound plausible,’ Ajay shot down the suggestion, to Reshmi’s annoyance. ‘Anyway, let’s go to our next concern, the girls playing cricket at Target School. I checked their school website and, though it mentions their matches won against other girls’ teams, it doesn’t give any details. No scores or names except the name of the captain, Nayanika. There’s nothing on the Internet either about any of their matches. Which paper covers girls’ cricket matches

anyway?’

‘Excuse me!’ Reshmi was peeved. ‘Now I know exactly why Colonel Uncle wanted this match. You boys think you are the cat’s whiskers.’

‘It’s a phrase that means you are better than anyone else,’ explained Kishore for the benefit of those who looked baffled.

‘Sorry!’ said Ajay, not sounding in the least apologetic. ‘Has anybody asked around and found out anything more?’

‘Not yet, but tomorrow the facts will be at your disposal, O captain!’ said Jayaram. ‘My sister goes for maths tuition to a place where there are a couple of girls from Target School. She’s got tuitions this evening and I’ve asked her to find out as much as she can from them about the cricketers there.’

‘But will she do that?’ asked Ajay, looking a little doubtful. Jayaram’s sister Nila was a high-spirited girl who loved playing the fool. ‘I bet she’ll forget. Or she’ll tell them why.’

‘No to both. I’ve promised to give her my new bicycle if she helps me,’ said Jayaram.

‘Oh, Jay!’ Minu gushed. ‘How generous of you!’ The others looked at him with renewed respect.

‘Not really,’ Jayaram grinned. ‘The cycle has a problem with the seat; it pinches.’

‘Oh, Jay!’ Minu sounded indignant now while the rest guffawed.

That afternoon, during PT period, Mr Sunderlal clapped his hands to draw the attention of the whole class and asked them to form a semicircle around him.

‘It’s cricket time again!’ he began. ‘As you all know, we have an important match on our hands, a special and historic match. Special because it is our beloved Colonel Nadkarni’s last wish and historic because this is the first time a boys vs girls match . . .’

‘Girls vs boys, sir,’ Reshmi interrupted. ‘Ladies first.’

The boys groaned, and Amar protested, ‘I thought this match is all about equality. There should be no extra privileges or chivalrous behaviour.’

Mr Sunderlal replied, ‘True, but let’s accept Reshmi’s suggestion. It’s a historic match because this is the first time a girls vs boys cricket match is being played here.’

‘And sir . . .’ Reshmi interrupted again, ‘I also found out that the first ever official Twenty20 cricket match was between two women’s teams!’

~~When twenty-20 cricket match was between the women's team.~~

‘Okay, Reshmi!’ Amar was annoyed. ‘Agreed that women are the cat’s whispers or whatever you said yesterday. Stop interrupting and let sir continue.’

Mr Sunderlal looked grateful and went on. ‘The match is very important because Green Park’s reputation as a superb cricket team is at stake. This is a challenge, a challenge by a girls’ school to prove that its cricket team is as good, if not better, than a boys’ team. And if Colonel Nadkarni identified Target School as the best school to play against us, it’s because he knew its strengths and was sure the girls would put up a good fight. Most importantly, I think he wanted you to have a healthy respect for women cricketers, to learn never to underestimate anyone, never to be overconfident.’

‘Hear! Hear!’ Reshmi clapped her hands and Minu joined in.

‘But sir, we do respect India’s women cricketers,’ Ajay protested. ‘They are doing so well. Mithali Raj and Jhulan Goswami are my favourites.’

‘I’m glad.’ Mr Sunderlal looked approvingly. ‘We must field the best under-15 team possible that excludes class IX boys. Mr Jagmohan and the teachers don’t want them to play; they say it’s too close to their exams.’

‘What a shame!’ exclaimed Ajay. ‘Won’t they be mad?’

‘Can’t be helped.’ Mr Sunderlal sounded philosophical. ‘I’ll have to find replacements for Hari and Jaydeep.’

‘Anyway, sir, neither of them expects to be picked. Both had their fifteenth birthdays last week; they were bleating about that at the bus stop yesterday,’ Abdul added.

‘Really? That’s a relief to know,’ said Mr Sunderlal. ‘I was wondering how to break it to them. And Arvind has just returned after a bout of dengue, so I can’t include him either. I’ll decide on the team in a day or two. Meanwhile, let’s not waste any more time! Let the practice begin now. And from tomorrow, the team will have to stay back after class for practice. Inform your families.’

The moment Jayaram entered the school gates the next day, his friends surrounded him with variations of ‘Did your sister help?’ and ‘What’s the news?’ He didn’t disappoint them.

‘Yep, I’ve got quite a lot to tell you. It seems the girls’ team is prestigious; excellent in all departments of the game. Nila tells me they haven’t been beaten in a long time.’

~~‘Not to worry. That will be corrected soon,’ said Kiran. ‘Matter of prestige.’~~

NOT TO WORRY. THAT WILL BE CORRECTED SOON,' SAID KIRAN. MATTER OF PRESAGE.

'I thought you'd forgotten that favourite expression of yours, Tub,' Amar commented. Tub was Kiran's nickname, bestowed on him for his rotund shape. 'Haven't heard you use it lately.'

'I save it for special occasions, like this one,' said Kiran airily. The truth was he had actually forgotten it and was reminded when Ajay said 'prestigious.'

'I got the names of some of the players and a few details,' Jayaram went on. 'But Nayanika, the captain, is definitely the goods. Nila says she holds the team together. She's a very shrewd captain, with an instinct for making the right decisions. She is their ace batsman, bowler and fielder and, when there is need, can don the gloves and keep wickets as well.'

'Does this paragon of cricketing virtue make a good umpire too?' Eric laughed.

Just then, the bell rang, and the students got ready for the assembly. Mr Sunderlal had informed Mr Jagmohan in confidence that he had finalized a list of fifteen boys for the cricket match and would put it up during the lunch interval. His plan was to do that discreetly and then inform the students about it.

At the assembly, Mr Jagmohan, fed up of the constant questions about the historic match from students any time they spotted him—especially the junior school boys, who were never overawed by authority—decided it was time to publicly pass the buck to the sports master. Bracing himself for a raucous response, he announced, 'The team for the cricket match will be put up on the noticeboard today during lunch break.' He wasn't disappointed. The students gave a wild cry that sounded like a group of starving lions that had sighted a lone deer. Raising his voice over the uproar, he shouted, 'Stop shouting!'

Amar giggled and whispered to Kiran, 'Look who's talking!'

Mr Jagmohan frowned and continued. 'No whispering! And don't come to me again for any information. Everything you need to know, you can ask Mr Sunderlal. Now go to your classes!'

A huge group of class VIII students led by Amar sacrificed lunch to lie in wait for Mr Sunderlal outside the door of the staffroom. The moment he came out, list in hand, he was surrounded and then wafted like a cloud to the noticeboard, where the rest of the school appeared to have congregated. Though the students knew more or less who would be on the team, they loved anything that deviated from the school routine.

‘Move aside, everyone!’ Mr Sunderlal ordered. Everyone obliged by moving a mere millimetre away. He grunted, annoyed with the principal for having put him in this position. Managing to hold his balance and his breath as a rich bouquet of sweaty smells threatened to knock him out, he pinned the list on the board, ducked and sprinted for the safety of the staffroom. The crowd swarmed around the board, almost knocking it down. Mahesh, the head boy, now took charge and, with the help of some other class IX boys, pushed the students back. After order was restored, he unpinned the list and read from the paper to the waiting throng.

“‘The fifteen probables for the girls vs boys—Target School vs Green Park School—under-15 cricket match on 15 March.’ Haha, 15–15–15!

“‘The final team will be chosen from the following names on the day of the match. Class IX boys and those who have turned fifteen are not on the team. The players are:

Ajay Shekhar (Captain)—VIII A
Amar Kishen (Vice-captain)—VIII A
O. Arjun (Wicketkeeper)—VIII A
Sumay Ghosh—VIII B
Kiran Reddy—VIII A
Abdul Javed—VIII A
Pranav Singh—VIII B
Eric Paul—VIII A
Ishaan Sen—VIII B
J. Mitra—VIII B
Jithin Pandey—VIII B
Jayaram Rajaram—VIII A
Rohan Nair—VIII B
Thomas Mathew—VIII A
Kishore Krishnan—VIII A

Every name read out was welcomed with vociferous applause. The VIII B boys, a lethargic bunch known for their laid-back ways, were pleased there were at least five selected from their class. Rohan Nair, a new boy who’d joined school rather late in the year, got an especially warm response. He was an exciting find, excelling in batting and bowling, and his classmates were very proud of him. They gave him the bumps, tossing him up like a pancake, until Mahesh stopped them with a stern ‘Hey, hey, stop! You’ll drop him. We don’t want him injured.’

‘You lucky guys!’ said Hari, looking glum.

Jaydeep looked mournful too. ‘I knew Hari and I wouldn’t be in because we’re now fifteen, but I never thought all class IX students would be left out!’

‘You brilliant scholars need to focus on your exams,’ said Amar with an impish grin.

‘Hari will be difficult to replace. Is Sumay going to take over the opening bowling? Big shoes to fill,’ Eric reflected. ‘Good we have our deadly fast bowler Jithin to scare the daylights out of the girls—what say, Jithin?’

‘You bet!’ Jithin flashed a mock glare and flexed the muscles of his bowling arm.

A lot of other students remained after school to watch the practice. Mr Sunderlal announced, ‘All right, boys, remember, we’ve less than two weeks to go for the match—the rest of this week and until Thursday of the next. The match’s on Friday. I hope you know what that means?’

‘Practice, practice and more practice,’ Amar chanted the mantra dear to Colonel Nadkarni and Mr Sunderlal.

‘Exactly! No taking things easy in a Twenty20 match. People think playing only twenty overs a side is simple, and that’s just where they are wrong. With such few overs, we can’t afford to relax or be absent-minded. Arjun, you . . .’ He looked around. ‘Where’s Arjun?’

Arjun was nowhere in sight. ‘I think he went home when the bell rang, sir,’ said Jayaram. ‘I don’t think he even knows we have practice every evening.’

Mr Sunderlal sighed. Arjun often left him pulling out what was left of the hair on his head in exasperation, but he was a terrific wicketkeeper and a brilliant slogger who, when he got going, could turn a match around.

‘Ajay, drill it into that madcap’s head that this match is very important and, as wicketkeeper, he has a key role. He MUST come for practice.’

‘Will do, sir.’ Ajay grinned.

Mr Sunderlal continued. ‘Every ball bowled must be planned and effective, every ball faced must be watched well and played, though you really have no time to settle down and get your eye in. By the time you get your eye in, you’ll be out.’

‘Haha!’ Amar guffawed.

Mr Sunderlal hadn’t meant to be funny, and frowned. ‘I talked to the sports teacher of Target and we’ve decided that every bowler gets a maximum of four

overs. All right, then, let's have some catching practice today.'

He threw the ball to Amar, who dropped it.

'Fantastic beginning!' Manas, the school bully mocked.

Kishore dashed into the classroom the following morning, brandishing a newspaper. The bell hadn't rung yet, but many of the students were already there. A few were the regular early birds but Amar and some of his friends, generally tardy, were present too. With very few days to go for the match, they had decided to come early every day to discuss strategy.

'Look! Read! Examine! Study! Scrutinize this! Mull over this report!' he waved the paper over his friends' heads in circling movements like an impatient eagle looking for food.

'What is it?' Eric plucked the paper from Kishore, who snatched it back.

'Careful! Don't rip it apart. Didn't I tell you the ides of March is the key? Look at this news item. No, let me read. The headline is "The Ides of March".' He stopped, waiting for that to sink in. Everyone, except Arjun, looked interested. Flattered, he continued.

"The Ides of March is the name adopted by the music group that includes former cricket players, and it plays in town on 15 March." Kishore paused for effect, and then continued. "A few months ago, an NGO called Music to Save the Girl Child, with the backing of a few philanthropists in the UK, was formed to raise funds to help underprivileged girls in Africa and Asia get basic amenities of life and access to a school education. What is special about this group is that it is made up of cricketers, mostly retired cricketers, who are also music enthusiasts. They plan to give performances around the world at select places to raise money for the girl child. Wherever they perform, they will collaborate with local musical talent. They do not wish to restrict the concerts only to big cities. This town is honoured to have been selected as the venue for the first performance, and they will collaborate with two well-known local groups, the Heebie Jeebies and the Cool Cats. Since 15 March is the date, they have decided to call themselves the Ides of March, which, according to the Roman calendar, is 15 March. For more information and for tickets, contact blah . . . blah . . . blah . . . Well, some numbers are given. What say, my dear friends, Romans, countrymen?'

'Man, did I just hear you say the Heebie Jeebies?' The magic names of the

Again, did I just hear you say the FIVEEE SEEDS? The magic names of the music groups had woken up Arjun. ‘And the Cool Cats? The same group with Arpitha, Noumi, Lekshmi and Nishitha?’

‘Awesome! To think you were actually right!’ exclaimed Amar, thumping Kishore on the back. More thumps and exclamations followed.

‘Genius!’ Minu complimented Kishore.

The genius looked gratified. ‘What I think must have happened is that Colonel Uncle got to hear of this when he was in London and planned this match. Makes sense, since it’s all to do with girls and the rest of it. So, he—’

Amar now took over the speculations. ‘He wanted to give the tickets as prizes to the winners, and he knew that would encourage us to play the match with total seriousness.’

‘Cool! That must be it.’ Kiran nodded in agreement. ‘We should win. Matter . . .’

‘. . . of prestige!’ everyone chorused.

‘Dear, dear Colonel Uncle,’ Amar murmured. For a while everyone went quiet as they reminisced about their beloved Colonel Uncle.

Ajay broke the silence. ‘Wonder who the cricketer–musicians are,’ he mused. The mood lightened.

‘Brett Lee? *Can you tell a girl . . .*’ Eric began to hum the Australian fast bowler’s popular number, ‘*you’re the one for me.*’

‘Bravo, of course! *DJ Bravo, DJ Bravo . . . Champion!*’ Arjun sang, and the rest took up the chant. ‘*Champion! Champion! . . .*’ The students danced their way to the assembly.

Now that the mystery behind the choice of date had been solved, the upcoming contest was discussed in excited whispers and hurriedly passed notes during the English and maths classes in the forenoon, the other two periods being spent in the science lab. Miss Philo, the English teacher, confiscated some scraps of paper that neither she nor any of her colleagues could make sense of when she read them aloud in the staffroom. “‘Maybe it’ll be Sunny and the Cool Cats!!! Cool, what?’” And here’s another. “‘Hahahaha, imagine Swann’s swan song!’” Can’t even spell “swan”! What’s it all about?’

‘Must be to do with the match. Wish I could also play!’ exclaimed Miss Sudha, a junior school teacher with the excessive enthusiasm of a new recruit. She had till recently thought that cricket was an insect that brought bad luck if

killed.

‘Same here!’ Miss Susan, her friend whose knowledge of cricket and the coming match was even foggier, reiterated. ‘We’re girls, aren’t we?’

Nobody disputed the claim, but Miss Morrin, the maths teacher, made a clicking sound with her tongue to show her annoyance. ‘Tch! I just wish the wretched match would get over and done with. The students in all the classes have the attention span of half-witted butterflies, and the less said about VIII A, the better. Today I gave Amar and Kiran twenty extra sums to do as punishment and they said “Thank you, ma’am”! Whispering, giggling and jostling each other all the time! I tell you, this school’s the limit!’

Mr Shyam, the class teacher of VIII A, and Mr Sunderlal’s friend, smiled and turned to look at Mr Sunderlal, but the sports teacher had already left for cricket practice.

On the way to the grounds after a quick lunch, Reshmi asked Jayaram, ‘So what else did your James Bond sister find out for you?’

‘Oh, plenty!’ he replied. ‘I wanted to tell you, but Kishore’s mind-blower took centre stage. I’ve written down some of the names she mentioned and their game.’ He consulted a paper. ‘Their captain, Nayanika, is their star—’

‘We’ve already heard about cricket’s Wunder Woman,’ Amar cut him short. ‘Let’s call her that—“W-u-n-d-e-r W-o-m-a-n”. Give us the low-down on the others.’

‘Right! The vice-captain’s a girl called Kritika. She’s a leg-spinner who sometimes bowls medium pace. A useful bat. The wicketkeeper is Purnima Rao, a . . .’

‘I hope she’s nothing like the giant keeper of Blossoms School, that bleating Amazon whatshername!’ Kishore gave a mock shudder.

‘Amazon?’ asked Thomas. ‘How can a river bleat?’

‘This is another Amazon. Amazons are also huge women warriors in Greek mythology, Thomo,’ explained Kishore. ‘I was referring to that large wicketkeeper who played for Blossoms.’

‘Who? Shefali Singh?’ asked Thomas. ‘Wasn’t she always stepping on her stumps?’

‘Haha, yes, the same. What memory, Thomo!’ Kiran gave Thomas an appreciative thump that sent him coughing and spluttering forward.

‘No, this wicketkeeper’s quite the opposite,’ Jayaram grinned. ‘From what

Nilu tells me, I gathered she's slightly built but is pure dynamite behind the stumps. Gauri, Malavika and Kaikasi are batters, Aarathy and Zoya are all-rounders. In fact, except for Purnima, all the players can bat and bowl, says my sister. And all are ace fielders.'

'Uh-oh! Really? Can't wait to play this supreme, eighth-wonder-of-the-world team,' Eric hooted.

'Nitisha and Vineetha are their opening bowlers,' Jayaram continued. 'Nandika and Aditi are spinners and, well, that brings my bulletin to an end. That's all Nilu managed to get out of those two soft targets in her tuition class.'

'Good enough for a start,' said Amar. 'Well done, Jay. She deserves the front wheel of your cycle for this.'

'And the seat!' Abdul guffawed.

'Oh, there's something else,' Jayaram added. 'It seems the team has been practising hard for some time now, probably from the time their principal read Colonel Uncle's mail. And on weekends they play on some open ground somewhere.'

Amar's face began to glow, and a look appeared that all his friends had come to dread, a look that indicated the germination of an idea.

'Hey!' he yelled. 'I've got . . .'

'An idea!' a few of the boys chorused.

'Oh no, Amar!' Minu groaned. 'I was just thanking our lucky stars there haven't been any brilliant ideas from you yet, and there you go!'

'This one is super brilliant!' enthused Amar, eyes shining.

'Which one wasn't?' Eric remarked. 'But describe one that was trouble-proof.'

'Millions!' Amar shrugged off the allegation.

'All of Amar's ideas lead to Rome, rather, room—our dear Princi's,' said Kishore.

'Listen, you dopes.' Amar sounded cross. 'We're just wasting time with these stupid remarks. Mustn't we know how these dark horses play? Your description is so vague, Jay—"some open ground somewhere". It could be in the middle of the Gobi Desert. Any idea where this "somewhere" is?'

'Actually, yes.' Jayaram looked pleased he could answer that. 'Nilu mentioned a construction site where work's been stopped. Court orders, it seems. It's quite close to Nandika's house; at least, that's what my mom said.'

it's quite close to Nayanka's house; at least, that's what my spy said.

'How about going to this place tomorrow and watching them practise?' Amar suggested. 'Incognito.'

'In what?' Arun looked puzzled but Amar didn't bother to explain and, for a change, Kishore also let it pass.

'We could record their game, if someone can bring a smartphone along,' Amar added.

'Mmm, there's something in your idea, Amar.' Ajay looked thoughtful.

'Not bad at all, Butter!' Reshmi gave him a thumbs up.

'I'll come with you,' Eric volunteered. 'I'll bring my brother's old phone along. It has no sim but the camera and recorder work.'

'Swag!' Amar looked elated.

'What's happening here, boys?' Mr Sunderlal was among them, frowning. 'I thought you'd be practising and here you are, wasting your time talking! Arjun, fix the stumps.'

The students exchanged smiles and practice began.

That evening there was further discussion about the next day's sneak visit to the girls' playground. Though Reshmi, Minu, Kiran and Abdul wanted to accompany Amar and Eric, Ajay put his foot down. 'Two will do,' he emphasized.

'Too many cooks aren't necessary,' added Kishore.

'Good luck and don't get caught,' Minu cautioned the boys.

'Ha, caught? Don't know the meaning of that word!' Amar winked as he and Eric went to Amar's house to make plans for the next day. They rang up Jayaram for some more details and, over delicious samosas and pakodas that Amar's mother plied them with, the two boys munched their virtual way to the girls' playing field with the help of Google Maps on the Internet. Eric left after they decided to take a bus the following day to the place while the others would go to the vacant ground near Eric's house, their usual haunt, for some more practice.

The next morning, Eric met Amar at the bus stop. 'Hey, Butter,' he began, looking worried, 'we forgot something very important. Where do we hide and watch? Behind a tree or in it? Can a tree hide me? Will there be trees at all there? And I'm not a very good climber.'

'Not to worry, Eric. Let's decide once we get there. We have to make do with what's available,' said Amar, ever pragmatic.

What was available when they got there was a long mud wall. It ran around the whole area, which didn't have a single tree in it. There was grass growing sparsely here and there, an odd bush or two, but otherwise, greenery was alien to the landscape. The boys could hear voices from the other side of the wall and they peered cautiously, like cats with a guilty secret. The girls were already there, rigged out in proper cricketing gear, playing cricket.

'Dead serious, aren't they, Eric, about their game? Quick, get your phone out!' Amar whispered.

'How about moving a bit?' Eric, shorter and rounder than Amar, spoke from the corner of his lips, like a villain in a movie. 'Let's stand on that small hill; we might be able to see better.'

They walked to a slightly elevated portion of the ground and, balancing himself rather precariously on it, Eric found the view more to his satisfaction. He set his phone on video mode and began to record the proceedings on the other side of the wall.

'Aditi, your turn to bowl,' an authoritative voice announced.

'That must be Nayanika, the Wunder Woman,' Amar whispered. They saw a tall, slim girl walk confidently to a short girl and hand her the ball. A bespectacled girl, who was practising fencing cuts and thrusts with the bat, settled down to face Aditi. Nayanika set the field and took her position at forward short leg. 'Watch it, Purnima!' said Aditi, who didn't bother with a run-up and bowled a slow delivery that spun a little. Purnima went for a forward defensive stroke but got a faint touch on to the pads and Nayanika pounced the catch almost off the bat.

'Wow, brilliant!' Amar exclaimed. 'They know their stuff. That Purnima must be the wicketkeeper. A Lilliputian. Nothing like that mammoth Shefali.'

Nayanika padded up to bat next. Aditi's second delivery went high over the extra cover boundary for an effortless six and the one that followed went all along the ground for a four. The next ball was also dispatched to the boundary while she neatly played the one after that for two runs. The last ball was lofted for another six. Aditi's bowling figures were completely ruined.

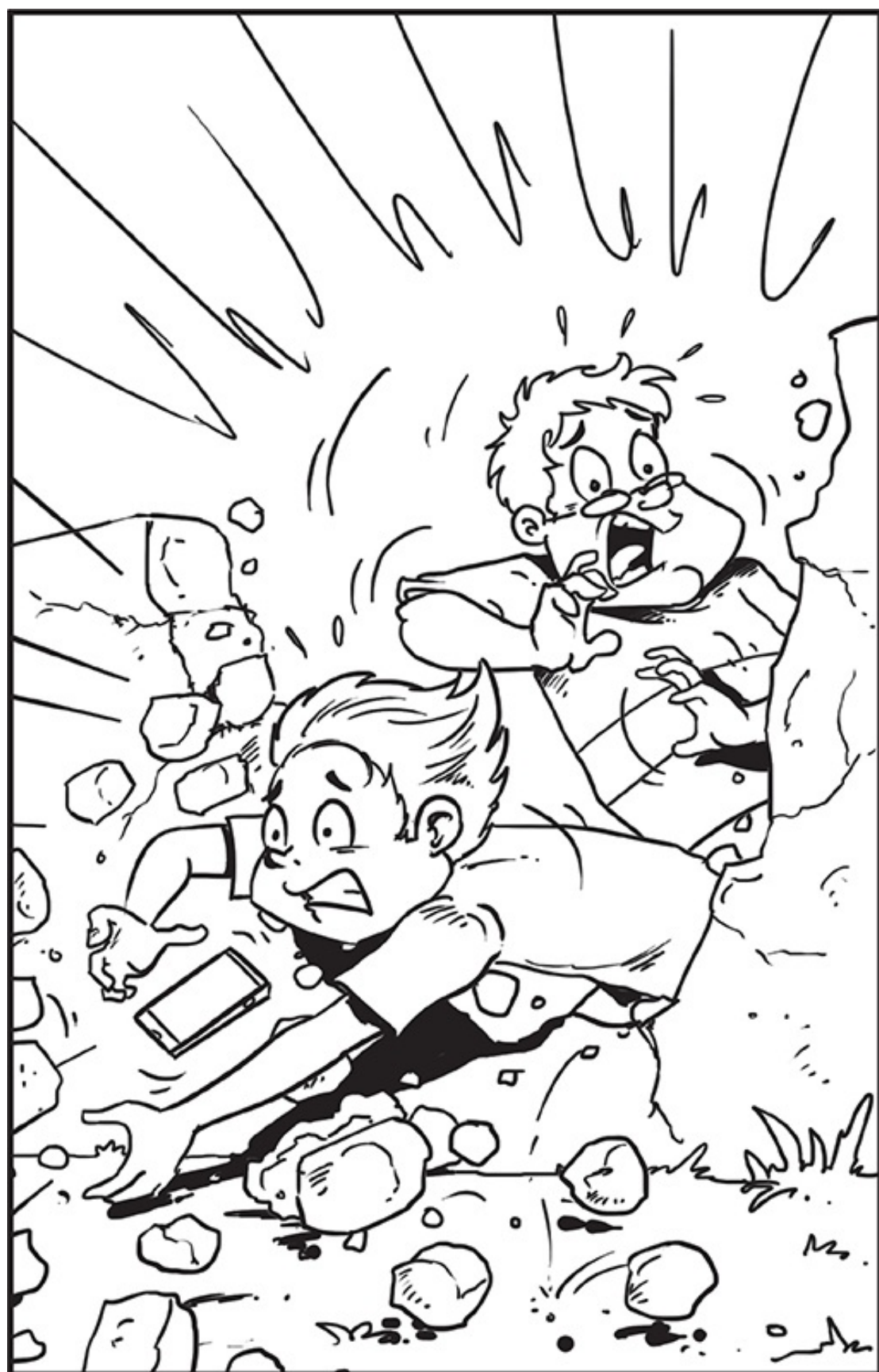
'Twenty-two runs in that over! She's Wunder Woman all right!' Eric gushed. 'I got all her shots except the last one. Your head blocked my view, you blockhead!'

'I'll do the recording midset!' Amar grabbed the phone from Eric who

...as the recording, image. Amar grabbed the phone from Eric, who wasn't pleased, but, balanced on one foot, wasn't in the best of positions to show who was boss.

Amar leaned forward, elbows on the wall for greater stability, and zoomed in on the action on the field. Another girl had come on to bowl to Nayanika. He had just pressed the record button when, without warning, Eric yelled, 'Yeowch! Ants!' The elevated portion they had been standing on was an expertly crafted anthill, and the ants, frightened by the unexpected employment of weapons of mass destruction on their dwelling, decided to retaliate in the only way they knew.

Eric lurched towards Amar, and the phone flew from Amar's hand and fell on the other side. Aghast, Amar draped himself over the wall, legs dangling in the air.



The flimsy wall, failing this test of strength, gave way, taking the boys with it. They fell with a loud thud, fashioning themselves into an odd-shaped pyramid—the crumbled wall with the phone buried under it was the base, Amar lay spreadeagled on the ruins while Eric made a generous topping. As if that wasn't enough, the ball whacked by Nayanika chose to land on the unfortunate Eric's ample back, forming the apex.

The girls followed the noise and the ball to rush to the heap and watched in fascination as, layer by layer, it came to life in slow motion. Eric was the first to slide off, ball in one hand and rubbing his back with the other. By some miracle, his glasses were still perched on his nose. Amar, seemingly flattened by Eric, lay immobile for a while. Eric forgot his pain to look at him in concern, while one girl tugged his hair and asked, 'Hello! Are you dead?'

Amar's anguished response—'Thuargh! Phthop ith!'—proved he wasn't and, spitting mud from his mouth, he did a slow push-up to raise himself into a wobbly position. His shirt front was soil-stained and, acutely conscious that he was surrounded by girls, he began brushing the mud off his clothes and himself.

'Who are you guys?' asked Nayanika, setting the ball rolling for the inquisition. Questions flowed from all sides; it was a very democratic group.

'Why are you here?'

'Why did you ruin the wall?'

'Were you spying on us?'

'Where's our ball?'

'Why are you trespassing?'

'Why don't you slim down?'

'Do you like eating mud?'

'Shall we report you?'

The last question attracted a quick reply: 'No, no! Please don't.' Amar swallowed the rest of the mud and continued. 'We'll explain.'

Nayanika looked at the boys, puzzled. 'You look very familiar,' she mused. 'I've seen you somewhere before.' She stared so long and hard that the boys began to feel very uncomfortable. Then her face cleared. 'Got it!' she exclaimed. 'You, tall, thin boy, are Amar Kishen, the vice-captain of Green Park School's cricket team . . . and you, short, plump boy, are . . .?'

'Eric,' the short, plump boy mumbled.

‘We’ve watched your matches on YouTube,’ Nayanika said.

‘Look!’ pointed Aditi, who had been digging into the ruins for the ball.

‘Here’s a phone. Or what started life as a phone.’ She picked up the pieces.

Eric made a sound like a tortured animal. ‘Agh, no! Grrup! Give that . . . those to me. Here’s your ball.’

‘Ha! You know what? I suspect they were recording our practice session!’ said a ponytailed girl.

The boys looked at her, annoyed.

‘I think you’re right, Malu.’ Nayanika set her lips in a thin line. ‘Why were you spying on us? That’s not cricket! You are cheats.’

This charge stung and Amar responded with spirit. ‘Of course we aren’t. How dare you call us cheats! What about you, watching our matches on YouTube?’

‘That’s because you show-offs have uploaded them,’ Aditi retorted. ‘It’s for anyone to view.’

‘Well, not our fault if there’s no match of yours there,’ Amar replied. ‘We are open and frank. We have nothing to hide. You are sneaky, secretive. We had no option but to watch you play here.’

‘And record it for your friends,’ added Malavika.

‘Didn’t work,’ Eric muttered, looking ruefully at the remains of his phone.

‘Let’s leave,’ Amar whispered, and the two turned to take to their heels when a peal of laughter made them freeze in their tracks.

‘Hahaha, this is so funny!’ Nayanika laughed till tears flowed from her eyes and the other girls followed suit.

Surrounded by the cackling girls, the boys exchanged uncertain glances. Amar, a firm believer in the saying ‘If you can’t beat them, join them’, smiled and very soon, he and Eric gave in to sheepish laughter.

‘Meet the team,’ said Nayanika and introduced the girls. ‘This is Kritika, the vice-captain and left-hand bat. Spinner but can bowl medium pace too. Meet Purnima, our wicketkeeper and a wizard behind the stumps. Malavika is our super batsman . . . by the way, we say batsman, I hope that’s okay with you?’ Without waiting for a response, she continued, ‘Gauri and Kaikasi are also batsmen. Vineetha and Nitisha are our deadly opening bowlers, Aditi and Nandika are our spinners. Zoya, Vidya and Aarathy are all-rounders. Nazia is a wicketkeeping batsman and Nandini bowls medium pace. And you?’

‘I’m Amar, batsman, and this is Eric, a spinner. I can bowl too and he can

I'm Amar, batsman, and this is Eric, a spinner. I can bowl too and he can bat.'

'Same with us; we can all bat, bowl and field. That's what we need to do when we play Twenty20. And we play by the book,' Nayanika continued matter-of-factly. 'Length of the pitch: twenty-two yards. Number of balls per over: six. No short boundaries. Helmet, pads, gloves—we wear them all. Ball is the proper cricket ball and some of our bats are heavier than Tendulkar's. No special favours because we are girls.'

'Yes, yes, of course. No, no, of course not. Er . . . no . . . yes . . . um . . .'

Amar looked confused. He decided that discretion was the better part of valour, a quotation often used by Kishore to describe the countless escapades of his friends. 'We're leaving. Bye! Come, Eric.' The boys took off.

'Don't you want to watch us play some more?' Nayanika shouted after them.

'But they can't record it, UNFORTUNATELY!' Aditi's loud voice, accompanied by giggles and hoots of laughter, followed them till they reached the lane leading to the bus stop.

'Messed it up, dude?' asked Reshmi when the two dirty, sweaty boys joined the others, looking downcast.

'Er, well, you could say we didn't do too well,' mumbled Amar. 'And the recording went for a six, almost literally.'

Eric held out the ruins of the phone.

'Aw, that's tragic!' Minu commiserated. 'But whatever happened?'

When Amar and Eric described the events, their friends collapsed in laughter, much to the chagrin of the two boys.

'I really don't see what's so funny.' Amar made a face at Reshmi, who was wiping away the tears from her eyes. 'You're laughing just like those idiotic girls. We learnt one thing—those girls mean business. It isn't going to be easy; that Nayanika is one swaggy player. Come on, more practice!' So the rest of the day and the next were totally devoted to cricket.

Jayaram came rather late to school on Monday, just in time for the assembly, but it was certain he had some earth-shaking news up his sleeve. Clearly it was happy news, for a silly grin was plastered on his face, irritating his teachers no end and intriguing his friends. But the class had to wait until lunch to hear it. As soon as the bell rang, Amar's voice rang out, 'Now out with it, Jay!'

'Yep, you've been looking as if you've broken Brian Lara's batting record on

the sly,' said Ajay.

'Prithee, what new news hath Nila, thine beloved sister, the spy that lovest thee, brought to thine ears?' asked Kishore, striking a dramatic pose.

Amar clamped Kishore's mouth shut with his hands. 'Prithee, stop showing off, you pseudo Shakespeare, and let Jay tell us why he's been grinning like an idiot.'

'Great good news!' Jayaram announced. 'Nila tells me that Nayanika, the dreaded one, won't be playing on Friday.'

'What!' There was a general exclamation of disbelief followed by a chorus of 'Why?' Kishore, whose mouth was free again, asked, 'Prithee, why? Pray, sirrah, enlightenest us, and in haste.'

'I believe her father, who was abroad, has come down and was shocked to know his daughter was going to play a cricket match against a team of boys. He thinks it isn't proper and has forbidden her from playing.'

'Awesome news! I love her nineteenth-century father!' Amar clapped his hands.

'Yes, three cheers for Mr . . . what's his name?' asked Kiran.

'She's Nayanika Sharma, so he must be Mr Sharma,' Jayaram deduced.

'Long live Mr Sharma! And all the Sharmas of the world!' said Eric, punching the air.

'Why all the Sharmas of the world?' Thomas looked bewildered.

'Because, because, that's why. It's going to be easy now! We should win like that!' Amar snapped his fingers.

'Hey, hey, guys! This is *exactly* what your Colonel Uncle wanted you to guard against,' cautioned Reshmi. 'How do you know the others aren't as good as Nayanika? Anyway, Amar and Eric hardly saw anyone else play.'

'Aye, thou dost speakest good sense, fair maiden.' Kishore gave Reshmi a mock bow.

'I'm sure there's some truth in the reports that she's the cat's visitors,' said Amar. 'But yes, let's not get complacent. To the grounds, all!'

That evening at dinner, Amar was racked with twinges of his heavy conscience. He felt that winning against a team without its key player would take the gloss off the victory. Besides, he felt sorry for Nayanika. It was clear she had been looking forward to the match and he imagined how he'd have felt if his father prevented him from playing. But he knew his father would never do that.

‘I really think you shouldn’t play that match, Amar!’ Mr Kishen interrupted his son’s reverie and had no idea why Amar shot out of his chair like a cannonball.

‘What! Why?’ Amar blinked in disbelief.

‘Nothing. You’re spending far too much time on sports. You’ve to think of your exams.’

Amar sat down and jumped up again, looking indignant. ‘Dad, how could you say this?’ A piece of chapatti flew out of his mouth. ‘The honour of Green Park is at stake. I have to play. I’ll study for my exams, promise!’

‘All right, Amar, calm down. And stop spray-painting the dining room with chapatti,’ said Mr Kishen.

In class the next day, Amar realized he wasn’t the only one feeling guilty. Almost all the others felt the same. ‘Colonel Uncle wouldn’t have wanted us to win this way,’ observed Ajay, voicing everyone’s opinion.

‘Yes and, guys, I have an idea!’ Amar, who had been unusually quiet, broke his silence, the eureka-moment look on his face.

‘I’ve not yet recovered from the results of your last wonderful idea,’ Eric protested, feeling his back, still tender from the impact of Nayanika’s shot. ‘And my brother’s phone’s ruined forever.’

‘Stop whining, Eric. That was a useless phone anyway. Besides, we did learn something,’ Amar said. ‘And don’t forget that my body aches too, the way you landed on me like a giant meteorite from outer space. My idea is this: Why don’t we write a letter to Nayanika’s father, telling him how important this match is and how she is the key player on her team, that her school could lose the match and lose face without her? If we manage to convince him, he might allow her to play.’

‘And how do you plan to do that?’ asked Minu.

‘Who writes letters in these emailing and WhatsApping days?’ Abdul looked doubtful.

‘Do you really think he’ll listen?’ Reshmi sounded sceptical.

Amar brushed all the objections aside and declared, ‘Anyway, there’s no harm in trying!’—the principle that guided most of his actions. ‘We can drop it in his letter box. First, let’s write the letter, and then we’ll plan the rest of it. Kishore, please help.’

‘Do you want it in Shakespearean English or . . . ouch!’ Kishore received a sharp kick from Amar.

Just then, Sumay and Ishaan came rushing into the classroom. ‘Hey, guys, Sunderlal Sir’s getting mad. Come now for practice.’

‘We’ll join you soon,’ said Amar, and he and Kishore retired to a corner to write the letter while the rest left. After several attempts and many arguments, they finally came up with this:

Dear Mr Sharma,

This letter is from Green Park School’s cricket team. We hope you don’t mind us taking the liberty of writing to you. We have a request to make.

On 15 March, we are slated to play a historic match against a girls’ team from Target School; this is the first time this is happening post evolution. It was the last wish of our school’s beloved benefactor, the late Colonel Nadkarni, that this match should take place. We had lost a match once to a team that included girls, and he felt that was a result of our overconfidence. He wanted this match to make us understand that girls play cricket as efficiently as boys, well, almost, and must be taken seriously. He chose Target School as our opponents since their team has the talent to defeat a strong boys’ team (we are talking about us).

Your daughter, Nayanika, is the captain of Target School’s cricket team and she is awesome. She is an outstanding batsman, bowler, fielder and captain. We were shocked to learn that you don’t want her to play in this match. Taking her away from the team will mean Target becomes practically toothless. That would actually help us, but we wish to play a full-strength team, and that’s what our Colonel Uncle would have desired too.

Please, please, Mr Sharma, she HAS to play. Please allow her to play. You will never regret it. One day she will represent India, she is that good. And we think the prize is tickets to the Ides of March concert. We want to attend very badly and we are sure the girls are equally eager, and that is going to make both teams give their best.

We hope you understand the seriousness of this situation and give Nayanika permission to play. We will be eternally indebted to you.

Thank you very much.

Yours gratefully,

Amar Kishen and Kishore Krishnan

(For Green Park School’s cricket team)

The two boys then sped to join the others at practice, ignoring the dirty looks that Mr Sunderlal gave them. When they went back to the classroom after the bell, Amar, spotting Miss Philo in the distance, read the letter aloud at supersonic speed. ‘So who is coming with me this evening to drop it in Mr Sharma’s letter box?’ he ended, as if offering them a seat on a rocket to the moon. Nobody responded and with Miss Philo entering the class at this juncture,

he was forced to wait till the end of the period to cajole someone to accompany him. Finally Kiran agreed. Amar hunted for an envelope and retrieved a soiled specimen from the dustbin.

Yet again Amar skipped practice to go on an errand of mercy. He and Kiran took a bus to the same place he had visited during his spying mission. They soon entered the lane where, according to Nila's information, Nayanika lived. They read the nameplates on every pillar and gate till they finally came to the one that, in golden letters, read 'S.S. Sharma'.

'Yes, yes. Mr Sharma, don't say "No, no",' Amar hissed to the nameplate as he pulled out the letter from his bag. Looking up and down the lane and glad to find no one about, he was about to shove it into the letter box when Kiran stopped him.

'Hey, Butter, do you really think he'd check his letter box? No one gets letters these days. My dad never opens our mailbox. We should do something to draw Mr Sharma's eyes to the envelope. Don't push it all in. Leave some of it jutting out and visible.'

'Cool!' Amar gave a low whistle of appreciation. 'And I'll write something on that part.' Taking out his pen, he wrote in sprawling black letters, 'Attention, Mr Sharma! Please read! Urgent!' on one half of the envelope. With Kiran's help, he pushed the blank part of the envelope in and folded the rest down so that the message was in clear view. The boys admired their handiwork for a while and from various angles until some honking in the distance alerted them to the possibility of a bus that could take them back. Soon they were home, pleased with themselves.



Everyone awaited news of the success of the mission but Jayaram could provide no further update from Nila, who said the Target girls were ill and absent from class. The suspense, therefore, continued.

‘Friday! Today’s Friday!’ yelled Amar, rushing down for breakfast with an enthusiasm generally reserved for holidays. ‘The day of our historic match.’

The landline rang while he was stuffing breakfast into his mouth and his mother went to take the call. ‘Hello! Who? Sunderbans? Line’s bad. Oh, but why? I’ll call Amar.’

‘Amar!’ she shouted. ‘For you. It’s your Sunderlal Sir. He was saying something about Ajay twisting his uncle.’

Amar looked astounded and ran to take the call. ‘Hello, sir, good morning. Why did Ajay twist his uncle? I mean, how’s that possible, sir? Oh! But that’s tragic; today’s the match, sir! What? Oh, okay, sir. Thank you, sir. Bye, sir.’

‘What were you sir-ing so much about?’ asked Mr Kishen. ‘Has one of your crazy friends murdered his uncle?’

‘Not uncle, Dad, Ma—*ankle*. Ajay tripped over his cat and twisted his ankle. He’s our captain, so sir called to tell me that I’m to captain the side today.’

‘That’s so lovely, Amar!’ Mrs Kishen looked at her son with pride. ‘I didn’t mean Ajay’s accident,’ she added hurriedly.

His father smiled and said, ‘Good luck, Amar. Be a credit to us men. Don’t let the girls defeat you.’ He ignored his wife’s irritated glance and continued. ‘I’ll take you to school today.’

‘Wow, thanks, Dad! Kiran said he’ll come here.’ Amar rushed to fetch his bag before his father changed his mind. Mr Kishen dropped the boys at the end of the road leading to the school’s gate. Kishore and Eric were just entering the lane and, on sighting them, Kishore quoted, ‘The ides of March are come.’

‘And Ajay has gone,’ Amar responded.

‘Gone? Where?’ The others hadn’t heard the news.

‘Out of the team. He’s hurt his ankle.’

‘The dope! What a day to perform his ultra-special acrobatics! Methinks thou art captain, then?’ Kishore gave Amar a patronizing pat on the back.

‘Yep. And get off your Shakespearean high horse, idiot. No more of your thou-ing and your art-ing. Captain’s orders!’ Amar grinned.

The news spread and a huge crowd gathered around the ‘News and Views’

board as everyone wanted to find out who would be the playing XI. Mr Sunderlal had just pinned the list and everyone jostled to read it, trapping the teacher between them and the board. 'Geff afay!' he gasped, struggling to breathe.

'You rowdy boys, move!' Mr Shyam, who was passing by, came to the sports teacher's aid and, helped by Mr Hiran Hiran, the art teacher, and some senior boys, used brute force to rescue him. Once things settled down, Mahesh, the head boy, read aloud the names of the selected team.

'Hey, guys, listen. "The team for the under-15 Twenty20 match against Target School: Amar Kishen, captain. Sumay Ghosh, vice-captain. Arjun, wicketkeeper. Pranav Singh, Rohan Nair, Abdul Javed, Jayaram Rajaram, Kiran Reddy, Eric Paul, J. Mitra, Jithin Pandey. Twelfth man: Ishaan Sen. Reserves: Kishore Krishnan and Thomas Mathew."'

Every name was received with a loud 'Yaay!', the roar reaching a crescendo when Thomas's name was heard. Cheering and shouting, the students were preparing to go for the assembly when Mahesh announced there was no assembly that day. Anticipating a festive atmosphere and restless students, Jagmohan had cleverly decided to use the public address system to make the announcements.

'Hey, Thomo, Kishore, how come you aren't in the eleven?' Minu asked.

'I'm not there?' asked Thomas, who hadn't heard Mahesh. 'Great! I wanted to watch.'

'An actual statement from you? Unbelievable!' Minu laughed.

'And I wanted to deliver the commentary,' said Kishore, looking satisfied. 'I said that within sir's hearing many times, and he's taken the hint.'

'But you might have to field,' Kiran reminded him.

'Not likely in a Twenty20 game.' Kishore shook his head. 'At the most Ishaan might have to.' Catching sight of Sumay, he yelled, 'Ahoy, Sumoy! Congrats, I bow to thee, O vice-captain!'

Sumay smiled, a little overwhelmed. He hadn't expected to be made vice-captain and hoped Amar wouldn't do anything stupid that would force him to become makeshift captain during the match.

Once the students had settled down in their respective classes, the public address system fizzled to life and Mr Jagmohan's rasping voice came crackling out. 'Today's a half day, as you all know, since we are hosting the historic girls

out. Today's a half day, as you all know, since we are hosting the historic girls vs boys match—the under-15 Twenty20 cricket tournament between Green Park XI and Target XI. It will start at 2 p.m. Be on the grounds by 1.45 p.m. I wish our boys all the best and hope they come out successful. And remember, no rude comments or opinions about girls. The match must be played and watched in the right spirit. Now go to your . . . er . . . now the classes will begin.'

'Poor Ajay. Sir said Ajay's cousin would drop him off here in the afternoon. He doesn't want to miss the game,' Eric whispered to Amar.

'Yep, he's got to watch at least. Do you think Nayanika will play?' Amar whispered back.

The teachers turned a deaf ear to the excited whispering that went on in classrooms until, finally, it was lunchtime. Mr Jagmohan's remarks had given ideas to some enterprising boys, who rushed to the 'News and Views' board to fill up the blank space with comments and drawings: 'Gender battle: Skirts at war with trousers!', 'Boys aren't better, they are plain superior!', 'Operation Target Shooting', 'Boys don't cry, they just try . . . and win!', 'Boys will be boys—victorious!', 'Green signal for Target annihilation'. A boy with artistic pretensions drew a quick sketch of stick-figure girls playing cricket with kitchen utensils. Another added a baby that looked like a drunken monkey clinging to the back of the wicketkeeper.

By 1.30 p.m. almost all the students had filled the stands. Banners of Woodwork Furniture and Heroic Cycles, the two sponsors, fluttered in the breeze. Five minutes later, two Target school buses rolled into campus, and droves of screaming girls scrambled out. Green Park's students looked stunned. They hadn't expected an army of cheering girls. Mr Jagmohan and Mr Sunderlal rushed to welcome the team and seating arrangements for the girls were quickly made.

'Hey, look who's leading the team, Butter!' Eric exclaimed. 'Nayanika!'

'Mission Mr Sharma successful!' Amar winked.

The Target team was in blue shirts and trousers while Green Park was in white. The principal of Target School, Mrs Priya K, and the sports teacher, Miss Anuradha Ranjan, had accompanied the students. Mrs Priya, a serious-looking lady, was led to the makeshift pavilion by Mr Jagmohan. Ajay, who had limped on to the grounds, helped by his cousin, was, to his great disbelief, honoured with a chair in the pavilion.

Nayanika and Miss Anuradha walked to the pitch to inspect it. Very soon, the teachers and other guests took their seats and it was time for the match to start. The teams stood around the pavilion, sneaking the occasional surreptitious glance at the trophy on the side table. There were neat piles of small boxes near it. 'The tickets must be in them,' Amar whispered to Kiran. 'We've got to win them.'

'Matter of prestige,' Kiran responded.

Kishore, meanwhile, seated close the pavilion in case he needed to field, prepared to deliver his expert comments to whoever would listen. 'Equality in umpiring!' he announced to those nearby. 'There will be two umpires today, one male, Mr Sunderlal, and one female, er . . . I don't know her name but I think she's the sports teacher of Target School.'

At exactly 2 p.m., Mr Jagmohan announced that the match was about to start. The anthems of Green Park and Target schools were sung completely off-key by the students of the respective schools, after which Mr Jagmohan read out the names of the players of both sides. Now the two umpires walked out on to the field with the two captains in tow for the toss. Amar smiled at Nayanika, who responded with a curt nod. Discomfited, he dropped the coin even before Mr Sunderlal asked him to toss it. Nayanika picked it up for him. He flicked it high. 'Heads,' said Nayanika in her clear voice. The coin went spinning up, alighting on Nayanika's head before sliding off to land on its edge, rolling away for a while before coming to a stop, still on its edge.

'Shall I blow on it?' asked Amar to general laughter around.

'No, toss again.' Ms Anuradha was firm.

This time, Nayanika said, 'Tails,' and tails it was. 'We'll bat first,' she declared.

Amar was relieved. He hated winning the toss and making a decision that could be criticized later. When the captains returned to the pavilion, a group of special guests were being ushered in by Mr Shyam, causing a buzz, but the teams were too preoccupied to register this. Amar led his team on to the grounds to the loud accompaniment of cheers and catcalls. Target's opening bats, Nayanika and Malavika, started their walk to the crease. Arjun, who had forgotten his new gloves, ran back for them, colliding with Malavika, who was carrying hers. The gloves flew from her hand. Arjun caught them brilliantly and howed. 'These should do. thank you!' Malavika snatched them back. muttering

something unmentionable.

Mr Sunderlal, umpiring at the bowler's end, signalled for the game to start. Amar set the field, keeping the power play in mind. Slow clapping accompanied Jithin when he walked to the run-up and, as he ran in to bowl to Nayanika, who had taken guard, the cheering swelled to a crescendo with the sound of drums adding to the ruckus. An unperturbed Nayanika, eyes on the ball like a cheetah waiting for the kill, drove it all along the ground for a four. The Target students went berserk with glee.

'Girls are the best!' one girl screamed. No pace bowler takes kindly to the first ball being treated with such utter disrespect. Jithin stormed to the bowling mark and sent down a fast and furious delivery that was expertly defended. Two more dot balls followed. Jithin relaxed and the next ball was a short one that Nayanika pulled over the square leg boundary for a thumping six. Unnerved, Jithin bowled a loose full toss that was punished with another six. Sixteen runs in the over. Green Park students went silent while Target wouldn't stop celebrating. The battle of the sexes had begun among the spectators too.

'So, ladies and gentle sires,' Kishore, struck dumb by Nayanika's assault, found his tongue, 'that lady whom we call the Wunder Woman is indeed marvellous. Sixteen glorious runs. The bowler Jithin, as you notice, licks his wounds in the cover. The captain, Amar, otherwise known as Butterfingers, drops his head.'

Sumay, bowling his gentle but deceptive medium pace, got some respect from Malavika, who watched the first three balls like a hawk and played herself in. A single off the next brought Nayanika to face Sumay. She got a nick that went safely to the side of Eric for two runs. Green Park was determined not to allow her to take a single. The next ball was right on the block hole, but amazingly she skipped forward smartly, turned it into a full toss and straight-drove it for a four. The over was over.

'Yes, there's a bowling change, folks,' drawled Kishore. 'The captain, Amar, known to face danger head-on, has decided to bowl. Watch!'

Amar bowled a maiden, but the opening pair soon began piling up the runs to reach 93 in the first ten overs, the first six overs, comprising power play, yielding 62 of them. Nayanika was on 68 and had reached her fifty in 32 deliveries.

Amar made quick bowling changes; Kiran, Eric, Mitra and Rohan—all had a go but nothing worked. In desperation, he gave the ball to Abdul, who rarely bowled. Abdul took a very long run-up and finally bowled such a slow delivery that Malavika, tired of waiting, threw her bat at it and edged it right into the hands of Amar at first slip. Ecstatic, Amar promptly flung it up and it dropped to the ground.

‘Not out,’ said Mr Sunderlal, glaring at Amar. Malavika giggled and that proved her undoing. She came way out of the crease to play the next delivery but Abdul sent a much quicker one, which Arjun collected and stumped her.

‘Howzzzatttt?’ the boys in the stands screamed at the Target girls.

‘Yeah, Green Park has got its breakthrough. Now, will there be a procession?’ asked Kishore.

There was. Kritika, who came next, got out on the last delivery. Emboldened by his decision, Amar brought on Jayaram, another reluctant bowler. Nayanika sent the first ball for a four and took a single off the next. Gauri, who had come in after the fall of Kritika’s wicket, saw off the first ball she faced, chased the next that was moving away and got a nick. Arjun made no mistake. The next batsman, Nandika, desperate to get Nayanika to face the bowling, ran for a non-existent single and got run out. Purnima, the wicketkeeper, who was next in, lost her balance as she got ready to play the last ball of the over and fell on the stumps. ‘Hehawhehehawhaw!’ Arjun laughed like a demented donkey and the boys in the stands added catcalls to this.

‘Five wickets down, and Purnima’s dismissal is a patented Shefali Singh act, specially reserved for wicketkeepers,’ Kishore explained, though few understood him.

Kaikasi came in and steadied the innings, hardly scoring runs but cleverly rotating the strike so that Nayanika could score. Soon 125 runs were on the board with five overs to go.

‘At this rate, they might get at least 175 runs,’ Jayaram, who was getting ready for another over, muttered to Amar. ‘All because of your super rotten letter-writing idea!’

This reminded Amar, who was moving to his position at first slip, of his noble deed. ‘It’s good your father gave you permission to play,’ he remarked to Nayanika as she got ready to face Jayaram. ‘The letter worked.’

‘Eh?’ Nayanika looked at him, puzzled. The momentary lapse in

concentration cost her dear.

Jayaram, who had always wanted to bowl a perfect googly, chose the perfect time for it. The ball turned into her, she hurriedly jabbed at it and Kiran took the catch gratefully. ‘Matter of prestige!’ he announced as Jayaram ran to hug him. Nayanika had made 81 in 54 balls. She was obviously annoyed with herself as she walked back to a standing ovation.

‘A captain’s knock, ladies and gentlemen, quite like Mithali Raj’s. In fact, this cool Wunder Woman appears to be the Indian captain’s clone,’ enthused Kishore.

Jayaram, elated at having got the prize wicket, bowled an inspired spell. He got Nitisha and Aditi out in the next two deliveries, completing a hat-trick.

Vineetha and Kaikasi didn’t want to take chances and played carefully, adding only five runs. Jithin had been entrusted with the last over and, desperate to add to the score, Vineetha decided to go for a slog. She missed the ball and was clean bowled. Zoya took a single off the first ball she faced. Kaikasi played and missed the next two deliveries but managed a single off the fifth ball. Jithin came thundering in and, throwing caution to the winds, Zoya flung her bat out, connected, and the ball went sailing for a six. The innings ended at 138 for 9.

‘So, friends, Target’s score is 138 and Green Park’s target for victory is 139. Will the Adams outsmart the Eves? Will they eve-n things out? Wait till eve for the answer to the million-dollar question,’ Kishore drawled.

‘Aha, sledging, eh, Butter?’ Eric chuckled when the team walked back to the pavilion. ‘I saw you rile up the Wunder Woman and she got out immediately.’

‘No sledging-wedging. I only reminded her about our letter,’ Amar explained.

The players gulped down their drinks, and while Nayanika had her team in a huddle, discussing strategy, Amar told his players, ‘Just go get the runs. The pitch has eased out a bit. A score of 139 shouldn’t be too difficult. But you have to give your best, you never can say with Target School.’ Complacency, at any rate, had become a thing of the past.

Pranav and Rohan opened for Green Park, and disaster struck immediately. Nitisha, the opening medium pacer who described herself as a fast bowler, glared at Pranav, arms akimbo, as any self-respecting fast bowler should. She followed up the glare by pulling a face and twitching her nose. Then she sneezed, which wasn’t part of her plan, but it added to the special effects, and wiped her nose on her shirt. Pranav watched, fascinated. And got out to the first

wiped her nose on her shirt. Manav watched, fascinated. And got out to the first ball she bowled. The girls shrieked with joy.

‘No run, one wicket! Dream start!’ Manas hooted.

Abdul, the batsman with the silken touch, came next and the spectators sat up, looking forward to a delectable display of classic batting. Abdul didn’t disappoint them. Runs flowed effortlessly from his bat as he appeared impervious to the stares of Nitisha and the formidable personality of Vineetha, the other pacer, who thundered in to bowl with her hair flying like a fizzy halo. Rohan also found his rhythm, and the two took the score to 50 when Nayanika introduced spin. Aditi fooled Rohan out of his crease and Purnima did the rest.

Sumay lasted only one over before he played on to Nandika. Arjun swaggered in, a rainbow-coloured band crowning his head to keep his long hair in place, and began throwing his bat around as only he could. One of his flamboyant hits struck Malavika on her toes and she retired hurt. Aarathy, the twelfth man, took her place on the field.

At the end of the twelfth over, Green Park was comfortably placed at 96 for 3, and it looked like the match would end in another five overs. And then began the great Green Park collapse. For no good reason, Arjun, after bringing up the hundred for Green Park, decided to bat one-handed to Zoya’s gentle medium pace and the tennis-like lob was taken with ease by Purnima. He had made 45. He doffed his hat, bowed and strutted off, blowing kisses to everyone on the field.

‘Imbecile!’ Mr Jagmohan muttered, embarrassed, not daring to look at his guests. But the spectators loved it and cheered him all the way to the pavilion. One girl screamed, ‘I love your hair!’

Jayaram joined Abdul, and began cautiously, seeing off the next few balls. Nayanika now came on to bowl leg spin, sending in a beauty of a ball to Abdul that started on a leg stump line before dipping, turning and dislodging the off stump. ‘Great ball,’ he acknowledged with a nod and walked away. Nobody knew if the thunderous applause that followed was for his sweet knock of 38 or for the ball that knocked off the bail.

‘That, my dear friends, is the ball of the twenty-first century, similar to the Ball of the Century bowled by Shane Warne to get Gatting, who was batting, out decades ago. The best ball ever!’ Kishore rhapsodized, his love for cricket getting the better of his desire for his team’s victory.

Eric got two runs off the next ball but spooned an easy return catch to the bowler. Kiran fell to the next ball and suddenly it looked like Green Park was in trouble. Amar was padded up and chewing his nails in agony, but decided to send in Mitra. Mitra denied Nayanika a hat-trick but was plumb lbw to the next. Eight wickets down for 105 runs with six overs to go and 34 to win.

Amar came in, and he and Jayaram steadied the rocking ship with some sensible cricket, keeping the scoreboard ticking with singles. When the last over began, Green Park needed 9 runs for victory, with Jayaram, on a compact 18, facing Nitisha. The first ball was a no ball, and the next, a free hit, was dispatched to the boundary. Four runs to get off 5 balls.

‘Easy! We’ll romp home! Boy power! Man power!’ Kishore wagged his hands.

‘Shut up, horse power! Donkey power! Are you the school’s clown?’ snapped an anxious-looking girl. Piqued by the slight, Kishore shut up.

The next delivery, well outside the off stump, was left alone but Jayaram got a nick to the ball that followed, and Kaikasi, standing at first slip, dived to her right to take a brilliant catch. Three for victory, 2 balls left and the last man, Jithin, was at the crease. There was a strange silence all around, broken by Mr Jagmohan’s anxious bleating, ‘That Amar! How does he always manage to get into these heart-attack situations?’

Amar went over to Jithin and the two spoke for a bit before Amar returned to his crease. Nitisha glared and bowled a fast ball. Jithin managed to get a touch to it and ran a lightning-quick single. Two to win off the last delivery.

Nitisha took ages to get to her bowling mark. The whole team surrounded her with advice while Amar and Jithin had a midwicket conference. Finally, she was ready. Nayanika set the field and Amar took his guard and waited, watchful. He expected a yorker but Nitisha bowled a short ball, wishing to lure him to hit out and get out. He sent the ball whizzing towards the midwicket boundary with Aarathy racing towards it.

The grounds rang with excited advice from the spectators: ‘Run, Amar, run!’, ‘Run, Jithin, run!’, ‘Get the runs, boys!’

‘Run, Aarathy, run! Get him out!’ shrieked a girl.

Amar ran one and turned for the second, both boys flying like the wind between the wickets. ‘Butter, don’t drop the bat!’ someone yelled and it quickly became a chorus.

The grounds reverberated with the alert. Amar heard this. He finished the second with his bat tightly gripped and he waved it over the crease. He turned and, sprinting to Jithin, hugged him; they had got the 2 runs required! The rest of the team rushed in to chair them. The grounds rang with cheers, catcalls and applause. Aarathy, meanwhile, had run in with the ball and whipped off the bails in frustration. Purnima appealed, 'Out! And look, a run short!'

She pointed to Mr Sunderlal, who, standing at the bowler's end, appeared to be performing gymnastics. He was tapping his shoulder with his fingers to signal a run short. He also lifted the other hand's finger to signal 'Out'. Now everyone stopped celebrating and all eyes were focused on the umpire. Raging arguments and counter-arguments began.

In his excitement, Amar hadn't grounded his bat at the popping crease to complete the second run; neither had he stepped into the crease. He was a run short and, oblivious to it, had been celebrating way out of the crease when the bails were removed. He was given a run-out and his team was awarded only the first run. Green Park was all out for 138 runs and the match was a tie. Mr Sunderlal gave Amar a reproachful glance. Amar dropped his bat in embarrassment.

'Idiot Amar, why didn't you drop the bat inside the crease?' his supporters now changed their tune.

Mr Sunderlal and Ms Anuradha went to the pavilion to consult the others. The spectators waited anxiously for the decision. At last, Mr Jagmohan took the mike and there was a hush. Reading from the hastily scrawled notes he had made, he announced, 'I am told that tired . . . er . . . tried . . . sorry, tied Twenty20 matches these days are decided by a bale-out or a super nova.'

Some titters greeted this, prompting him to check his notes. He continued. 'Er, sorry, I meant a bowl-out or a super over. But for this match such a rule had not been made. Besides, everyone here, and we have some very special guests with us, feels that this is the best possible result for an excellent match. So the trophy, sponsored by, er, Firework Woodwork, will be handed to the two captains now and the company's representative says arrangements will be made to donate another trophy soon. Please get ready for the prize distribution that will follow shortly.' He sat down, wiping his face, pleased he hadn't got anything wrong,

while the representative of Woodwork Furniture looked around suspiciously for the rival sponsor.

The Green Park team got over their initial disappointment and began celebrating. Everyone, including the teachers, Manas, Jayaram's sister, Nila—who had come to the grounds with her tuition friends after school—and some cricket-loving parents who, hearing about the match, had come out of curiosity, joined in the general mood of joy.

'Who are the special guests Princi mentioned?' Amar looked around. 'I was so engrossed in the match that I didn't notice the new faces in the pavilion.'

'Man, I hope there are enough Ides of March tickets for all,' Arjun mumbled, looking uncharacteristically worried.

'Yep. I'm waiting to see the Heebie Jeebie Russel, the Cool Cat Arpitha and the others in action with the cricketer musicians,' said Eric.

The ceremony began with Mr Jagmohan congratulating all the players on an excellent game of cricket, a 'hummingbird of a game,' as he called it.

'He means "humdinger".' Kishore laughed.

'The game of cricket is the winner,' the principal declared. Indignant, Arun protested to his friends, 'Both teams won, and Princi gives the credit to cricket!'

'Now the principal of Target School will say a few words.' Mr Jagmohan sat down, as always relieved to have something solid under him.

Mrs Priya said she'd be brief and everyone applauded in approval. 'I'm so glad that the last wish of my dear relative the late Colonel Nadkarni has been honoured, and how! The exciting match between our girls and your boys proved that our girls are a match for the boys. Gender equality has been restored.'

'Whatever that means,' whispered Jayaram to Abdul.

'We have two very special guests with us today and they will hand over the trophy to the captains.' She paused. 'Mr Sunil Gavaskar and Ms Mithali Raj!'

'What!'

'Really?'

'Where?'

'Lovely!'

Exclamations of astonishment, elation and excitement followed. Everyone craned their necks to get a view of the legendary opener and the captain of the Indian women's cricket team.

A thunderous ovation greeted Sunil Gavaskar when he took the mike with a happy smile. 'I've never watched such a match in my life, and I'm delighted and privileged to have been here today. My hearty congratulations to each and every member of both the teams for an enthralling, high-voltage cricket match,' he enthused.

Mithali Raj was welcomed with deafening applause. She smiled charmingly and her opening words, 'I can't help this, but three cheers for the brilliant girls!' kept the applause going for a while. 'They played fantastic and, without any special concessions, almost defeated the boys. Women's cricket has a very bright future. And my heart goes out to Green Park's captain, who made the error of not completing his run properly. Such things happen and we should thank . . . what's his name? . . . Amar Kishen, for helping the match end in a tie, the perfect result for an absolutely wonderful match. Great bowling, awesome batting, superb fielding. And yes, fine wicketkeeping. Congratulations to all of you!'

Amar and Nayanika came forward, shook hands with Gavaskar and Mithali and received the trophy jointly from both. 'You can hold the trophy, I might drop it,' Amar whispered to Nayanika.

Mr Neel Nadkarni, the cousin that Colonel Nadkarni had been visiting in London when he passed away, now spoke. 'Like Priya here, I'm delighted my cousin's wish has come true. He was very keen that his boys should respect the cricketing skills of girls. He was equally keen that the match should be on 15 March.'

Kishore winked at the others. The students flapped their ears, waiting to hear about the Ides of March. Instead, Mr Neel Nadkarni said, 'The fifteenth of March is the birthday of my cousin's mother, Dena Nadkarni, my aunt. She was an admirable woman, a strong, enlightened lady who believed in women's education and women's rights. She was a genuine feminist, much before feminism became so widespread. She is no more, but in her memory, her son, the late Colonel Nadkarni, wanted the girls vs boys match to be played on 15 March—so appropriate. We have planned to give a mug with her picture on it to each participant, and I'd be very pleased if Ms Mithali Raj and Mr Sunil Gavaskar hand over the gifts to the teams.'

The faces of the boys fell as the narration went on. 'What!' Amar sounded disbelieving. 'Colonel Uncle's mother's birthday!'

disbelieving. Colonel Uncle's mother's birthday!

'Such a simple explanation!' exclaimed Kiran. 'That ass Kishore and his ides-of-March theory!'

'To think the prize is a mug with Colonel Uncle's mother's mug on it!' Eric laughed.

Mr Sunderlal called out the names of the girls first and Gavaskar handed them the gifts, the first of which was opened to reveal the picture of a serene lady on the ceramic mug, with 'Dena Nadkarni, A Wonder Woman and a True Lady' and the dates of her birth and death inscribed on it. Mithali gave the gifts to the boys, who pretended to look happy.

'So the Ides of March tickets go out of the window,' commented Amar, hiding his disappointment.

'Now for the final surprise,' said Mr Sunderlal, smiling. 'I invite Mr Sharma, one of the organizers of the Music to Save the Girl Child campaign, to disclose it.'

'Mr Sharma?' Amar looked at Kiran and raised his eyebrows.

Mr Sharma, a genial middle-aged man, came to the mike. 'Without wasting words, let me tell you how pleased I am to have watched such an entertaining match, the first of its kind since . . . er . . . evolution. You see, I found a letter in my letter box that I couldn't make head or tail of until I realized it wasn't meant for me. A case of mistaken identity. But I was intrigued by its contents. It mentioned a girls vs boys match to be played here and begged me to give my daughter permission to play. I must confess I am not married and have no daughter.' There were guffaws from many quarters and a gulp from Amar. 'But I'd never have prevented any girl, daughter or no daughter, from playing; I am committed to the cause of the girl child.'

'I understood that, for some strange reason, the writers believed the prizes for the winners were tickets for the Ides of March music concert today. Since I'm involved in it, I thought I should discover for myself what this historic match was all about. I asked Mithali Raj, our chief guest for today's concert, and Sunil Gavaskar, who is singing a couple of songs at the event, if they'd like to come along. The other cricketers in the band for today's programme, Dwayne Bravo, Brett Lee, Sanjay Manjrekar and Graeme Swann, will arrive only by six and I'm sure they will be very unhappy to learn what they have missed.'

'Today's match was a shot in the arm for girls and I warmly congratulate

Target School's captain and her team for their spirited, no-holds-barred approach. Congratulations! I informed the press, and reporters were here to cover the match. Tomorrow you will be in the papers. I am now very pleased to request the principal of Target School to hand over complimentary passes for today's music show to the Green Park cricketers, including the twelfth man and the reserves, and the principal of Green Park School to present them to the Target team.'

Resounding cheers accompanied the boys as they walked up to receive the passes. Amar collected Ajay's for him. When they descended and stood with the other students to watch the Target team claim theirs, Amar remarked, 'It's all so baffling. I don't understand this. Why did Nila tell Jayaram that Nayanika was not going to play? Who told her?'

'This idiot girl will explain,' an annoyed Jayaram stated, leading Nila by the ear.

'Hey, Jay, let go of her ear!' ordered Reshmi. 'No torturing a girl child.'

Nila, looking defiant, clarified, 'Nobody told me that. I made it up to teach this meanie Jay a lesson. He said he'd give me his cycle and I tried to ride it. How it pinched me!'

'I hope it taught you a painful lesson. I said I'd give you the cycle after the match was over. Who asked you to take a sneak ride? Telling us all those lies!' Big brother Jayaram frowned.

Nila stuck her tongue out and giggled.

'And now the final announcement,' said Mr Sunderlal. 'The man of the match award has been sponsored by Heroic Cycles. And since there were many brilliant performances from both teams, we decided, after much discussion, to give two man of the match awards: one to an outstanding player from Target, and the other to a player from Green Park. The prizes go to Nayanika, the captain of Target, for an exceptional performance and to Jayaram of Green Park for a fine all-round show. Er, unfortunately, the sponsor thought the match was between two girls' teams, and the prizes are ladies' cycles . . .'

He couldn't continue, for a mighty roar of merriment drowned his words. Tears of mirth flowed down Reshmi's eyes while Nayanika grinned. Manas hooted and Arjun wouldn't stop hee-hawing. The teachers guffawed, the guests laughed and even Mr Jagmohan chuckled.

When the laughter had finally died down. Mr Sunderlal said, eyes twinkling.

When the laughter had many died away, the manager said, eyes twinkling,
'I'm sorry, Jayaram, but maybe you can give it to your sister.'

Nila beamed from ear to ear.

'And most undeserved too!' Jayaram grumbled as Nayanika and he walked up to receive the keys from the manager of the company.

'Poetic justice,' commented Kishore, still in splits.

'I think Nila earned it,' Amar declared as they crowded around Gavaskar and Mithali Raj for pictures. 'Thanks to her, we can attend the Ides of March programme. With some luck, we might even be able to pose with Brett Lee, Bravo, Manjrekar and Swann!' In his excitement, he dropped the mug, but Nayanika caught it inches from the ground.

'Here.' She handed it to Amar. 'Now tell me what that was all about.'



Mummy!

‘Mummy! Here I come!’ announced Amar one morning from the top of the stairs. He was true to his word, taking flying leaps to land on the doormat that slid under the impact and conveyed him at breakneck speed to the solid wooden dining table. The table rocked, spilling some potato curry on the tablecloth.

‘Arrived on my magic carpet!’ Amar informed Mrs Kishen, who had charged out of the kitchen on hearing the din. He was quick to place the dish over the spilt curry but not quick enough.

‘Oh, Amar! My new tablecloth!’ she exclaimed, examining the mess. ‘And don’t call me “Mummy”. You know I hate it; I get that creepy feeling, as if I’m an ancient Egyptian mummy.’

‘An ancient Egyptian mummy is exactly the one I was addressing, Ma, not you!’ Amar grinned. ‘A genuine 4000-year-old relict that. . . or should I say whom? . . . I’ll be seeing today. We’re going to the museum from school to see this special mummy that has come all the way from Egypt. Fieldwork, according to Ramesh Sir, haha!’

Mr Kishen, entering the room, caught this. ‘Impossible!’ he remarked. ‘I can’t imagine that our modest town’s modest museum has actually managed a mummy from Egypt!’

‘You mean a modest mummy from modest Egypt!’ Amar laughed at his own jest. ‘Well, not directly from Egypt, Dad. It’s an Egyptian mummy all right, but from a museum in Italy. It seems a Kolkata museum wangled it on loan from Florence for a year. Our museum begged and pleaded with the Kolkata museum to loan it for a bit, and a few other cities and towns joined in the chorus. Kolkata finally agreed. So it will be here for a few days. Then it moves to the other places before going back to Kolkata and from there to Florence.’

‘A travelling mummy!’ His father laughed. ‘Don’t forget that all mummies come with a curse. Not your mummy,’ he added in a hurry when his wife glared at him.

‘Hehe. Yes, Dad. Curses! Awesome! Kishore was talking about the curse of

the pharaohs. What's it, exactly?'

'It's the curse that falls upon anyone who disturbs an ancient mummy, especially the mummy of a pharaoh. Pharaohs were extremely powerful. Anyway, it was mostly pharaohs who became mummies; only they could afford it. The others ended up as mere dead daddies.'

'Hahaha!' Amar guffawed, almost falling off his chair.

Mrs Kishen rolled her eyes at her husband.

'Didn't those who discovered the tomb of King Tututwhatshisname come under the curse? I heard they all dropped dead,' Amar remarked with ghoulish enthusiasm.

'King Tutankhamun. And it wasn't so dramatic, Amar.' His father smiled, ignoring his wife's disapproving glances. He once had a passion for Egyptology and the topic continued to interest him. 'There were so many people involved in the excavation; everyone didn't die. But when some who were closely connected with Howard Carter, the archaeologist, died, rumours quickly spread about the pharaoh's curse.'

'What an appetizing topic for the breakfast table!' Mrs Kishen grimaced.

'Exactly!' Amar exclaimed, ignoring the sarcasm. 'So, Dad, do you think the ones handling this gypsy mummy will be cursed? And what about us, who are going to see it?'

'It's just superstition; all nonsense, Amar.' Mr Kishen chuckled. 'But,' he added, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, 'why don't you take your scarab ring with you? It's believed to be lucky and might cancel out the evil.'

'Brilliant, Dad! Ma, where's my scarab ring?' His uncle had gifted him an Egyptian scarab ring that Amar had given to his mother for safekeeping.

Mrs Kishen gave her husband a look that spoke volumes and rose to get the ring while Amar, breakfast done, got ready for school.

'Here, Amar, don't lose it.' Mrs Kishen handed Amar a small square box. Amar read aloud from it: "'The scarab was a powerful omelette, no, amulet, that signified regeneration . . .'"

He looked quizzically at his father, who responded, 'Means renewal.'

"... and was used a great deal by the Egyptians in their jewellery. It was often inscribed with further amul . . . amuletic signs to protect the wearer." Just what I need!'

He opened the box and examined the ring closely. It was dull gold in colour.

... opened the box and examined the ring closely. It was set in gold in a circle, with figures and inscriptions on it. 'So many designs! Hope they are all amulwhatever signs to protect me and my friends. Look, tiny animals and birds—a croc, a snake, a horse, an eagle or a falcon, a dog at the centre . . . or is it a jackal?'

'Must be the jackal god, Anubis.' His father took a look.

Amar continued his scrutiny. 'There's a green beetle, the green must be a precious stone . . . a cat, a bull . . .'

'All bull!' snapped his mother, exasperated. Mr Kishen winked at his son.

Amar stuffed the ring into his pocket and returned the box to his mother. 'Whee! Got to hurry. Bye, Ma, Dad!' He took off like a hare to the bus stop. He didn't want to miss his bus that day.

It was the turn of classes VIII A and B to visit the museum that morning, and the students clambered on to the school bus, talking excitedly. An outing during class hours was a special treat; they would have welcomed even a visit to a garbage dump if it had meant missing school. The topic turned naturally to mummies and curses. Amar set the ball rolling by mentioning the curse of the pharaohs and Kishore brought up Ötzi's curse.

'Ötzi?' asked Thomas. 'You mean the football player?'

'Haha, that's Özil. This is Ötzi, O-t-z-i,' began Kishore, always pleased to enlighten the others. 'Ötzi is Europe's oldest mummy, also known as the Iceman. But Egyptian or European, all mummies bring curses.'

The morbid discussion came to a temporary halt when the teachers boarded the bus. Mr Ramesh, who taught them history, and Mr Hiran Hiran, their art master, were supposed to accompany them; so the students were surprised to find Mr Abhijeet, their geography teacher, climb in with Mr Hiran Hiran.

'Good morning, sirs!' they chorused.

'Where's Ramesh Sir, sirs?' asked Reshmi.

'He's on leave today,' said Mr Hiran. 'It seems he's ill.'

'The curse is working already,' Eric whispered to Kiran.

'But Amar's ring will protect us,' Kiran replied. Amar had already passed the ring around to his friends in class.

The students split up when they reached the museum for the teachers didn't want everyone crowding into the room where the mummy was exhibited. Mr Hiran Hiran was keen on going to the picture gallery and herded a large group

along. 'The great masters! You MUST see them,' he gushed, shaking his ponytail. 'The impressionists and the modernists first. Mummies later.'

Mr Abhijeet divided the rest into two groups, taking one with him to the geological section, while the other headed for the antiquity wing. Amar and his friends, who were in the second group, asked the surly security guard, who was in close conversation with two men, where the mummy was housed. The guard looked annoyed at being interrupted and didn't respond.

'Delightful chap!' commented Eric. The students meandered about until they stumbled upon a dimly lit chamber lined all around with Egyptian artefacts that gave out eerie vibes.

'It definitely has ATMOSPHERE,' Minu pronounced, breaking the silence. She glanced, goggle-eyed, at the fearful masks that appeared to leer at her from the walls and shivered. Right at the centre of the room was the mummy. Standing around, in respectful awe, were a few gawking visitors.

'An AC room for the mummy!' exclaimed Jayaram. 'Cool!'

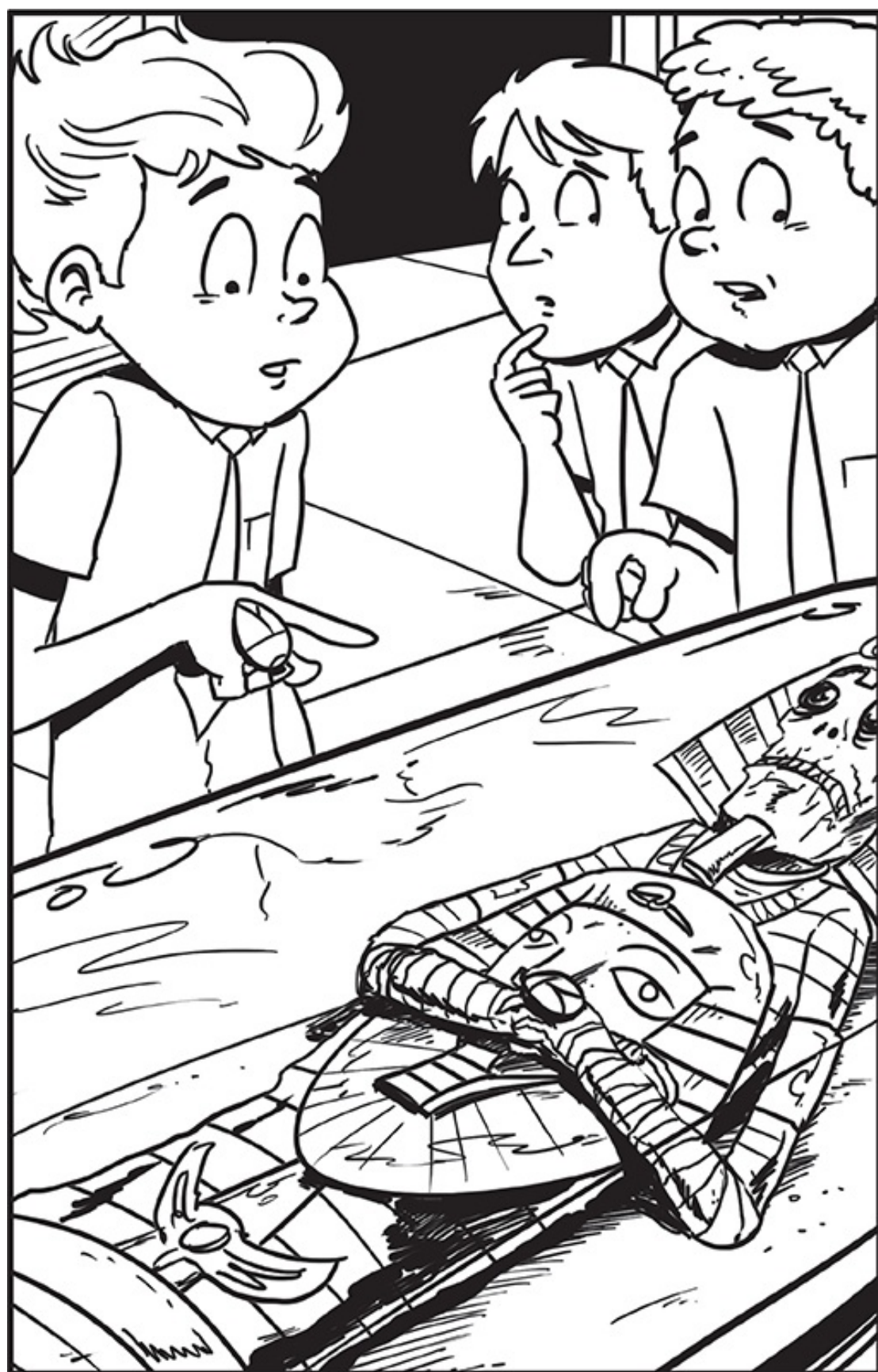
'Did you know that ancient Egyptian mummies were mashed up and made into oil paint?' asked Kishore.

'Enough, Kishore, don't be gross!' Reshmi protested.

They waited for the visitors to disperse before crowding around the mummy that was lying in a glass case. They had expected it to be wrapped in layers of cloth and were surprised to see instead a wizened, cadaverous figure with the head and hands exposed. A mask rested on its chest and the skeletal hands were crossed over it. The children gazed, wonderstruck, as if they were looking at the Koh-i-noor diamond.

'Hello, great-great-great-and-so-on-grand-uncle! How does it feel to be 4000 years old?' Amar asked, peering in.

'Face is like parchment. Look at the sticklike hands!' exclaimed Kiran. 'Like yours, Butter, hehe. Hey,' he tugged at Amar's skinny hand, 'he's wearing a ring! Just like yours.'



‘You don’t say!’ Amar’s mouth fell open. He fished out his ring from his pocket and slipped it on his finger. ‘Wow, who’d have thought? A scarab ring. To bring luck, maybe. Anyway, the guy’s lucky to have survived like this so long.’ Everyone huddled around, astonished, and stared at both the rings. After they had ogled enough, Amar pocketed his ring again and they left the room.

On an impulse, Amar dragged Kiran back to the chamber. It was empty now. Looking thoughtful, he gazed at the mummy and, tapping a light tattoo on the lid, said, ‘If only we could open this, I could get grand-uncle to wear my ring.’ He put his hand under the lid and, to his amazement, found he could lift it. ‘Tub, it’s open! Hold it up.’ Kiran took a furtive look around and obeyed. Amar, with uncharacteristic gentleness, slid his ring on to the mummy’s finger.

‘Hi, handsome!’ Amar giggled. ‘Glad to meet you.’ He pretended to shake the skeletal hand. The two boys continued to admire the bejewelled mummy till they heard the sound of approaching footsteps.

Quick as a wink, one eye on the entrance, Amar removed his ring and pocketed it while Kiran closed the lid. Just in time, for the sulky guard entered with his two seedy-looking companions.

‘Haunting the mummy, are you?’ he snarled. ‘Get lost!’

‘Phew! Narrow escape,’ gasped Amar as the two joined their friends. ‘Imagine leaving my ring behind!’

Back in school at lunchtime, Amar and Kiran described their daring deed to the rest. ‘My precious scarab did bring me luck.’ Amar brought the ring out and kissed it. ‘Actually, the mummy’s ring wasn’t exactly like mine.’ Then inspecting his ring, he gave a start. ‘Oh no!’ he exclaimed, turning pale. Hands trembling, he scrutinized the ring from every angle. Finally, he turned a stricken face towards his friends and said in a sepulchral tone, ‘Guys, I think I took the wrong ring. This is not mine.’

‘What!’ His friends were shocked.

Amar stared in horror at the mummy’s ring. ‘Yes, now what?’ he moaned.

‘You have to return it, of course,’ Minu pronounced.

‘But how?’ Amar looked at the others in consternation. ‘We can’t go back now. And the museum closes at four. No time to go there after school.’

‘Go in the night,’ Abdul suggested.

‘Classic! Thanks. Do you really think the gates and doors will be wide open with “welcome” written all over? That AC room is like a bank’s vault ’

with welcome. Which all over. That his room is like a bank's vault.

At that moment, Mr Abhijeet entered the classroom. 'Sorry to barge in,' he began. 'I know the bell hasn't gone, but I forgot to tell you that Mr Jagmohan wanted two students from this class to present a report tomorrow at the assembly about the museum visit.'

Before they could protest, he continued. 'I know I should have told you earlier so you could have made notes. But never mind, class IX is going to the museum in the afternoon and the boys are just boarding the bus. Who would like to go there again?'

'Me!' shouted Amar, leaping up.

'I!' said Kiran, grammatically on point, bouncing up and down.

'Butter and Tub!' the rest said in one voice.

The teacher raised his eyebrows. 'All right, hurry! And take your bags along. You can get off at your respective bus stops.' He left, wondering if something was brewing in VIII A.

'What luck, Butter!' said Reshmi. 'Your ring did it.'

'My grand-uncle's ring, you mean.' Amar smiled, feeling better. The two boys snatched their bags and rushed out.

At the museum, they dodged the security guard and, camouflaged among a large group of class IX boys, sneaked into the mummy's room. At the earliest opportunity, they sidled close to the case and peeked in. The mummy lay as it had earlier but there was one little difference. The hands were bare; there was no ring on any finger.

The boys exchanged dismayed glances. Amar tried to lift the lid surreptitiously but couldn't. It was locked.

'Butter, your ring's gone,' Kiran whispered, stating the obvious. 'Let's get out of here.'

They sought refuge in the art section. 'I think it's been stolen, Tub!' Amar was agitated. 'And when the authorities discover the theft, they will call the police, and then?' He began chewing his fingernails.

'And when the thieves discover they have the wrong ring, they will start their investigation, and then?' Kiran added fuel to the flames already consuming his friend.

'I'm in deep trouble,' Amar groaned, swallowing a bit of his chewed nail. His natural optimism seemed to have deserted him. 'Looks like the curse is upon me.'

Tub, you look around and take notes for tomorrow's report, I'll think of ways to break out of prison or take my own life.'

Kiran laughed. 'Just chill, Butter. You have the mummy's lucky ring to protect you. Let's see what tomorrow brings.'

Once home, Amar hid the ring in the clothes cupboard. Fortunately, there were guests over for dinner and his parents didn't quiz him about the museum visit. But he spent a sleepless night, twisting and jerking as if he were on a bed of nails. His mind, usually buzzing with ideas, failed him this time; he couldn't think up any solution that wouldn't get him into trouble.

The next morning, he scanned the paper and was relieved there was no report about a theft in the museum. At breakfast, his mother asked him about the ring and he mumbled that someone had 'borrowed' it.

'See that you get it back,' she said, unwittingly turning the knife deeper in his wound.

Amar's friends greeted him with sympathy, Kiran having already brought them up to speed, though Reshmi couldn't resist remarking, 'Hey, Butter, you look like you haven't slept a wink.'

'Well, I haven't slept a wink,' Amar growled.

'So what's the modus operandi?' asked Kishore.

'I'm sure the theft will be discovered today. In which case, tomorrow's paper will report it. Then . . .'

 Amar paused, looking miserable. In his imagination, the prison gates were already beginning to open.

'Then you should go to the police, Amar, that's best,' Minu suggested. 'Tomorrow is Saturday, there's no school.'

'But what do I tell them? How do I explain?' Amar whined.

'The police will be very happy you have the genuine ring. They'll excuse you for your crime,' said Reshmi. Amar winced.

'I think the security guy and his creepy friends did it,' Ajay, the wannabe detective, pronounced.

'Likely, but I can't tell the police that when the stolen ring is with me,' Amar bleated.

'Stop being such a grump, Butter,' Reshmi tapped him on the head. 'Look, I'll come with you tomorrow to the station. A gentle, feminine presence might help.'

'Did I hear someone say gentle?' Eric chortled.

The next day the local paper carried a brief news item that a ring had been

stolen from the local museum. But no details were given. Amar rang up Reshmi and they went to the police station, Amar looking very nervous, right hand deep in his pocket, holding the ring tight.

The sleepy police station, meanwhile, had been rudely prodded to wakefulness by the theft. The robbery had been discovered on Thursday itself and immediately caused a furore. Italy had sent the mummy on the strict understanding that not a wrinkle on its skin or a crinkle on the folds of cloth wound around it should be touched.

The museum authorities in Florence would be appalled to know that the mummy had embarked on a merry all-India tour, and if they got to hear that the ring on its finger had been stolen, things could blow up into a diplomatic crisis. For the ring was no ordinary ring; it was believed to be a special commemorative scarab ring made during the reign of Amenhotep III, one of the most powerful pharaohs of ancient Egypt.

When the museum director had discovered the theft, he informed the Kolkata museum director, who was horrified. ‘Wh . . . a . . . t?’ he stammered. ‘How careless! Inform the police. I’ll send a special private investigator straightaway. Spread the net, find the ring, solve the case immediately, otherwise there’ll be hell to pay,’ he ended with a sob.

When Amar and Reshmi went to the police station and stated the reason for their visit, they were led to a private room. A placid police officer, Inspector Prasan, was seated at the table, while an eager-faced private detective chewed gum and paced the floor at the same time.

‘Sirs,’ Amar began with a gulp, ‘we . . . er . . . know about the ring. It’s a scarab.’

‘Arab! I knew it!’ The detective spun on his toes like a frenzied ballet dancer. ‘It’s an international plot. An Arab is involved!’

‘No, sir, not Arab. Scarab.’

‘Arabs! Ha, there’s more than one. I should have guessed. It’s a global gang, mark my words. Egypt wants the ring back, Arabs want it too. Excuse me; I have to make a call to the ambassador.’ He dashed out.

Amar and Reshmi looked bewildered.

‘What is it?’ asked the inspector. ‘Tell me.’

Inspector Prasan’s calm manner reassured them, and the whole story came tumbling out. Amar showed him the ring. ‘This is the ring I took by mistake

tumbling out. Amar showed him the ring. 'This is the ring I took by mistake from the mummy. I'm very sorry.'

A senior police officer and a worried-looking man, who turned out to be the director of the local museum, entered. 'Where's that foolish investigator?' snapped the officer.

'Ringing up the ambassador.' Inspector Prasan smiled.

'Hmm! Tell him the thieves have been caught, no thanks to him. The guard confessed and our men arrested all those involved. But the ring is missing. The thieves were babbling about a fake ring and when he was arrested, one of them flung this into the constable's face.' He opened his palm to reveal a ring.

'My scarab!' Amar's funereal expression turned beatific.

'And these children have found the real ring. It's a long story,' said Inspector Prasan, handing the ring to the director, whose face lit up. He examined it with a magnifying glass from his pocket and exclaimed, 'Thank goodness! This IS the real thing. Amen!'

'Hotep!' The senior officer winked. 'Phew! How can I thank you?' He shook hands with the children before turning to leave with the director. 'I'll see you later. We have a few calls to make. And I must send that private eye out of my sight. Whoever made him a detective must be a total imbecile. I'd be surprised if he can find the correct switches for the lights in his house.'

'Take your scarab ring and leave your names, addresses and phone numbers,' said Inspector Prasan to Amar and Reshmi. 'I'll get in touch with you soon. Thank you for your help.'

Just then, the detective stormed into the room. 'I asked the police to round up all the Arabs in this town, but it appears there aren't any!' He looked perplexed. Inspector Prasan glanced at the children and smiled.



World Environment Day

It was Monday. Amar had rechristened it Moan-day since everyone came moaning and groaning to school after the weekend. He had just entered the classroom when the bell rang.

‘There it goes! Who sets the clock in school?’ moaned Kiran.

‘Assembly again! Mornings were so peaceful the last two days!’ groaned Amar, aiming his bag, like a shot-put throw, at his desk. It landed with a thud on the floor.

‘Butterfingers begins the week with a bang!’ Minu giggled.

Amar recovered his bag and this time, deposited it on the desk before joining his classmates as they dawdled to the grounds where Mr Jagmohan was already on stage.

‘Look who is here! Early bird Princi waiting for the worms,’ Amar whispered to Kiran.

‘Yep. And if he is early, I bet he has some horrendous scheme up his sleeve,’ Kiran whispered back.

Mr Jagmohan was a person who, when he had something fresh and exciting to announce or a bombshell to drop, didn’t have the patience to wait for the students to arrive before taking the stage. He stood there now like a stern vulture, glaring over his glasses as the students crept and crawled to their places.

‘You bet!’ Amar agreed. ‘Remember this was how he announced we’d have to sacrifice a games period for art class.’

‘And how he declared we have to stay back for extra classes for a month before exams,’ added Eric.

‘Not to mention how he cancelled the athletic meet to hold surprise tests,’ continued Kiran through clenched teeth. That particular cancellation rankled.

‘Silence! No whispering!’ Mr Jagmohan took on the role of a snapping turtle. ‘Let’s finish with the assembly before I make an important announcement.’

‘I told you!’ Kiran mouthed to those around him as the school anthem began. The formalities over, Mr Jagmohan cleared his throat and bellowed into the

mike, 'All right, children, what day is 5 June?'

'Wednesday!' Aarav, a class II boy, shouted shrilly.

'Is he conducting a surprise low-IQ quiz?' whispered Amar.

'No, Thursday!' screamed Deepak of class IV.

'A ho-li-day!' trilled the ever-hopeful Isaiah of class VII.

'World Environment Day!' yelled class VII's Alvin, the Mr Know-All of middle school.

Mr Jagmohan, whose face had begun to darken with annoyance when he'd heard the first few answers, went back to its former shade at Alvin's response. Nodding his head in approval at the boy, for he believed in immediate acknowledgement of merit, he said, 'Very good, Alvin, that's what it is. As everyone ought to know, 5 June is World Environment Day. This is a day through the celebration of which the United Nations makes the whole world aware of the importance of the environment and the responsibility of everyone towards preserving and saving it. It was in 1972 that . . .'

He droned on about the history of World Environment Day in a monotone that lulled most of the students into a state of semi-consciousness. A sudden silence, indicating that the information bulletin had come to an end, stirred them back into existence. He paused. The bulk of his audience looked back vacuously at him. Irritated by the response, he glared and continued. 'This year is special; India is hosting the global World Environment Day. Schools have been asked to celebrate this day in a meaningful way. We get just two days to prepare for 5 June. But so what? Two days means forty-eight hours—in other words . . . er . . . twenty-four thousand . . . er . . . about several thousand minutes and . . .'

'It's 2880 minutes, sir,' Alvin shouted. He was a senior-level topper at abacus maths, who loved to display his mental-maths skills. 'In seconds that would be —'

But this time Mr Jagmohan wasn't pleased and cut him short. 'Enough! Don't interrupt me. That's exactly what I was going to say!' The students tittered.

Mr Jagmohan cleared his throat and continued. 'On 5 June, Mr Madhav, the director of zoos and a renowned environmentalist, will visit every school in this town to find out how it is observing World Environment Day, and a shield will be presented to the school that makes the best effort. We've decided that classes VII and VIII should involve themselves completely in the programme while the junior classes can plant saplings, clean out weeds and keep the surroundings

junior classes can paint cupping, steam cut pieces and keep the surroundings tidy. The senior classes will be in charge overall. I'll be coming around shortly to discuss this. Now go to your classes.'

'Work, work, work!' grumbled Eric as the students strolled forward. 'We get back to school and there's a pile waiting. When will I get to the senior classes? I'd love to be in charge, which, of course, means doing nothing.'

'Wonder what torture he has planned for us,' commented Amar when the students reached the class.

'You don't have to wait too long,' said Kiran. 'Princi appears to love us; he has followed us here.'

'Oops, so he has!' exclaimed Amar, turning to look and ramming into a desk that almost toppled over. Mr Jagmohan frowned with displeasure at the familiar sight of Amar performing acrobatics to set fallen furniture right and waited with a frown till order was restored.

'Sit down, please!' he commanded. 'To continue what I was saying at the assembly . . . we must think of something specific to do. The efforts should be shared. Mr Shyam and I have been thinking we could have students prepare charts, make presentations, craft meaningful models and create small posters that can be stuck on trees, the walls of classrooms and so on. By the way, I hope you know that every year there is a different theme for World Environment Day. This year, it is "Beat Plastic Pollution".'

'Mr Jagmohan, is chewing gum made of plastic?' asked Thomas.

'Er, I'm not too sure,' Mr Jagmohan ruminated, chewing his underlip. 'But, plastic or not, it's uncouth to chew gum. I hope no one here does that.'

Kishore quietly transferred the gum he was chewing to a piece of paper, Ajay swallowed his and Arjun stuck his stick of gum under his desk.

'Here are some themes of the previous years.' Mr Jagmohan consulted a paper. 'In 2012, it was "Think, Eat, Save".'

'I like the eat part,' whispered Eric to Kishore.

'In 2015,' continued Mr Jagmohan, 'it was "Feeding the Planet".'

'I'm hungry already,' whispered Kiran to Amar. 'I wish someone thinks of feeding me.'

'Stop it! No more whispering!' Mr Jagmohan was exasperated. 'I am talking about something very serious. I wonder how many of you are aware that our planet is dying. Amar, do you know last year's theme?'

Just that morning, Amar's environment-conscious parents had made their displeasure regarding a tree being cut down in a neighbouring house very clear. Mr Kishen had snapped, 'Everywhere people are mowing down trees thoughtlessly. Nature is being destroyed. No hope for the future.'

Playing for time, Amar made a wild guess, mumbling, 'Um . . . er . . . people . . . nature . . . the future . . .'

'Exactly!' Mr Jagmohan looked surprised. "Connecting People to Nature", that was the theme. Can't believe you are actually aware of environmental issues. You have more sense than I thought. In every piece of coal, there might lie hidden a diamond. What did you say—"nature is the future"? Good slogan. I'll put you in charge of making the smaller posters, on A4 paper, with catchy slogans. Not just on this year's theme but on environmental issues in general. Kishore and Minu can help you. Children, Mr Shyam will divide you into groups and tell you what is planned for each group. Put your hearts into your work; I will also do something to save Planet Earth.'

The saviour of Planet Earth left the class, pleased with himself.

'All in two days! What's Princi thinking of?' Ajay complained.

Amar looked visibly dismayed. He wanted to practise in the evenings for the football match in the colony on Saturday. Now he wouldn't be free till Thursday.

That evening Amar surfed the Internet for matter about World Environment Day, the problems plaguing the environment and what should be done to save the earth until he felt something needed to be done to save him, especially his head and his eyes. That night, he had nightmares about oceans, dead fish, bare trees, a blazing sun shining down on skeletons in the desert . . .

He went bleary-eyed to school the next day and dozed through the lessons. 'Thinking,' he told Miss Philo when she pulled him up, 'of slogans.' He picked Kishore and Minu's brains for more ideas.

On Wednesday, Mr Jagmohan gave him a sheaf of A4 paper that he rolled and shoved into his already bursting bag. When he took it out in the evening to make the posters, he was dismayed to find the papers crumpled. Worse, they wouldn't straighten, curling back into a roll the moment he let go.

After several failed attempts, his face brightened. *Ironing might help*, he thought. For Amar, to think was to act. He placed the papers, curved side down, on the ironing board and had just begun to press them when his mother shouted

that Kishore was on the line. He had called with some ideas for slogans and Amar went off to write them down.

Sniff! Sniff! An unpleasant, acrid smell made Amar cut the call and rush to the ironing board to discover that the iron had burnt a hole right through the papers!

Dismayed, he walked into the kitchen, where his mother was frying cutlets. 'A cutlet or two might inspire me. Food for thought.' When he popped one into his mouth, he noticed the paper on which his mother had placed the fried cutlets to soak up the oil. Why, the size was just right for his purpose.

'Ma, do you have any more of these papers?' he asked, his mouth full of cutlet.

'Yes, I have a stock of them,' Mrs Kishen replied. 'That's recycled paper. What do you want it for?'

'To make posters for World Environment Day.'



‘What a lovely idea, Amar, to use recycled paper for that! Take as many as you wish.’ She looked at him fondly as he grinned, the burnt paper screwed into a ball in his hand.

The next day, 5 June, was cloudy and windy. *Perfect for World Environment Day!* Amar thought when he left for school, the posters propped straight in an old paper bag he had hunted out.

As usual, Amar missed his school bus and had to walk quite a bit to reach the bus stop. What he didn’t know was that the bag was half-torn at the bottom, and as he jogged to the bus stop, swinging the bag, the rent got wider, the bottom slowly opened up and the contents slipped out. Oblivious to this, Amar streaked to the bus and just about managed to hop on. He realized vaguely that the bag felt lighter but put it down to the lightness of his heart at having boarded the bus.

Once he reached school, he rushed to his class to show the posters to his friends, except there were no posters. His bag was . . . empty. ‘Oh, but . . . where are my posters?’ He looked comical in his dismay and was shaking the bag, urging it to miraculously produce the posters, when the principal entered the class.

‘Let me see your posters, Amar,’ he requested, holding out his hand.

‘Sir, I . . . seem to have dropped them . . .’ Amar stammered.

‘This is too much, even for you, Butterfingers!’ snapped Mr Jagmohan, who rarely addressed anyone by their nickname. He looked quite disbelieving. ‘How can you drop A4-sized posters? Did you even make them?’

‘Of course I did, sir,’ Amar protested, looking miserable.

‘Now what? It’s too late to make more posters. Amar, you’re responsible for this and you have to find a solution.’

Sighting a lot of old, crumpled newspapers overflowing from the bin in the corner, Amar brightened. ‘Maybe we could write the slogans on those old newspapers . . .’

‘We? What do you mean we? You’d better do something, anything!’ Mr Jagmohan left the classroom breathing fire out of his nostrils. Amar’s friends rallied around him and, using whatever they could lay their hands on—pens, pencils, crayons, sketch pens, paint—they wrote what Amar dictated, with help from Kishore and Minu. They went around the school and pinned or pasted the ‘posters’ on walls, doors, trees, and hung them from branches.

Meanwhile the car in which Mr Madhav was being taken to the schools had

Meanwhile, the car in which Mr Madhav was being taken to the schools had to brake suddenly when a piece of paper that had been dancing like a kite decided to descend and cover the windscreen. 'What's that?' gulped Mr Madhav as the seat belt stopped his head from banging into the windscreen. A huge 'SAVE' on the paper caught his eye and, getting out of the car, he obeyed the appeal and rescued it. On it was written 'Save trees, recycle paper' and an eye-catching cartoon accompanied the slogan. At the bottom was inscribed in tiny letters: 'World Environment Day (Amar Kishen, Green Park School)'. Another paper was caught on a thorny bush and it said, 'Walk to work; carbon emission is pollution.' Feeling guilty, he asked the driver to park the car on the side and walked on.

To his amazement he saw quite a few environment-related posters lying around or flying about. He decided to find out more about this . . .

The next day, the newspaper carried the following report under the headline:

Green Park Wins Environment Day Shield

Mr Madhav, director of zoos, who led an inspection of the schools in town to decide which school celebrated World Environment Day in the most innovative and effective manner had no problem declaring Green Park School the winner. Not only did the school have a unique exhibition on the school grounds with charts and working models to bring alive the dangers faced by the environment, posters made on old, crumpled newspapers and wonderfully imaginative presentations, there were children planting trees and watering the plants with water drawn from the school well.

But what impressed Mr Madhav the most was how the children of the school had taken the message to the town. Unique and telling posters on recycled paper were scattered here and there, as if they had been dropped from a helicopter. Mr Sridhar, a resident of the town, told Mr Madhav that he and his friend had come upon the posters lying around. They'd believed that some environmentalists had left them for the wind to disperse and spread the message.

Others in the town also spoke of coming across similar posters flying about, reminding them it was World Environment Day. Slogans like 'Plastic is drastic, but jute is cute', 'Be mature, love nature', 'Taste food, don't waste it', 'Avoid air conditioners, open windows', 'Don't just use, reuse', 'Plastic isn't fantastic, cloth is', 'Don't brood, share food', 'This is our only world. Save it', 'Don't panic, eat organic', 'More buses, less cars', 'Wear cotton, synthetic is rotten (though it doesn't rot)', 'Stay stable, eat vegetable', 'Two legs are better than four wheels', 'Want a treat? Eat wheat', 'Pesticide is suicide' and 'He who walks, lasts' stirred the collective conscience of the people, who decided to put many of these into practice.

On finding out that one boy, Amar Kishen, of Class VIII A, had been entrusted with the task of crafting the posters and had been responsible for taking the message to the people in this innovative manner, Mr Madhav gave him a certificate of merit and a special treat for his class that has impressed him with their thought-provoking work.

By staff reporter.

At the school assembly, after Mr Madhav handed the shield to Mr Jagmohan and the certificate to Amar, he praised the students. ‘With such responsible youth, there is hope for our planet. As a reward for Class VIII A’s exemplary work, its students will be treated to a movie this afternoon. Mr Jagmohan and I will come to Class VIII A with the details.’

The rewarded students couldn’t believe their ears while the others looked enviously at them. A movie during class hours? And Mr Jagmohan had agreed to it? Unbelievable! The world was certainly coming to an end; never mind what the optimistic environmentalists and Mr Madhav felt.

In class, while waiting for Mr Madhav and the principal, the students debated on what movie it could be.

‘Can’t be *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom*. It’s only going to be released.’ Kishore made a face.

‘Who knows, special release for special students!’ Amar winked.

‘I hope it’s *A Quiet Place*,’ said Ajay. ‘It’s got something to do with the environment. And there’s suspense in it.’ He smacked his lips.

‘Maybe it’s some Dark Knight movie.’ Eric looked pleased with his guess.

‘I want to see *Deadpool 2*!’ Reshmi pouted.

Mr Madhav came to class with Mr Jagmohan, beaming. ‘My congratulations to all of you. I’m very proud to see such conscientious children. Since you are such committed environmentalists, I’ve arranged for you to watch the short film *No Nature, No Life*, a prize-winning German documentary with English subtitles, at the Museum Hall this afternoon. It’s not too far from here and you will enjoy walking to the venue. And since, being health-conscious students, I know you’d prefer organic to junk food like popcorn, fizzy drinks and pizzas, I’ve arranged for you to be served special ragi dosa, nuts and fruit salad . . .’

The students, whose faces were growing longer and longer with dismay, perked up when they heard ‘fruit salad’. ‘Thank goodness for some ice cream, at least,’ whispered Kiran to Eric.

Mr Madhav continued. ‘. . . with brown-sugar syrup, not ice cream. You know better than others how bad ice cream is. Enjoy the afternoon and keep up the good work!’

Amar began to look forward to Saturday’s football match.



The Beach Adventure

‘Whew!’ said Amar, closing with a big bang the Sherlock Holmes collection he had been reading. He now pounced on a card lying on the table and began to fan himself furiously with it. ‘It’s as hot as the Sahara!’ he complained. ‘I’m getting barbecued. Why does the power fail all the time?’

‘It’s only been a minute since the power failed, Amar,’ Mr Kishen retorted. ‘And the temperature’s just 33 degrees. Your powers of exaggeration are scaling new heights.’

‘Thirty-three degrees? Seems more like 330 degrees. I don’t think people know how to check the temperature.’

‘And you don’t know how to treat wedding invitations. Put that card down, Amar! I think you’ve already torn it and the wedding’s not over yet.’

‘Whose wedding is it?’ asked Amar. He stopped his frenzied fanning and looked with some curiosity at the card that was much the worse for having doubled as a fan.

‘A relative’s. The wedding’s tomorrow and your uncle Ravi is coming too. He’ll be arriving any time now.’

‘Ravi Uncle? Oh, lovely!’

Ravi was Amar’s father’s youngest brother and Amar’s favourite uncle. Amar owed his skills in tree- climbing, whistling, making funny faces and playing weird variations of cricket and football to Ravi Uncle’s assiduous tutoring.

At that moment, someone began to drum on the door.

‘That, my dear Watson, has got to be Ravi Uncle; that’s his unmistakable signature tattoo,’ observed Amar to no one in particular, his face breaking into an anticipatory smile as he flew to open the door.

It was indeed Ravi and Amar fell upon him with a cry of delight. Uncle and nephew performed a wild jig together before Ravi asked, ‘So how’s everyone? Goodness, it’s so hot!’

‘My father doesn’t think so,’ said Amar, sneaking a sly glance at his father before beginning to fan himself again, this time with the newspaper.

‘Well, I do,’ said Ravi. ‘So how about going to the beach this evening?’

‘Great idea!’ exclaimed Amar, wiping the sweat from his face.

That evening Ravi and Amar set off to the beach that was rather far away. It seemed as if half the population of the town had had the same bright idea and the place was teeming with people. But the lovely cool breeze that fanned their faces was compensation enough for having to share the beach with a multitude. As they stood there, Ravi sighted an old friend in the distance and hailed him.

Very soon, Ravi, his friend and Amar settled down on the sand. Ravi and his friend were absorbed in their conversation and after a little while, Amar got bored. He stretched out his hand stealthily behind his uncle’s back and began scooping out the sand, taking great care to see that his hand did not touch his uncle. Just as he felt the hole was big enough for his uncle to fall in if he leant back a little, Amar felt himself sink into the sand.

‘OOOH!’ he shouted, feet in the air, as he tried desperately to recover his balance. Hands flailing, he eventually gave up and fell backwards into the shallow pit like an out-of-practice pole-vaulter.

‘Haha!’ laughed Ravi, helping his sheepish nephew up. ‘That’s a trick I taught you, Amar, and you seem to have tutored your friends expertly.’

‘Hahaha!’ Ravi’s laughter appeared to echo from behind Amar, who turned to find Eric and Kiran there, wide grins on their faces.

‘I wouldn’t have missed this sight for anything,’ Eric hollered.

‘You wouldn’t, would you?’ Amar lunged towards him. Eric took to his heels and Amar gave chase, caught up with him and tugged. Eric fell, pulling Amar on him. Kiran joined in this horseplay and after a wild skirmish, they finally rose, shaking the sand from their persons. Kiran had brought his Frisbee along, and Amar yelled to his uncle that he’d join him after playing for a while.

A little later, when the three boys returned to where Amar’s uncle had been seated, they found the place empty except for a pair of sandals. In the distance they saw Ravi paddling in the waves breaking on the shore.

‘I’ve got an idea!’ said Amar, eyeing the sandals.



‘Oh no!’ exclaimed the seasoned victims of Amar’s bright ideas.

‘Oh yes!’ Amar responded, eyes shining with mischief. ‘I’m going to bury Ravi Uncle’s sandals. We’ll let him look for them for some time. See, the holes we’d dug are still here.’

‘Must you?’ asked Kiran, looking doubtful.

But Amar had already matched his deed to his words and was deftly filling the holes.

‘Hey,’ protested Kiran. ‘How will you know where you’ve buried them?’

‘Easy!’ said Amar. ‘I just have to mark the place. See, I’ll push this stick in here.’

At that moment a piece of dirty pink-coloured paper came waltzing in the breeze, towards them. Amar caught it and tied it in a butterfly knot around the stick.

‘Perfect for identification.’ He smiled, looking pleased. ‘Now let’s continue with the game.’

After some time they saw Ravi walking towards them and, exchanging knowing smiles, the three boys ran to meet him. But the smiles faded and were replaced by expressions of shock when they found he was wearing his sandals.

‘What’s wrong, boys? Why are you admiring my feet?’ he asked. ‘Clean, aren’t they?’

‘Uncle, your sandals . . .’

‘I didn’t take them off. The buckles were stubborn, so I wore them when I went down to the sea. Wrong decision, though! The wetting hasn’t done my leather chappals any good. But it’s so sweet of you to worry about them.’ He glanced down ruefully at his sodden footwear.

Amar ignored his uncle’s misplaced appreciation of their concern and turned to his friends, worried. ‘Then whose sandals did we bury?’

The question was answered right away. A quiet man and a hand-waggling, vociferous lady came close. ‘I’m sure I left them here,’ the quiet man was heard to insist.

‘Where on earth . . . or where on sand are they? You know how expensive they are. My sister brought them especially for you from the States. Goodness knows what state they are in now. Why she continues to bring you presents when you couldn’t care less for them beats me! I’m sure the waves have carried them to the sea. First I lose my gold earrings and now this happens.’

them to the sea. First I lose my gold earring and now this happens.

‘I had nothing to do with your earring,’ the man objected, mustering up some spirit when he was able to get a word in. ‘And the waves never reach this far.’

‘So what are you telling me? That they vanished just like that? Did some shoeless ghost spirit them away?’ Voice dripping with sarcasm, she continued her tirade. ‘Just where are they? Don’t tell me somebody’s buried them.’

Hearts sinking, the boys exchanged glances while Ravi looked on curiously. ‘What’s up, boys?’ he asked. ‘You look pretty shaken. It’s not just the lady’s personality, is it? Correct me if I’m wrong, but I think our Amar here has landed you in some scrape.’

While Amar explained in an undertone what had happened, he suddenly recollected something. ‘Hey, Kiran, Eric, we’ve forgotten something. All we need to do is look for the stick.’

But there was no stick visible anywhere in the vicinity.

‘Look!’ Kiran pointed into the distance. Far away they could see a little child running, holding up a stick with a pink paper on it fluttering like a flag.

‘Butterfingers, you’ve done it again!’ Eric muttered, looking downcast. He could foresee trouble. The sand stretched in every direction and they could not locate the spot where they had buried the sandals.

‘Come on, Sherlock Holmes,’ said Ravi to Amar. ‘Get down on all fours and start looking.’

The three boys fell on the sand and began digging like dogs for a coveted bone, spraying sand all around, desperation lending force and speed to their digging. It attracted the attention of the couple, who came closer and asked Ravi what the boys were doing. Ravi decided to tell the truth and explained what had happened. That was enough to set the lady off again, this time at the boys.

‘How dare you boys do this! Burying chappals! And that too a stranger’s. Never heard of such a thing in my life! What’s this generation coming to? Is this your idea of fun? Dig, dig, boys, dig up the whole beach! I’m not letting you go home till you’ve found the sandals.’

‘Calm down, Rima,’ said the man, looking apologetically at the children. ‘The boys didn’t mean to hide my chappals. It was a mistake.’

Without warning, the lady’s face crumpled. ‘If we can’t find huge sandals in the sand, how can I even think of finding my earring? What a day this has turned out to be! I never wanted to come here in the first place. Now all I need is a

tsunami to complete my misery.'

Just as she said this, a monster wave crept upon them from the side and broke, wetting all of them and sweeping Amar off his feet. When the water rolled back to the sea, Amar tried to stand up, his hands pressing down on the sand. He felt something hard under his left palm. 'What's this?' he exclaimed, examining the spot. Now he yelled, 'Look! Hey, look! I've found something here.'

He held up what looked like . . .

'An earring! My gold earring! My lost earring! You found it, my dear, dear boy!' The lady beamed with joy and gave an embarrassed Amar a big wet hug. Ravi and the others tried to hide their smiles as Amar struggled to escape.

'I'm so sorry, but I just don't know where your sandals are,' said Amar, turning to the man.

'That's all right, boy,' said the man, looking relieved. 'Don't worry. And what's your name?'

'Amar,' said Amar.

'Butterfingers,' said Eric and Kiran in one voice.

'Eh?' The man looked puzzled.

'His name's Amar. Butterfingers is his nickname,' explained Ravi. The man smiled.

'Yes, Amar, that doesn't matter,' said the lady for whom Amar had changed in a split second from villain to hero. 'Those are only sandals. But my expensive gold earring! I had no idea when and where it dropped from my ear. It's a miracle how you found it! How can I thank you?' She beamed again and held out her arms, ready to give him another hug. Flustered, Amar moved back.

'Let's treat them all to ice cream,' said the man, coming to Amar's rescue.

'Sir, let's look some more for your sandals. Maybe, like the earring, we'll find them.' Amar's conscience was troubling him.

'No, no, don't,' said the man, looking worried. 'It's getting late, and I can always get a new pair. Come, let's go for ice cream.'

As they walked towards the ice-cream stall, the man fell behind, forcing Amar and Ravi, who were walking beside him, to slow down. 'Thank you very much, dear boy,' he said in a low voice, 'for losing my sandals for me. They were most uncomfortable and ill-fitting. I hated them. Now I can get a pair of my choice. So I'm buying you all ice creams—and an extra-large one for you!'



The Music Makers

At the end of the mandatory Monday morning assembly, the principal, Mr Jagmohan, cleared his throat, looked over his glasses and gave a forced smile. One thousand two hundred and twenty-three hearts sank, for this was the signal for one of the so-called ‘treats’ to be announced.

‘What third-degree torture has Princi planned for us?’ whispered Amar to Kiran.

‘Listen, everybody. I’ve a special announcement to make,’ he said. ‘As part of the cultural fest, the staff and I have decided to have a classical music night for the high school students on Friday. We’re inviting well-known artistes for it’s my firm belief . . .’

Murmurs of dismay and protest from the section singled out for this honour greeted this news, but, unfazed, Mr Jagmohan went on. He was not being completely honest when he said ‘the staff and I’ for when he had broached the subject at the staff meeting, most of the teachers had been vociferously against it. As usual, he had managed to override all opposition.

‘. . . that you children should learn to appreciate classical music, both vocal and instrumental. This is what culture is all about . . .’

The students groaned as he rambled on about the importance of culture and their pathetic lack of it. He ended the harangue with an invitation: ‘And I’m inviting your parents too. It’s a family musical night.’

‘Why can’t we have a rock concert instead?’ grumbled Kiran as VIII A walked back to their class. ‘And did you know the Heebie Jeebies are coming to our town to play at Belaire Hotel?’

‘Ah, don’t tell me!’ groaned Ajay, thumping his chest in a mock show of agony.

‘Rock concert and culture?’ said Eric in a deep voice, clearing his throat and peering over his glasses like Mr Jagmohan. ‘Don’t be foolish, boy!’

The others giggled. ‘I can imagine my father’s horror when I tell him about the music night,’ said Amar with a grin, quickly spotting the silver lining in the

cloud of compulsory cultural education. He looked quite pleased at the prospect of carrying this news to him. 'I bet he'll arrange some Houdini-style escape.'

That evening Amar returned from school to find a van parked before his neighbour's gate. Two men were unloading furniture.

'What's happening, Ma?' he asked, flinging his bag on a chair. 'I'm hungry! What's for tea? And what's the lorry doing there?'

'Go wash your hands, Amar,' Mrs Kishen responded with the mandatory injunction as she placed some plates on the table. 'Our neighbours have rented out part of their house and the tenants are moving in. Just for a month, I heard. I saw some musical instruments being carried in, so I guess it must be a music troupe.'

'My life is full of song and music, tra-la-la!' Amar sang and settled down to tell his mother about the music event as he tucked in. His father returned late from work, so he had to wait till morning to give him the news.

Mr Kishen came to breakfast red-eyed and grouchy. 'What's happening in our neighbourhood?' he growled. 'I wasn't able to sleep a wink with all those weird noises and wails in the night.'

'What noises?' asked Amar, who was famous for being dead to the outside world the moment his head hit the pillow.

'Must be our new neighbours,' Mrs Kishen speculated. 'Mr Govind has rented out a section of his house to some musicians, and I think they were practising. They kept me up too.'

'Music, you call it? Banshee wails! I thought Govind was my friend. Another night of this, and I'll go mad!'

Amar decided the time was just right to tell his father about Mr Jagmohan's plans and was gratified by the reaction.

'Classical music night?' Mr Kishen spluttered. 'Your mad Princi must be straitjacketed and put away! Why is this happening to me?' Drowning in self-pity, he struck his forehead repeatedly in mock punishment. Amar watched, fascinated. He loved these moments. His father continued. 'Hounded by noise that is charitably called music! I can't bear all those quavering voices and that weepy music! If you must have music, why not tuneful pop music?'

'It's to do with culture,' said Amar, looking mischievously at his mother. 'Princi said appreciation of classical music is a sign of culture, of being civilized.'

His father calmed down. 'Er, yes, of course. And I do like it when it's well rendered. That's exactly it! There are very few genuine classical artistes.' Having cleverly managed to salvage his reputation as a man of culture, he warmed to his theme. 'And there's nothing as painful as classical music being murdered.'

At that moment his mobile rang. Saved by the bell, he eagerly took the call while Amar listened with great interest to his father's side of the conversation. 'Yes, yes, of course. Certainly. I'll be there. Tickets shouldn't be a problem. Right!' He ended the call and turned a miraculously revived face to his family. 'Rescued! Haha, I do have a white knight! It was my boss and he wants me to go to Delhi this evening. I'll be there for two days and will return on Friday morning.'

'Then you can attend the music programme on Friday night, Dad!' Amar giggled.

'Oh, no! I forgot about that!' Looking a little sober, Mr Kishen sat down for breakfast.

The next day at school, Eric was waiting for Amar. 'Hey, Butter,' he began, sounding worried. 'I need your help. My cousin's left his electric guitar with me and will come for it this weekend. You know my father, he can't stand music. He threw a fit when he saw the guitar. "Either me or the guitar," he said.'

'Don't tell me you chose the guitar!' Amar guffawed.

Eric chuckled. 'Be serious, Butter. Can you keep it in your house? Will your parents mind?'

'Ma won't and Dad's going to be away till Friday, so I guess it's okay. Yippee, it's more than okay! Thanks, Eric, I've always wanted to play an electric guitar. And all that talk of the Heebie Jeebies has made my fingers itch for guitar strings.'

Eric looked alarmed. He began to doubt his decision to entrust the guitar with his friend of the itching fingers. 'Don't do anything stupid, Butter. It's a top-class guitar and my cousin will kill me if there's even a scratch on it.'

'Don't you worry, Eric,' Amar reassured him.

That evening, when Eric came to Amar's house to give him the guitar, he noticed a sad-looking couple at the gate, deep in conversation with Amar's mother.

‘Who are they?’ he asked.

‘Our neighbours. Poor things, they came to pour out their woes to Ma. They foolishly rented out a part of their house to some musicians and now can’t sleep. They are certain they’ll soon go deaf and mad.’

That night Amar began practising on the electric guitar. He tuned it and, after downloading lessons from the Internet, began to play. He got so deeply engrossed in it, he lost track of time and continued to play late into the night.

‘Amar!’ his mother shouted, ordered, threatened, cajoled and pleaded at regular intervals, putting pressure on her vocal chords as she struggled to make herself heard over the cacophony. ‘Stop that horrible, grating noise! Amar, can you hear me? Someone will call the police if you don’t stop. Please, Amar, stop.’

When nothing worked, she plugged her ears with cotton and went to bed. The next day Amar woke up early and practised, went to school and took up the guitar again on his return. Seated on the veranda’s steps, he was engrossed in his music when someone looked over the gate.

‘Hey!’ the someone waved.

Amar looked up, jumped and reached the gate in three huge leaps. ‘Timothy Jay, the Heebie Jeebies’ guitarist! Are you for real?’ he gushed, thrilled. Timothy Jay’s real name was Trimoorthy Jaishankar, a name ill-suited to a rock star, and he had adopted this cool moniker.

‘Yep, maan.’ The tall man gave a lopsided smile. He looked weird in an orange-and-purple T-shirt, which had only one sleeve, and skintight distressed jeans, with one leg only reaching the knee. The other leg had two wide tears, one exposing most of his knee. His left eyebrow, chin and lower lip were pierced, but Amar gazed at him as if he were a lovely picture postcard.

‘That’s a great guitar, dude!’ Timothy drawled. ‘Mind lending it for a day? Mine has broken and I was all troubled, maan, wondering what to do, and then I heard ya play. I’ve a programme this evening.’

‘Yep, we heard about it, maan,’ Amar imitated his idol. ‘This isn’t ma guitar, but I’m sure ma buddy won’t mind. I’ll ask him. Please come in.’

Amar called up Eric, who was equally thrilled and said he was sure his cousin would be honoured if Timothy Jay played his guitar. ‘Besides, Butter,’ he added, ‘the guitar would be much safer in a Heebie Jeebee’s hands, haha!’ Amar ignored the slur and handed over the guitar to Timothy as if it were an offering to the gods.



After Timothy left with the assurance that he would bring the guitar to Amar's school the next day, Amar saw a lorry roar away from the gate of the neighbours.

'What's happened, Ma?' asked Amar. 'Have the neighbours left?'

'Yes, they have,' said a voice behind him. He turned on his heels to find Mr Govind there. 'Your guitar-playing was too much for their sensitive souls and they said they won't remain here another second if they could help it. They left in the morning itself and now their things have gone too.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry, Uncle.' Amar looked contrite.

'Don't feel sorry, Amar. Actually, I came to thank you. Of course, the whole locality was awake too, but only you succeeded in sending them away. I'm so happy, Amar.'

The next day at the assembly, a subdued Mr Jagmohan made another announcement. 'Students,' he began abruptly, 'I have some bad news for you. Due to an emergency, the musical troupe had to leave town.'

Everyone, the teachers included, struggled to hide their delight.

'Amar, looks like the neighbours you drove away were our cultural programme artistes!' whispered Kiran with a soft laugh.

The principal continued. 'Since we have already invited the parents, I'm wondering what we can arrange at such short notice . . .'

At this moment a strange guitar-wielding figure approached the stage from the side. The assembled students noticed this and yelled, 'Heebee Jeebees!'

Timothy gave a lazy wave and swaying his way to Mr Jagmohan, whispered something to him. The principal nodded his head several times, and then, his face breaking into a rare smile, announced, 'Listen, everybody! Mr Timothy heard my words and says he's very grateful to a boy from this school who lent him a guitar. The boy is VIII A's Amar. In return, he says he and his friends wouldn't mind playing here in the evening. And I guess pop culture is also culture!'

'On rare occasions, our dear Princi does talk sense,' remarked Eric as the students went wild with joy. The grounds rang with shouts of 'Three cheers for Amar!', 'Long live the Heebee Jeebees!', 'Three cheers for pop culture!'

The evening was a huge success. Eric's cousin, the owner of the guitar, managed to make it to the programme, and the Heebee Jeebees dedicated a special song to him. The Heebee Jeebees made it a request show and the students

special song to him. The Beebees made it a request show and the students decided to give first choice to the parents, who let their hair down and had a wonderful time demanding their favourite songs. Only one request was turned down, and that too by the audience—Timothy Jay's tongue-in-cheek call for Amar to play the electric guitar. Amar's father's 'No!' was the loudest.



The Booby Trap

Amar and his parents were at dinner when the doorbell rang. It wasn't a polite ring but a continuous and ear-splitting peal, as if the prime aim of the person with his finger on the bell was to startle the entire neighbourhood to its feet and get it ready for an emergency fire drill.

'What the . . . !' Mr Kishen dropped his spoon and jumped up. 'Ask the rascal to stop!' Amar had already reached the door and opened it, eager to see the artiste. Mr Kishen's words rang with embarrassing clarity as he did so, and the man who entered tweaked Amar's hair playfully and swept into the dining room, saying, 'Don't worry, the rascal has stopped, haha!'

'Who is it? Is it . . . Sanjay? Sanjay! How wonderful to see you! My goodness, it must be thirty years since we last met! How did you find my house? Come right in!' Mr Kishen exclaimed, wrapping his arms around Sanjay in an expansive gesture of welcome, quite oblivious to the fact that his friend was already right inside the house with only the kitchen standing between him and the back door.

'Had dinner? No? Good! Sit down and eat. My wife is a great cook. And you must stay with us. This, by the way,' he said, turning to his wife to make a late introduction, 'is Sanjay, my closest friend from school. Sanjay, my wife, Shreya.'

Mrs Kishen, pleased at the compliment but annoyed with her husband at the same time for inviting someone to dinner before checking with her, smiled. 'Hello. Yes, I've heard the name very often. So happy to meet you.'

'And this is my son, Amar,' Mr Kishen introduced Amar, who was standing with a frown since his chair had been usurped by the newcomer.

'Hello, Amar!' Sanjay gave a broad smile. 'We were about your age when we became friends in school. Oh, I'm sorry, is this your chair that your father pushed me on to?'

'It is, but that's all right.' Amar looked virtuous. 'I'll take the chair next to Ma's. But don't eat from that plate. I'd already started my dinner.'

‘Amar!’ admonished his father, shocked at his son’s manners.

His friend laughed. ‘Haha, Amar, you’re just like your father!’

The embarrassed Mr Kishen changed the subject. ‘Where were you all these years, Sanjay?’ he asked. ‘When I . . .’ Mrs Kishen went into the kitchen to make some quick additions to the items on the table, a little nervous since she also had to live up to her newly conferred status as a ‘great cook.’

The meal was much appreciated and, after complimenting his hostess, Sanjay settled down with his friend on the drawing room sofa to catch up on the lost years. The two carried on a lively conversation that was punctuated by many guffaws, chuckles, hand-clapping and backslapping. Amar was amazed. He had never seen his father behave like this before.

He went to his mother, who was washing up at the kitchen sink, and after making an impulsive offer to help, which was, to his relief, just as hastily turned down, he seated himself on the kitchen counter and commented, ‘Ma, did you notice? Dad and Sanjay Uncle are like two excited schoolboys! I always found it hard to believe that Dad had ever been a child, but now I know he was.’

‘Every man is at heart a schoolboy,’ said his mother with an indulgent smile as an explosive roar of laughter resounded in the drawing room followed by what actually sounded like giggles. Amar looked at his mother and both of them giggled too. He took a banana from the fruit basket and was beginning to peel it when his father hollered, ‘Amar! Come here!’

Amar ran to the drawing room, still holding the banana. ‘Sanjay has something for you. And give this to me.’ He plucked the banana from his son’s hand with the deftness of an accomplished monkey and ate it. Amar threw his father an indignant look before accepting the envelope Sanjay held out to him. *A gift of money!* he told himself, elated. *What a kind, generous man Sanjay Uncle is, unlike most grown-ups!* Warmed by these thoughts, he opened the envelope with a smile and unfolded the paper it contained.

‘Eek! Help!’ With a whirring sound, a small stone had shot out of the paper and caught Amar neatly on the nose.



‘Hahaha! Hohoho!’ The men-turned-naughty-schoolboys cracked up and his mother, who had followed him from the kitchen, gave a merry laugh too.

‘What is it?’ Amar asked, annoyed, rubbing his nose. Everything had happened at lightning-quick speed. He examined the contents of the paper in his hand and his irritation was instantly replaced by interest.

‘It’s a booby trap,’ Sanjay explained. ‘So you smart modern boys don’t know about this one! It’s a very simple, effective trick and we played it all the time.’

‘Haha, I’d completely forgotten about it, Sanjay!’ Mr Kishen chortled. ‘Remember the time our maths sir opened what he thought was a birthday card? “So thoughtful of you to remember my birthday, boys,” he said, haha!’

‘How mean!’ Amar’s mother sounded reproachful.

‘Exactly!’ Amar exclaimed. ‘So cruel! We never play such tricks,’ he added virtuously.

‘Oh, we did have a proper birthday card, which we handed him afterwards, and a book too, so we weren’t mean or cruel,’ Sanjay explained, swiftly trying to repair the cracks in the reputation of the respected older generation.

‘But what is this, exactly? How does it work?’ asked Amar, looking at the rubber band and a pliable piece of stick that were in the paper.

‘I’ll show you,’ said Sanjay. ‘Take this piece of stick and bend it into a U-shape. Next, connect the ends with a rubber band. Now take a small, flat stone . . . where is it?’ Amar went hunting on all fours and finally found his father standing on it. ‘Set it at the centre, between the two stretches of the rubber band, and twirl it tightly till it can’t be twirled any more. Then place it carefully on a piece of paper and fold the paper in such a way that it looks like a flat packet. Put the packet in an envelope and give it to whomever you wish to fool. When the unsuspecting person unfolds the paper, as you did, the stone will get released from the rubber band and fly out. Simple physics.’

‘Excellent! Wonderful! And so easy too.’ Amar’s eyes shone, and the two men looked pleased to hear the words of approval from a twenty-first-century boy. Amar’s mother sighed and returned to the kitchen. Amar spent the rest of the night in his room, perfecting the booby trap, while his father and Sanjay remained in the drawing room, exchanging news and reminiscing—‘Do you remember when . . .’, ‘Do you recall that . . .’—late into the night.

Early the next morning, Sanjay left and after breakfast, Amar’s mother wanted to go to the bank

to go to the bank.

‘Why don’t you get money from the ATM? It’s so easy and is right round the corner. What’s your problem with the ATM?’ asked Mr Kishen, who couldn’t understand why his wife was so squeamish about using debit cards.

‘I must go to the bank,’ Amar’s mother said, looking stubborn. ‘I need to withdraw money urgently. The ATM doesn’t have cash when I need it and never in the right denomination. I bank on banks. I’ll go on my two-wheeler.’

‘Then take Amar with you. I have some urgent work to complete.’

‘But why? There’s no need for Amar to tag along. I can manage very well on my own.’

‘I know that. But of late there have been reports of thieves who come on bikes or scooters and wrench chains from the necks of women. They also hang around banks and snatch away bags or money.’

‘And you think Amar will protect me?!’ Amar’s mother laughed.

‘At least you won’t be alone.’

‘His presence will only be a hindrance. I can’t understand why he should come.’

Amar was preparing to protest when the idea was first mooted, for he had other plans for Saturday morning. But his mother’s dismissive laugh at the idea of him being her protector hurt his pride and he changed his mind. ‘Of course I’ll protect you, Ma. Ha, you don’t know . . .’

‘Oh, all right, come!’ his mother said resignedly.

The bank was crowded, as it usually was on a Saturday. Amar took possession of the sofa there and occupied himself with his latest obsession—making a booby trap—while Mrs Kishen waited with increasing impatience for her token number to be called. Just when her turn came, Amar caught sight of Eric entering the bank and making his way to the sofa. He quickly addressed the booby trap to Eric and, noticing his mother return, placed the envelope on the low table near the sofa and got up. He hoped Eric would notice the envelope and open it. His only regret was that he wouldn’t be present to enjoy the sight of the stone hitting Eric’s nose. But there would be other occasions . . .

Mrs Kishen seated herself on the sofa and was stuffing her money into an envelope when the clerk called her name to return her passbook. She absently placed the envelope on the table and rose to get the passbook. She dropped it into her bag and was walking out of the bank when she remembered the money.

She rushed in like the wind and snatched the first envelope she saw on the table.

Suddenly, she heard someone yell out the number of her scooter. Startled, she went outside to find a man gesticulating angrily to her to shift her scooter, which was blocking the path of his car. She always adopted a cavalier attitude towards parking, much to the exasperation of her husband. She thrust the envelope into Amar's hands and rushed to rescue her vehicle out of the maze, pretending she had not heard the man say 'Women!' in a tone that conveyed exactly what he thought of women drivers. Amar hopped on the pillion and they started off.

Now things livened up. Someone appeared to be shouting from the bank, 'Hey, stop!' That was Eric. A motorcycle came roaring at that moment and expert fingers plucked the envelope from Amar's hands.

'Hey, thief!' shouted Amar as the scooter wobbled like a jellyfish, but Mrs Kishen didn't stop. Instead, she bravely tailed the rogue bike. Further up the road there was a commotion. A crowd was gathering around a bike that seemed to have skidded and fallen. The pillion rider, rising from the road, was rubbing his swelling eye while the rider seemed to have his helmet stuck on his head.

'These are the thieves who took our money!' Amar pointed to the men when his mother braked.

'What do you mean, money? How dare you trick us!' snarled the swollen-eyed thief. 'The packet contained a booby trap!'

By this time, a couple of policemen who were at the traffic intersection reached there and took the thieves away. One was still trying to yank the helmet off, making choking noises, while the other, his puffed-up eye now invisible, was shaking his fist and muttering, 'Meanies! Cheats! What's the world coming to? Tricking us . . .'

Now Eric arrived, Mrs Kishen's envelope in his hand. 'Aunty, you left the money behind and took the wrong envelope. Luckily, I saw it there.'

'Yeah, luckier than you know,' said Amar with a smile. 'The thieves took the booby trap meant for you.'

Seeing Eric's bewildered look, Amar said, 'Well, it's a long and complicated story . . .'

The incident was in the evening news and, basking in the glory of being a hero, Amar asked his father, 'Dad, can you teach me more of this stuff from your schooldays?'



In a Spot of Bother

Amar was going on a five-day trip with his class, and his father came to the railway station to see him off. After the train left, Mr Kishen whistled like an out-of-practice thrush all the way to office. He had many plans for the five-day period of potential peace, calm and quiet. But something happened in his office that took away the sunshine from his life. He returned home that evening, morose and grouchy.

‘What’s wrong?’ his wife asked when he’d found fault with the tea, the snacks, the flowers in the vase, the colour of the stray cat and the headlines in the newspaper. When he’d got personal and said she was putting on weight and eating more sweets than were good for her waistline, she’d decided enough was enough. With a wife’s instinct for sensing such things, she knew she was merely the punching bag; the real cause lay elsewhere.

‘Everything!’ he fumed. ‘I suspect Mr Srivastava came to my office just to let off steam.’ Mr Srivastava was his boss and headed the main office but often paid surprise visits to the other branches. ‘What am I to do if his father-in-law is coming to stay with him for a couple of weeks?’ He seethed. ‘I believe his mother-in-law is visiting a close friend of hers in Delhi and her husband didn’t want to accompany her. He’s arriving tomorrow. Mr Srivastava says he’s a hypochondriac who will want to do a round of every specialist in town. He’s doubly annoyed because he’s bringing his precious Dalmatian with him. Mr Srivastava can’t stand dogs.’

‘Dalmatian?’ exclaimed Mrs Kishen. ‘Amar would have loved this. You know how he was nagging us to get one for him after seeing that movie on television?’

‘Oh, the one with a million Dalmatians? Yes, he would. Foolish idea! I still haven’t got their yelping out of my system.’

‘A hundred and one,’ Mrs Kishen corrected him. ‘Amar gets his habit of exaggerating from you.’

‘Yes, now you, too, start blaming me for everything,’ Mr Kishen barked at her. ‘I had enough of that from Mr Srivastava. He kept picking on me. And you

know what? He hinted that the promotion he's been talking about for some time now might not happen. I mean, just tell me, what does his father-in-law's visit have to do with my promotion? This is just too much. Just when I thought I'll enjoy some peace and quiet with Amar away, all this nonsense begins.'

'I hope Amar's all right.' Mrs Kishen looked anxious. Amar had managed to contract a bad cold and mild fever a few days ago, to his great alarm and to the dismay of his parents, who had been looking forward to a tranquil week. Medicines were poured into him with great eagerness and ingested by the patient with minimum fuss. When he had left, he seemed better.

'He'd better be. It'd be the last straw if he comes back now.'

Mrs Kishen's mobile rang at these prophetic words. It was Amar. 'Ma, I saw a spot. No, more than one.' There was no excitement in his voice; on the contrary, he sounded worried, a rare feeling for Amar.

'Spot? What spot?' His mother was puzzled. 'Picnic spot? Already? You must have just reached.'

'No, Ma. On me. I saw some spots on my body. I don't feel too good.'

'Oh no! Do you think you have chicken pox?' Mrs Kishen made an astute guess.

'But hasn't it been eradicated?' Amar asked.

'My poor ill-informed child, that's small pox. Do you feel very sick?'

'I've a headache and my cold's returned. Feel feverish too.'

'That sounds bad. I think you'd better come back, Amar, before you get too sick. Besides, you shouldn't spread the infection among your classmates.'

Mr Kishen was listening to his wife's side of the conversation with growing dismay. 'Come back?' he mouthed in desperation. 'No!' He waved his hand frantically from side to side to make his meaning clear.

'Yes,' Mrs Kishen said firmly, ignoring her husband's mute pleas. 'I think you're in a spot of bother. I'd like to speak to your teacher.'

Mrs Kishen arranged to have Amar sent home by the night train. He was arriving the next morning. 'Excellent,' Mr Kishen recovered his sarcasm. 'Just what the doctor ordered.'

'Good thing we've both had chicken pox, if that's what Amar has,' said Mrs Kishen. 'Otherwise we'd have to isolate him and so on. I'll meet him at the station and take him directly to the doctor from there.'

Mr Kishen looked pleased. 'That'd be good. I have some work to complete in

the morning before I go to the office. The slave driver who goes by the name of Srivastava has piled more work on to my plate.'

Mrs Kishen went to the station well on time the next morning, and Amar alighted, wearing a full-sleeved shirt, with the collar raised. He gave a wan smile. 'Hi, Ma. There are more spots on me now.'

She looked at her spotted dear with concern. 'Did any of the passengers spot the spots?'

'No chance. I remained on the top berth all the time with my sleeves rolled down, collar up and feet covered. Not even an ant knew I was there.'

Mrs Kishen nodded in approval. 'Come, Amar. Let's go to the hospital and consult the doctor straight away. After that we'll head home. I hope you aren't too hungry?'

'Hungry? I've no appetite at all.' An Amar without an appetite was like an egg without its yolk; this confirmed Mrs Kishen's fears, he really was ill.

At the hospital, Mrs Kishen and Amar completed all the formalities and waited outside the GP's consulting room. Amar sat next to an elderly man, who turned his piercing, suspicious eyes on him. Amar smiled. Then he began to sneeze—again and again. He sniffed, blew his nose loudly and turned to smile at the man again, but found the man had turned his back to him. He appeared to be holding his breath, as if he had recalled that he hadn't completed his yoga that morning. The man looked around for another seat but all were occupied. After an uncomfortable wait of ten minutes, during which the silence of the room was broken only by coughs, sneezes, sniffles, clearing of the throat, noisy expirations of breath and the nurse's announcements, Amar's name was called.



The doctor, a rather old man, gestured to Amar to sit down and asked what the matter was. Mrs Kishen took over and said, 'I think my son has chicken po—'

Before she could complete the sentence, the doctor leapt out of his chair, almost did a double somersault and retreated to the wall, practically imploring it to open up and swallow him. Pressed against it, he pointed to the far corner of the room and said in a quavering voice, 'There! Go there, there!' Intrigued by the old doctor's surprising agility and acrobatics, Amar jumped up to obey him.

Regaining some of his composure, the doctor muttered under his breath, 'Coming to see me with a contagious disease!' Turning to Mrs Kishen, he asked fiercely, 'How do you know it is chicken pox?'

'Spots, doctor,' Amar answered instead and pointed them out with pride. 'See, here, here, here and here. There too. Can you spot them? My chest, I'll show you, has some big ones. And my stom—'

'All right, that'll do.' The doctor shielded his eyes with his hands, as if the mere sight of the spots would give him the disease. Then, feeling a little ashamed of his behaviour, which didn't become a doctor, he explained, 'I've not had chicken pox before. That's what is worrying me. And now I'm an old man. I don't want to get it. The older you are when you contract this disease, the more dangerous it is. Yes, it is chicken pox.'

Mrs Kishen hid her indignation. *What a doctor!* she thought. Aloud, she said, 'But what's the treatment, doctor?'

'It looks like a mild attack. That's a good thing. This anti-viral medicine will stop it from spreading further. He must rest for a couple of weeks. The nurse will give you a chart with the details of his diet. Your name is? Ah, Amar. Amar Kishen,' he said, looking into the file. He quickly scribbled something on the prescription pad and ordered in a loud voice, 'Now go!'

They went. Amar opened the door and walked straight into the old man, who had been trying to eavesdrop at the door. Both of them involuntarily clutched each other for support and Amar's file went flying, scattering the contents. The man recovered his balance and picked up a paper. It was the prescription. He took one look, turned pale and, holding it by the tips of his fingers, dropped it from a height into Amar's hand. After they had chased down all the papers, Amar and his mother bought the medicines and returned home.

Mrs Kishen settled Amar into his room before going to the kitchen, the food chart in her hand. Mr Kishen was still in his room busy with his work. Half an

chart in her hand. Mr Kishen was still in his room, busy with his work. Half an hour later, Mrs Kishen was back in Amar's room, serving him the special food she had prepared. Mr Kishen entered, looking elated. 'Ah, Amar, how are you, son?' he asked, showing some belated concern. 'Did you meet an old man at the hospital?'

'Plenty, Dad. The place was crammed with old men. Or did you mean the doctor? Yes, he was an old man, a mean old man.'

'Well, the mean old man has done me a good turn. Mr Srivastava just called. It seems his father-in-law, Mr Siddharth, wanted to be taken to the doctor this morning itself. He felt he had caught a chill on the train—the AC was too cold. At the hospital, he was seated next to a boy who sneezed into his face all the time . . .'

'I didn't!' Amar protested indignantly.

'If you did, thanks. The right thing to do. And later the boy rammed into him and dropped the prescription. That I can well believe.'

Amar grinned sheepishly.

'Mr Siddharth stole a glance at the prescription, which said the boy had chicken pox. He got frightened. He was sure he would get it too. When he discussed this with the doctor, the doctor told him it's better to be careful and advised him to take the new chicken pox vaccine. The doctor was planning to do the same, I believe. The vaccine would take effect only after seventy-two hours, so there was still a risk he might have contracted the disease. The doctor suggested he could get admitted to the hospital and be there for a week or two. He could have a thorough check-up, get tests done, scans, the works. The hospital has a new wing with five-star facilities. Mr Siddharth was elated. He could now be a hypochondriac to his heart's content and that too under medical supervision.'

'So he's not going to stay with Mr Srivatsava?' asked Mrs Kishen.

'No, he isn't. Mr Srivastava is elated. There is elation all round. I'm elated too, and I'll tell you why. Mr Srivastava was waiting outside the hospital and saw both of you leave. And when his father-in-law said the chicken-pox boy's name was Amar Kishen, he realized who his saviour was. He's now talking about the promotion! But one thing's still bothering him. The dog. It won't be allowed in the hospital, and he and his wife hate dogs. It's already driving them nuts, he says.'

‘What dog?’ asked Amar, mystified.

His mother explained.

‘Wow, damnation, I mean Dalmatian! Dad, Ma, can’t he bring it here? I’ll look after it. I have to rest for two weeks, and your boss’s father-in-law will be in hospital for two weeks. Perfect!’ Amar perked up.

‘But how? You have chicken pox!’ his father protested.

‘So what? Chicken pox is not zoonotic.’

‘What tick?’ Mr Kishen looked confused.

‘Zoonotic diseases spread between species—between animals and humans. But the chicken pox virus doesn’t spread from man to dog. So the dog won’t get chicken pox from me, but I’ll get a lot of joy out of him.’

Mr Kishen looked at his son with newfound respect. ‘Are you sure? How do you know?’

‘That was my biology project, Dad. You can check on your phone if you don’t believe me.’

‘I’ll do that, just to make sure, not that I don’t believe you, Amar,’ he added hurriedly. ‘Then I can give Mr Srivastava an authentic source too.’

He brought out his mobile from his pocket and after a little while lifted his head, looking very happy. ‘Thank you, Amar. Mr Srivastava is now talking openly about my promotion and he even mentioned my annual vacation! He is over the moon. He asked me with gratitude dripping from his voice, “Are you sure you don’t mind?” I told him, “I have a spotted son at home. Why not a spotted dog too?”’

Amar and his mother laughed.

‘I also found out that Dalmatians have hardly any oil on their coats,’ Mr Kishen continued. ‘So they lack a doggy smell and stay clean. Now I guess I won’t mind having one at home for a couple of weeks. I might even enjoy it. One dog won’t yelp much and I haven’t had a dog since I was a boy.’



The Swimming Champion

Amar and Kiran made their way to the swimming pool, looking more serious than they normally did. The swimming pool was a new and proud acquisition of the school and lay beyond the cricket field. This year, Mr Jagmohan had offered to host the annual inter-school swimming championship at the new swimming pool and the All Schools Swimming Association had gratefully accepted the proposal. The local swimming pool had been drawing a lot of flak and Mr Jagmohan's offer had come as a godsend. The students of Green Park School, too, were fired up until it hit them that there was one serious problem: they had no champion swimmer to boast of.

'This is pathetic!' Amar exclaimed, standing a safe two hundred yards from the pool. 'Just imagine! Our school has millions of boys and two girls and not one can swim a decent length in a decent time! What's the world coming to?' He twirled the towel he was carrying, dropped it and promptly tripped over it, landing a good two feet away.

'Classy dive, Butter!' Kiran gave his friend a helping hand. 'A little more practice and we'll have a land-diving champion.'

'Ha! You never know. There might be such competitions in the Olympics soon!' Amar laughed, distributing sand from his person to everyone around. 'I had some hope when Jizan joined our school, but that guy seems to be suffering from hydrophobia.'



Jizan was a new boy, who had joined the school a week before and was in VIII B. He was a quiet chap, a boarder whose parents were in Dubai. His classmates made him feel at home and soon he became friends with everybody. Amar and his friends, who had made it their mission to discover a swimming talent in school, had been hopeful when they had heard about the new boy. But they soon found to their dismay that Jizan was not the fish they had hoped for but a mere crab that preferred to stay on the fringes of the pool.

‘You’re right,’ said Kiran. ‘Why, he turns green when he sees the water in the deep end.’

‘And that happens twice every evening,’ added Amar. That week it was the turn of all the students of VIII A and B to compulsorily use the pool for an hour in the evening. The boys generally heaped their clothes on a couple of stone benches nearby. Some boys, though, kept them on the spring board near the deep end. Since very few students ventured towards the deep end, they felt their belongings would be safe.

By this time they had reached the swimming pool and were hailed by the rest of their friends who were fooling around in the shallow end. Jizan was also there and gave them a half-smile. Their PT master, Mr Sunderlal, was urging Eric and Ajay to swim the length of the pool.

‘Let’s get Eric to dive from the deep end,’ Amar suggested. ‘He did it yesterday. I’m sure he’ll get a prize for the maximum water displaced on diving.’

‘If you call falling into the pool like a huge sack of potatoes diving,’ Ajay commented.

‘He would have been Archimedes’ blue-eyed boy!’ Kishore laughed. ‘He proves his principle right every time.’

‘Eureka!’ Amar exclaimed. ‘Why don’t we just take every boy to the deep end and shove him in? Swim or sink! To save himself he’d start swimming and, hey presto! Our Ian Thorpe or Michael Phelps would be born.’

Mr Sunderlal heard Amar’s words and got angry. ‘Amar! The last thing I want is boys drowning in my pool. Don’t you try such nonsense! Come on, everybody, be serious and start. I’ll time you.’

Jizan, who had turned pale while listening to this conversation, tried to slip away. Noticing this, Mr Sunderlal hailed him, ‘Jizan, what’s wrong with you? Get back into the pool!’

Get back into the pool.

‘Sir, I feel sick. I think it’s something I ate. Please let me go back to the boarding.’

Mr Sunderlal looked keenly at the trembling boy who really looked sick and said, ‘Hmm, all right, go and take some rest. But remember, no excuses tomorrow.’ After Jizan left the scene, the teacher remarked, ‘That boy seems to be mortally scared of water. I must try and help him get over his fear. But first things first. The competition’s worrying me. How can I tell Mr Jagmohan that not one of the boys in the school has a chance of winning a prize?’

He wrung his hands in despair. Amar consoled him, ‘Not to worry, sir. We’ll try our best not to come last.’

That weekend Kiran and his family went to their native village, Haryali, to visit Kiran’s grandfather.* As they sat around talking after supper, Kiran mentioned the swimming competition. ‘Grandpa, did I tell you about our fabulous new swimming pool? Our school’s hosting the inter-school swimming championship!’

‘Lucky for you, then, that Jizan’s there,’ said Grandpa.

‘Jizan? How do you know Jizan? And why lucky?’

‘Jizan’s grandfather lives in Haryali and is a very good friend of mine. I know Jizan too. Why, that boy’s the most amazing swimmer! He’ll win you all the prizes.’

Kiran looked at him sceptically. ‘I think we’re talking about two different boys, Grandpa. Jizan seems to hate water like a cat. He never even steps into the shallow end if he can help it. You must have some other boy in mind.’

‘Nonsense! It’s the same boy all right. Why, it was I who recommended your school to his parents. Didn’t he ever mention Haryali or me?’

‘He’s in another division, Grandpa, and he’s rather shy. We’re just getting to know him. But he can’t be a swimmer. No way!’

‘Of course he is. He’s a natural in the water. In any pond, river or even the sea, he can beat the best. He dives beautifully too.’

‘Then why does he behave as if he’s scared of the pool?’

‘I’m equally puzzled, Kiran. Anyway, I’ll be meeting his grandfather tomorrow. Let me find out.’

The next day, Grandpa told Kiran the story behind Jizan’s fear of the pool. ‘A couple of years ago, while he was standing near a swimming pool, someone

accidentally pushed him in at the deep end. He hurt his head, lost consciousness and almost drowned. After that he developed a phobia for the swimming pool. He's not afraid to swim anywhere else, in fact loves to do that, but a swimming pool revives those near-death memories and he hates it.'

'What a tragedy for us,' sighed Kiran.

On Monday morning, when Kiran and Amar walked towards their classroom, they saw a crowd of boys in front of VIII B with Jizan at the centre. Some VIII A students were in the periphery, stretching their necks to get a better view of something. Eric waved to Amar and Kiran on sighting them and said excitedly, 'Hey, Jizan's father sent him a super watch from Dubai. He's passing it round. It's a Casio Pro Trek and has innumerable features—it can read the temperature, the pressure, the altitude, can gauge the possibility of rain, has a digital compass too and a hundred thousand other features. It's solar-powered and has a light titanium strap.'

'Wow!' exclaimed Amar. 'Are you sure it can tell the time?'

The sound of the bell sent everybody scurrying to their respective classrooms. During the lunch interval, Kiran filled his friends in on the information he had gathered about Jizan.

'How sad!' mourned Ajay. 'All those prizes are so near, yet so far.'

'I'd have tried to talk Jizan out of his fear,' said Reshmi, 'but Minu and I have a debate competition this afternoon.'

'Let's go and look at his watch, at any rate,' said Amar, and they went to VIII B and had a wonderful time trying out its features.

In the evening, as the boys gathered at the swimming pool, Amar and Kiran accosted Jizan, who was as usual hovering near the edge. 'Jizan, you never told me you are from Haryali!' said Kiran. 'That's my native place too.'

'I know.' Jizan looked abashed. 'I wanted to tell you but . . .'

'Is it because of the swimming pool incident?' Amar butted in.

Jizan nodded. 'I just can't seem to get over my fear of the pool. I try not to look into it, but if by chance I do, I feel that the floor and the water are coming up in a menacing surge to attack me, to engulf me, to swallow me.' His fear made him eloquent.

'Good choice of words,' approved Kishore.

'That's only your imagination, Jizan,' said Ajay.

'Come on, Jizan! We'll help you. Let's go to the deep end. You can dive and

we'll cheer you on. I bet you'll get over your fear,' Amar suggested.

Jizan looked terrified and stammered, 'Nnnno, no . . . p-p-please don't make me s-s-swim there!'

Eric, meanwhile, had noticed a dark cloud in the distance and began studying the sky like an amateur weather forecaster. Soon he announced, 'Looks like rain.'

'Oh, I hope not,' said Amar, agitated. 'We have an important cricket match early tomorrow morning and I don't want it rained out.'

'Why don't we find out from Jizan's watch?' suggested Kiran.

'Good idea!' said Amar. 'Where's it, Jizan?'

'In my trouser pocket. My trousers are on the springboard. You can take the watch from there.'

'Sure thing! Race you!' Amar shouted to Kiran and took off towards the deep end from the side of the pool. Kiran huffed and puffed beside him but actually managed to overtake him as they reached the springboard.

Kiran found Jizan's trousers and as he fiddled with them, Amar grew impatient and with a 'Here, let me try,' snatched the trousers from him and pulled the watch with some force from the pocket. The effort sent the watch flying into the pool.

'Oops!' Amar exclaimed in dismay.

Jizan watched in horror as his watch dropped into the water and, without a second thought, leaped into the pool and swam furiously to the deep end. Everyone turned their attention to this exciting drama and some boys began hurrying to the other end of the pool. As the spectators watched with bated breath, Jizan disappeared underwater.

'Jizan!' shouted Amar, his heart in his mouth. There were no ripples in the pool. All fell silent.

'Here!' Jizan popped up without warning, spitting out water and twirling his watch. The relief was palpable and the boys greeted the swimmer with loud cheers. Jizan grinned from ear to ear as Mr Sunderlal, who had timed him, exclaimed, awestruck, 'My goodness, fifty metres in just thirty-five seconds! Why, we might have a national champion in our midst!'

'Maybe even an Olympian, sir,' said Amar, thankful that things turned out well in the end. 'Jizan, the way you Thorpedoed to you watch was amazing!'

Jizan, who had swum back to the shallow end, grinned. 'And your dropping

JIZAN, who had swum back to the shallow end, grinned. And your dropping the watch into the pool was most providential.'

'How's the watch?' asked Kiran.

'It's fine, I'm sure. It's waterproof. I didn't want to lose it, and forgot everything else. Thanks to Butter here, I think I've finally got over my fear of the swimming pool.'

'Hear! Hear!' said the boys in a chorus as Jizan blushed and smiled shyly. He checked his watch and said to Amar, 'You'll have your cricket match. It's not going to rain after all, says my watch.'

Needless to say, Jizan became the swimming sensation at the competition and swept away all the prizes. When he was being crowned swimming champion, a loud cry rose from the huge crowd of Green Park students, 'Three cheers for Jizan, our own Thorpe-Phelps! Hip hip hooray!'

Eric and Kiran whispered to Amar, 'And three cheers for our own Butterfingers, who made this miracle possible!'



Russel's Cap

Amar and Kiran were on the bus to Haryali, Kiran's native village. Their holidays had begun, much to the dismay of Amar's father who believed that time was passing too quickly for comfort. When Kiran invited Amar to spend a couple of weeks with him at Haryali, permission was given with ill-concealed relief and joy.

The bus got more and more crowded and the boys, who had begun the journey on a near empty bus and chose to sit at the back, soon found themselves forced to abandon their interest in the scenes outside and pay attention to matters of self-preservation. They realized that they had made the wrong choice in seats for, being close to the entrance, they were swamped by passengers of all sizes and smells. Their energies were directed towards pushing people off their shoulders, ducking from sharp corners of suitcases and shielding themselves from bags, baskets and babies. It was while Amar was involved in returning a squalling baby to its rightful owner that something caught his eye.

'Hey, Kiran, look who's there, right in front!' he said, trying at the same time to rescue his hair from the tightly clenched fist of the baby. 'That unmistakable earring! I can't believe it, it's . . .'

'Russel, the leader of the Heebie Jeebies!' completed Kiran in an awed voice. 'Yes, you're right, Butter, it is him! What's he doing on this bus? Is he hiding from someone? See how the peak of his cap hides his face! Where do you think he's going?'

Speculating on Russel's plans and craning their necks to get better glimpses of him occupied them for the rest of their journey. They couldn't believe their eyes when the bus stopped at Haryali and Russel alighted. They tried their best to reach the exit quickly, but too many obstacles hindered their progress and when they stepped out they saw Russel get into an old car and drive off. They heard a stranger, who had also got off the bus, say to his companion, 'That's the man we must get.' The boys looked at each other, shocked.

Quite oblivious to all this, Kiran's grandfather greeted the two boys with a

warm hug. 'Aha, boys! Welcome to Haryali. Looks like you were put through a threshing machine! So how are you, Butterfingers? Dropped anything in the bus?' Amar grinned.

'Whose car is that?' Kiran asked, pointing to the car that Russel had taken.

'Srinivasan's. He has a farmhouse where he takes guests. Come on, boys, to the cart.'

The next morning Amar woke up early, unusual for him, but he was eager to learn what was done on a farm. He went with Kiran to Grandpa, who was feeding the cows. 'Here, Amar,' Grandpa instructed the boy, 'toss these bundles of hay gently to the cows.'

'Grandpa, will you teach me everything?' said Amar, excited, flinging the clumps of hay like missiles at the cows. 'I want to feed the hens, collect the eggs, milk the cows, take the goats to graze, draw water . . .'

Grandpa laughed. 'Easy, easy! I like your enthusiasm. But let's do everything leisurely. Milking cows and drawing water need practice. They only look simple. Now you go and fetch the eggs. That shouldn't be a problem.'

A little later, Amar returned, rubbing his hands in pain, with no eggs in the basket.

'The hens were sitting on the eggs, Grandpa. They refused to move and when I pushed them, they pecked me.'

'Haha!' Grandpa laughed and Amar looked sheepish when he realized he had gone to the wrong coop, where the hens were brooding.

Later that morning, the two boys took the goats to graze by the hillside. When they approached the hill, they noticed a figure sitting right on top. The peaked cap was unmistakable and the gold earring glinted in the sun. It was Russel.

'Look, Butter!' Kiran pointed. 'There he is! Let's go meet him.'

At that moment, they noticed two men moving stealthily towards the hilltop. They were the strangers.

'Russel's in trouble!' exclaimed Amar. 'Time for action! Let's lead the goats from the other side and make them butt the rogues when they least expect it.'

They matched action to words, and soon the two men, suddenly finding themselves swamped by goats, muttered oaths and ran for cover, giving the boys dirty looks. Hearing the cacophony that sounded a lot like one of his popular numbers, Russel stood up and looked curiously in the direction of the sound. The boys soon reached him.

‘Hi, guys!’ said Russel hoarsely.

‘What’s happened to your voice?’ asked Amar with characteristic candour.

‘I’ve been ill. Lost my voice for some time. That’s why I’m here. I’ve been asked to take complete rest at a nice quiet spot. I’ve not brought my phone either.’

‘Oh, we are so sorry. We don’t want to disturb you. But we are great fans of yours,’ gushed Kiran.

Russel laughed, looking pleased. Recognition and adulation on top of a lonely hillock wasn’t an everyday occurrence.

‘That’s all right. It’s nice to talk to people. I’ve got pretty bored of myself, haha! But, look here,’ he said, looking closely at Amar, ‘you look a little familiar.’

‘You adopted my hairstyle once, after a performance in my school,’ Amar jogged the singer’s memory.*

‘Ah, yes, yes.’ Russel smiled as he recalled that event. ‘We did borrow your style, and pretty eye-catching it was too, though our mothers threatened to disown us. After that we shaved off our hair completely. That’s how it is now. When I fell sick, the doctor advised me to protect my head. Hence the cap. Now my cap and I are inseparable. Nice place, this, though a little too slow-paced for my taste.’

‘Maybe, but be careful,’ warned Amar, sounding mysterious.

They heard Grandpa calling out to them and, bidding Russel a hurried goodbye, they raced down. Grandpa wanted Amar to watch him milk the cows. After that he went to draw water and the two boys watched, fascinated.

‘It looks so easy, Grandpa,’ said Amar. ‘Let me try.’

‘No, Amar. It needs some practice.’

Amar looked so disappointed that Grandpa allowed him to help him pull up the bucket of water. The next few days passed in a flurry of farm-related activities. The boys didn’t come across either Russel or the men, though the whole incident continued to trouble them.

One evening, as they were walking along the road, the weather turned stormy without warning. The wind blew fiercely, the cold air cut into them. Black clouds came from nowhere and suspended themselves threateningly overhead. Just as they quickened their pace to reach home, it began to pour. A car going in

the other direction slowed down and the boys recognized the two strangers through the glass window.

‘Look, Butter! They’re leaving the village. Let’s hope Russel is safe.’ The worried boys ran home, drenched. They wanted to tell Grandpa their fears, but didn’t get a chance, since the sudden rain had prompted him to take care of many things.

It continued to be very windy the next day. The boys were about to set out for Srinivasan’s farmhouse when Grandpa asked Kiran to help him with the cows, who seemed very restless.

‘Wait for me, Butter. Don’t go on your own. I’ll be with you soon,’ said Kiran.

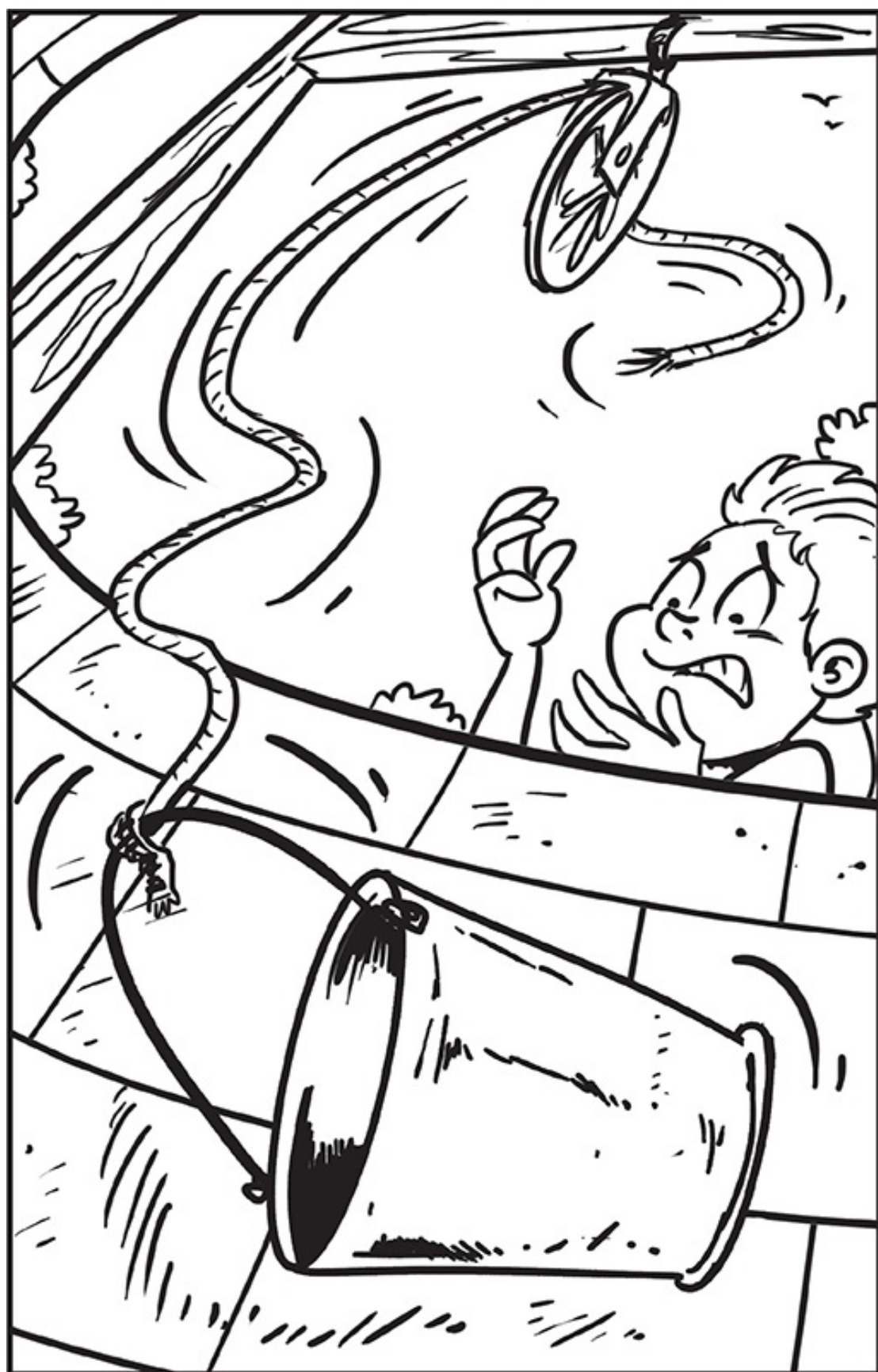
Amar waited for some time before making his slow way to the farm. As he walked along the road, he noticed that the roadside well, generally a busy place, was invitingly free of people. The urge to use this golden opportunity to draw water got the better of his desire to be a good Samaritan. He grasped the rope and threw in the bucket at the other end, loving the sound of the creaking pulley and the feel of the rope slithering like a rocket through his fingers. When the bucket hit the water with a splash, he smiled with satisfaction, a smile that soon turned to a grimace of horror when the rope slipped from his hand and accompanied the bucket into the well.

‘Oops!’ he gave his trademark exclamation and, dismayed, peered into the well. What he saw stunned him. Thinking he must be imagining things, he looked again. Yes, there could be no doubt. It was Russel’s cap floating in the well.

He panicked and sped to the farm, shouting, ‘Murder! Dead! Drowned!’

Grandpa, Grandma, Kiran and some farmhands crowded around Amar as he said between gasps, ‘He’s been murdered. No, he’s been killed!’

‘Same thing,’ someone wisecracked. ‘But who’s been killed?’



‘Russel. His cap’s floating in the well. He’s fallen in. No, he’s drowned. He killed himself!’

‘Come on, Amar, steady yourself.’ Grandpa put his arm around the frightened boy. ‘Let’s go and see what can be done.’

They rushed to the well and sure enough, the cap was there, floating pathetically for all to see. Just as Grandpa was making arrangements for a man to go down into the well, one of the men who had brought along a rope with a bucket, flung it in and after some effort, drew up the cap.

‘Oh, poor Russel! Poor Heebie Jeebie!’ mourned Amar, cradling the soaked cap like a baby.

‘Oh, thank goodness you’ve found it!’ A hand plucked the cap from Amar. It was Russel.

‘Russel! You’re alive! You aren’t a ghost, are you?’ asked Amar, feeling his hand to confirm its solidity.

‘Of course I’m alive. I lost my cap, and now you’ve found it for me. Thank you very much. You’ve no idea what’s in it.’

‘Let’s go back home and Russel can explain everything,’ said Grandpa.

At the farm, Russel told them what had occurred. ‘Yesterday two men came to meet me. They are producers and had somehow managed to trace me. They offered my rock band a wonderful contract for a performance abroad. They also gave me a handsome cheque. I prefer cheques to money transfers. I decided to leave this morning since I’ve recovered completely. I’d kept my cheque in my cap . . .’

‘What!’ Grandpa exclaimed, amazed.

‘Yeah, look!’ He showed a miniature zip running around the protruding peak of the cap and unfastened it to reveal a secret opening protected by two layers of plastic, in which nestled the cheque. He took it out and put it into his bag.

‘Experience has taught me that one must keep money, cards and important papers in the least likely place,’ Russel explained. ‘I’ve discovered that the cap’s peak is one of the safest places. But not quite, as I discovered today. This morning I took the bus. I had a window seat and the breeze lulled me to sleep. I think my cap was blown away but I discovered it was missing only after a long time. I didn’t know where to search for it, but I thought I’d begin from here. So I came back. I never thought I’d find it. Looking for it was like looking for a shell in the ocean.’

in the ocean.

‘Not when Butterfingers is around!’ said Grandpa, smiling.

‘You said it!’ Russel patted Amar on his back. ‘You can keep this as a memento and token of gratitude.’ He signed the wet cap with a flourish and presented it to Amar. Amar, at a loss for words, promptly dropped it.



A Sartorial Adventure

As Amar and Kiran sauntered into school one morning, they were hailed by an excited Eric. 'Hey, guys, heard the news? Our hockey team won the cup but lost the hockey sticks!'

'What's that again?' asked Amar.

'Don't talk in riddles, man!' exclaimed Kiran.

'I'm speaking plain and straight!' Eric responded, looking pleased, for this was just the reaction he had hoped for. 'Our guys won the tournament but lost the complete hockey equipment in the train.'

'How did they manage that? But then those jokers are capable of anything. Did someone steal the sticks? A hockey-stick thief! That's a new one. Which thief would want hockey sticks?' Amar rolled his eyes.

'Give me your money, or wham! I'll smack you one with this stick!' said Kiran, tapping Eric on his head with a roll of paper that was his social science project. 'Useful weapons for a hold-up.'

'Or for a murder,' Amar added, his sense of the macabre roused. 'Wham! Bang!' He took possession of Kiran's sheaf of papers and gave Eric's head a succession of rapid-fire thwacks.

'No, no, I don't think they were stolen,' Eric clarified with a laugh, seizing the much-maligned project from Amar's hand. 'What I heard was that the bag with the sticks was close to the door. The train was overcrowded; there were many people huddling near the door. Someone threw the bag out to make room to sleep.'

'Haha! Ingenious! The whole family gets a good night's sleep with the big fat bag out of the way. So funny!' Amar laughed, only to subside quickly when an annoyed voice behind him snapped, 'Not funny at all, Amar!' It was Mr Sunderlal.

Mr Sunderlal had accompanied the hockey team and felt responsible for what had happened. It was he who had suggested the bag be left at the door since it was too huge to be shoved under any berth. Though at the previous station a lot

of people had rushed into the reserved compartment and stationed themselves at the door, he thought it was a temporary situation because it had been a two-minute stop. He had great faith in the TTE's powers and believed that when the uniformed gentleman appeared on the scene, he would shoo away the passengers with unreserved tickets and the bag would be secure in its solitary splendour at the door.

Kishore, a reserve player of the hockey team, was present on the train, and ever cautious, he had expressed his doubts. But Mr Sunderlal had said, pre-empting Amar's recent opinion, 'Which thief would want hockey sticks?' and brushed his objections aside. So the white bag had stood there like a large, out-of-shape ghost and the next morning, it had disappeared. A man seated close to the door had said he thought it had been thrown out into the wilderness. He was almost asleep at that time, he had added hastily, before he could be blamed for anything. For Mr Sunderlal and the team, all the joy of winning the coveted trophy had evaporated when the loss was discovered.

'Sir,' said Amar, recovering his voice and his optimism, 'isn't it time we got new equipment? What the team had been playing with was such old, ancient, Neanderthal stuff, actually. It's a miracle they got the goals in without the sticks breaking off and won the trophy. This is a blessing in disguise.'

'Try telling that to Mr Jagmohan.' Mr Sunderlal sounded bitter. Mr Jagmohan hadn't minced any words when he'd learnt about the unfortunate incident. 'Irresponsible, that's what it is, Sunder! I had been under the misguided notion that you were sensible. Leaving a bag of precious, expensive hockey sticks near the door of a train, of all places! You might as well have gifted them away to a passing street urchin. The school is cash-strapped as it is. The parents aren't going to shell out money to buy new sticks at any rate. Ha! Nice reward after their children had won the trophy for the school!' He had ended his sarcastic tirade with a clever transfer of responsibility. 'It's all your fault and you'd better think up some solution or let the school do without hockey.'

The school was gearing up for the annual sports day that was round the corner. Nothing lifted the spirits of Amar and his friends like sports, and they threw themselves whole-heartedly into practising for the various events in which they were participating as if it were the Olympics. At the school assembly on Thursday, the day before the sports day, Mr Jagmohan announced that all the students should bring a pair of white trousers and a shirt to change into for the

students should bring a pair of white trousers and a shirt to change into for the evening ceremony that followed the sports competitions.

‘We have a surprise guest for the occasion, Mr Sidhant Roy, CEO of Good Luck, a famous sports goods company,’ Mr Jagmohan announced in a gruff voice, as if it was an unpalatable slice of bad luck. He hated these formal functions, where things very often went wrong. ‘Inevitable in a school that has Butterfingers in it!’ was how he always consoled himself. ‘I want Mr Sidhant to be impressed by our school and our students. He’s the new CEO and not too much is known about him, but I hear he’s rather hard to please and has very individual ideas and opinions. His company wishes to sponsor the sports requirements of a school and he’s yet to identify that school. You must all change into your spotless white clothes and be on your best behaviour. It would be excellent if he finds our school to his liking. Miracles can happen. Mr Sunderlal, as sports master, has a special responsibility to see to the success of the function. So has the sports secretary. Er . . . who is the sports secretary?’ he asked, frowning over his glasses.

‘Amar! Butterfingers!’ went the chorus.

‘Amar? Amar Kishen? Which foo . . . er . . . which idi . . . ahem, all right, as I said, miracles can happen. Amar, please meet me in my room after the first period. Now go to your classes!’

As soon as the first period was over, Amar went to Mr Jagmohan’s room, secure in the knowledge that no scolding or punishment would be waiting for him, and found Mr Sunderlal waiting there. Mr Jagmohan nodded curtly and without wasting any time, said, ‘Amar, since you are the sports secretary, you have to present the report. Please take great care with it. See that everything significant is included. Ask Sunderlal to help you. And, this is very, very important, see that your trousers and shirt are WHITE, PURE WHITE. I hope you know what that colour means?’

‘Actually, sir, white is not a colour,’ Amar clarified, inviting a classic glare from Mr Jagmohan.

That evening he told his parents about the sports day and the speech he had to prepare. ‘And I need a white shirt and a white pair of white trousers. Pure white,’ Mr Jagmohan said. I think the set I wore for my cricket match the other day should be fine.’

‘Fine?’ Shreya Kishen looked appalled. ‘You have changed its colour to

brown, Amar, and despite two washes in the washing machine, it still looks muddy!’

‘Permanent dust-and-dirt dye!’ Amar grinned. ‘So what now?’

‘Get him a new pair,’ said Mr Kishen. ‘What else? Nice thing, Amar, to tell us at the eleventh hour!’

The family set out to shop for a readymade set. They got a shirt that fitted Amar but the trousers proved to be a problem. Amar was tall for his age, and lanky, so no trouser fitted him perfectly. If the length was right, the waist was wrong, and if the waist was right, the length wasn’t. Mr Kishen was losing his patience and, finally, an exhausted Mrs Kishen said, ‘I think you’d better get one with the correct waist measurement and long trouser legs. I can shorten them to the right length.’

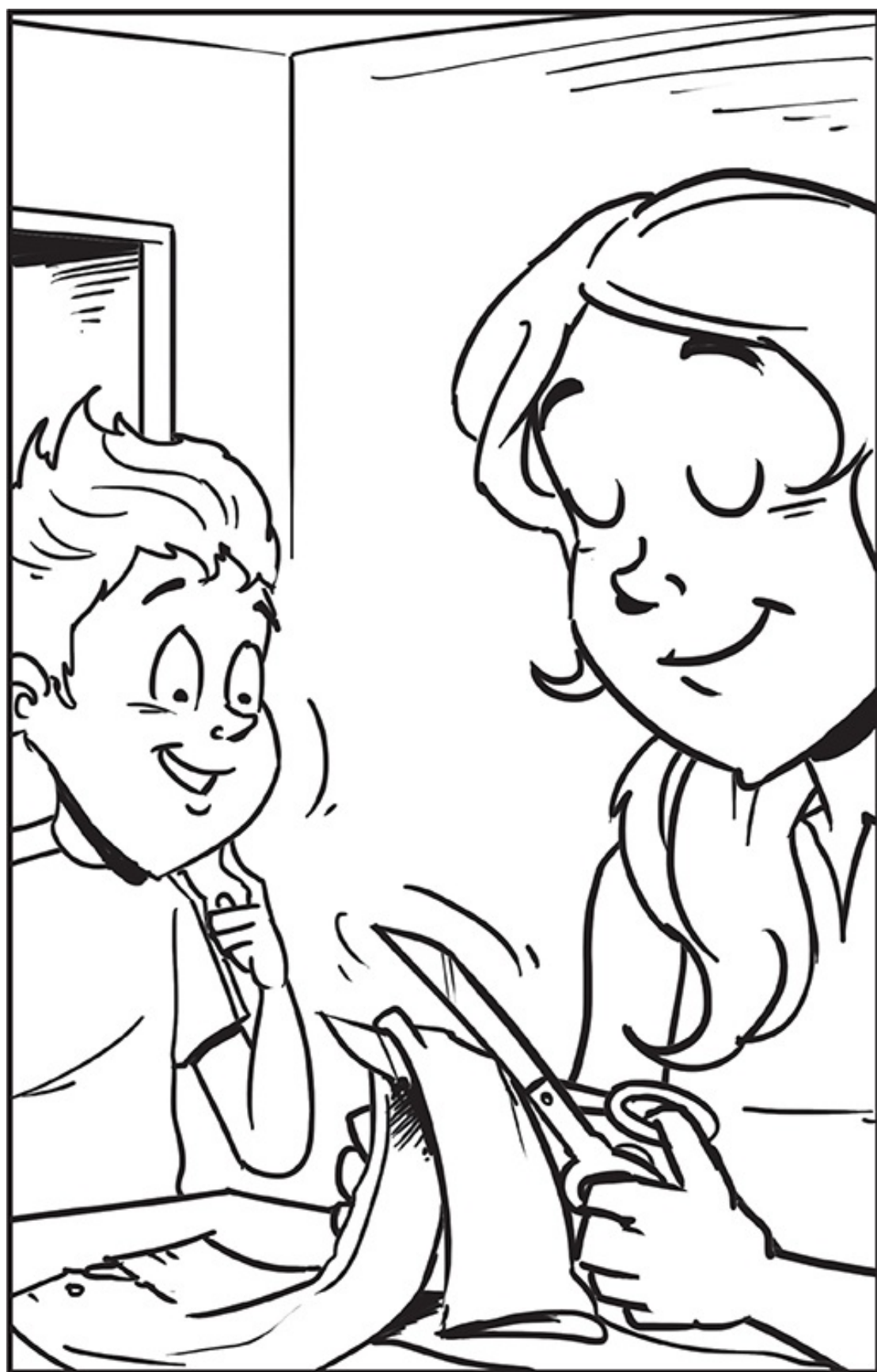
Finally they managed to find a pair whose trouser legs, according to Mr Kishen, would reach the other end of town. Once home, Amar’s mother took the correct measurement and, with Amar by her side, snipped off, with great expertise, the excess length of one trouser leg. Then she proceeded to tuck up and secure the edge with neat stitches as her son watched with admiration her deftness with her fingers.

‘Wow! Who will say this wasn’t done by a professional? Cool!’ Amar raved. Now his hands itched to do something. ‘Shall I help you, Ma? I know a little stitching from the needlework classes we had in class V. Or let me shorten the other leg at least. I’ll be careful with the scissors. Please, Ma.’

Against her better judgement, Mrs Kishen, mellowed by her son’s praise, nodded. ‘All right.’ She smiled. ‘Use the bit I had already cut to measure what needs to be snipped off.’

Amar held the trousers against him, the ends flapping about, and preened around as if he were a model on the catwalk, stopping only when his father startled him with a yell. ‘What are you up to, Amar?’

Amar dropped the trousers and picked them up with a mumbled ‘Nothing, Dad.’ He arranged one trouser leg flat on the table, placed the cut end over it and began to chop off the excess bit.



It was not as easy as it had appeared when his mother had done it, for the material was thick. Tongue sticking out, he set to work with great concentration and, finally, fingers aching, managed to cut it rather unevenly. His effort didn't please the artist in him and he was trying to pull out the loose threads when his mother returned. She took one look at her son's handiwork, took possession of the trousers and trimmed the jagged edge first before stitching the end neatly. 'Now wear it and see if it's okay,' she said.

'You bet it is. Oh no, I forgot the report! I'd better go and write it. Princi will skin me alive and drop me in boiling oil if I go to school without it. Not to worry, Ma, I'm sure the trousers are a perfect fit; you're the world's best tailor!' Rolling the trousers into a bundle, Amar rushed off to his room, paying no heed to his mother's exasperated words: 'Fold them properly, Amar. See that they are pressed and don't forget your shirt . . .'

Amar stayed up late and consequently woke up late too. Downing his breakfast in a gobble and a gulp, he elected to skip his bath—an easy decision. He stuffed the report into the pocket of his new trousers and, shoving them into a bag, raced out wearing his sports shorts and sleeveless shirt with his number on it. He was in quite a few events, including the relay. Everything went off without a hitch; he scrambled to the third spot in the 200-metre race and his relay team managed the second place, though he dropped the baton and had to go back for it. He was so much in the thick of things that he was one of the last to leave the field.

By the time he reached the changing room, the other boys were already in the hall, neat and tidy. The chief guest had also arrived. Amar turned out his bag only to discover he had forgotten his shirt. There was no one he could ask for help. Either he had to go shirtless or make do with the sweaty sleeveless green shirt. He decided on the latter and as he shook out his new but crumpled trousers, a further shock awaited him. One trouser leg was way shorter than the other! What magic was this? He soon realized with horror that in his eagerness to cut the right length, he had chopped off a length of the already altered trouser leg!

There was nothing to do but wear the mutilated trousers. He rolled up the longer trouser leg but it was the other that made his heart sink. It just about reached his knee. He pulled his sock high but it didn't help. If anything, it was more comical for his sock was a deep yellow and it wouldn't reach up to fully

more comical, for his sock was a deep yellow and it wouldn't reach up to fully cover the exposed leg.

When the announcement was made—'Reading of the report by the sports secretary, Amar Kishen'—a strange figure that looked like a modern-day Pied Piper slunk to the podium. The whole school looked stunned. Mr Jagmohan couldn't believe his eyes. *Mad! I always knew it!* he thought, rage darkening his face. *Now he's proved it.* With great apprehension, he sneaked a glance at the chief guest. The chief guest, who had been looking bored and had been preparing to take a light nap, was now sitting up, looking animated. He began to smile and then laugh.

Amar, not daring to look at anyone on stage or in the audience, focused all his attention on the report. And the principal got another shock when he heard Amar explain in exaggerated detail how the hockey team lost the hockey sticks. The reason was simple. Mr Jagmohan had asked him to mention everything significant, and for Amar that was one of the most significant events of the year. He also mentioned that the principal had said it was the end of hockey in school. Mr Jagmohan flinched. Amar described the school's loss of a cricket match because of his own dropped catches, the walkover the school's tennis team had given their rivals because they didn't get the repaired rackets on time and how all the teachers who'd taken part in the sack race had stumbled and fallen like sacks of potatoes.

'Hahaha! At last!' Mr Sidhant Roy laughed.

'At last what?' Mr Jagmohan agonized, certain the laughter was sarcastic.

After Amar's speech, it was time for the chief guest to deliver his address. Mr Sidhant Roy began without any preliminaries. 'I was wondering when I'd come across originality, individuality and a sense of adventure. I'd given up hope. Every school is producing nothing but clones. Every student is neat and tidy, everywhere the same old gushing speeches, same lists of achievements . . . I thought this school, too, would be the same. It appeared so at first glance anyway—all the children in sparkling white clothes, silent, disciplined.

'But, no, I realize that Green Park is different—unique and open. The secretary, what's his name? Amar! Yes, wonderfully strange sense of dressing, haha! I've not laughed so much in a long time. Good sense of humour, boy. And the honest report of the year's activities. Well, I don't have to look further. My company will sponsor the sports equipment for the school this year. The hockey

team can rest assured. Congratulations!’ Everyone cheered as Mr Jagmohan and Mr Sunderlal, not to mention the hockey team, looked relieved. ‘And Amar, accept this from me.’

He handed his bouquet to Amar and gave him a warm hug, sweaty T-shirt and all.



Amar Is Locked Out

Amar's father returned from the office on Friday evening in quite a flap and began to vent his feelings with an irritable 'Nuisance, I call it! I've to go tomorrow . . .' at the same time that his wife said, 'Sony's ill. I've to be with her tomorrow . . .'

'What!' exclaimed Amar. 'Both of you have to go tomorrow?'

Mr Kishen calmed down and asked, 'Eh, what's that? Sony ill?' Sony was Mrs Kishen's sister.

Amar's mother said, 'You've to go tomorrow?' Her question again coincided with his.

'Dad, Ma, I think I'll be the moderator; else you'll both be talking at the same time and no one will have any idea! Ladies first. Ma, take the floor.'

His father frowned while his mother, a faint smile on her face, said, 'This is serious, Amar, not a game. But yes, Sony needs emergency surgery for appendicitis and . . .'

'Wow! An operation? How lucky!' Amar exclaimed.

'Will you stop making these idiotic remarks, Amar, and allow people to complete what they are saying?'

'Sorry, Dad.'

' . . . I need to be with her tomorrow, the day of the surgery.'

'Now your turn, Dad.'

Mr Kishen looked exasperated and said, 'My boss wants me to be present at the meeting, I can't understand why! I've been slogging day and night over the project the whole week, the file's ready and Suresh from my office is going anyway. Why I have to go too beats me. I was planning to relax on Sunday . . .'

'And watch the football finals!' added Amar irrepressibly.

His father looked a little abashed and said, 'Yes, that did cross my mind, but I really do need a break. And if your mother has to go too, what about you? We can't leave you alone here, with all the robberies around. Maybe you can accompany your mother.'

‘No, Dad!’ protested Amar. ‘I want to watch the football finals.’

After some discussion, it was finally decided, very reluctantly on the part of Amar’s parents and rather eagerly on Amar’s, that he be alone in the house for a night. His mother would leave on Saturday morning and return on Sunday evening, and his father’s flight was on Saturday night so Amar would have to be alone at home on Saturday night. His parents were not happy for there had been a spate of robberies in the neighbourhood and though two of the three-member gang had been caught, one was still at large and very active.

‘At least you should change the lock on the front door,’ said Mrs Kishen to her husband.

‘Yeah, you’re right, any key fits in. Good thing you reminded me! Remember how we opened it the other day with a wire lying around when I forgot my key?’

‘That’s exactly it. Any fool can open it . . .’ she remarked unthinkingly while Amar stifled a giggle.

‘. . . and it would be child’s play for thieves,’ Mrs Kishen continued. ‘The police have recovered quite a bit of the stolen stuff, though the gold’s still missing. But my friends say that this end of town is safe now—the burglar seems to have changed his area of operation. There have been no burglaries hereabouts for two weeks.’

‘How do your friends know a burglar’s mind? Of all the silly . . .!’ Mr Kishen let the sentence trail off. ‘Anyway, tomorrow I’ll see to the lock.’

Early the next morning, Amar’s mother left after stocking the fridge with food for two days. In the afternoon, his father got a carpenter to change the lock and replace the flimsy old one with a very fancy, newfangled, durable lock. After the carpenter left, Mr Kishen demonstrated its workings to his son.

‘Watch, Amar. From the inside you have to turn the key like this till you hear two clicks. From the outside you just have to pull the door shut. It locks automatically and even the best burglar in the world can’t open it. At least that’s what the shop attendant told me. But you must be careful and see that you have the key with you when you are outside, else you’ll be locked out of your own house, haha!’

‘Yes, I’ll remember, Dad. Two clicks, and it shuts like a prison gate.’

The next evening after supper, his father left after giving him a string of instructions. ‘See that . . . Don’t forget . . . Whatever happens you mustn’t . . . Don’t . . .’

— — — — —
‘All right, Dad! Ma already told me the same things many times. Why don’t you trust me?’

As his father got into the car, he said, ‘You’re man of the house now.’

Amar heard it as ‘Are you man or mouse now?’ and began protesting, ‘What do you mean mouse?’ But the car was already on its way and he could only see his father’s hand waving to him.

‘Man or mouse? Mouse? How dare Dad say that? I’m man of the house and yesssss, I’m HOME ALONE!’

For an hour, he went about relishing his independence. He raided the fridge, eating what his mother had expressly told him to keep for the next day, then bounced hard on his bed, as if it were a trampoline, to try and reach the ceiling, stopping only when he went overboard with a thud. Relieved to discover he hadn’t done any serious damage to his ankles, he played book cricket against himself. His stomach rumbled, prompting him to go in for another helping of food. While carrying his dirty plate to the kitchen sink, he remembered his mother’s instructions to take the garbage out.

Grabbing the bag, he dashed out and the door banged shut behind him. The significance of the thud did not strike him immediately. He dropped the garbage in the bin and tried the door, but it wouldn’t open. Horrified, he realized that what his father had warned him against had happened. He had not taken the key with him and he was locked out! Not one to give up easily, he kept twisting and turning the doorknob, to no avail.



‘Now what?’ he said to himself. ‘What would I do if I were a burglar and could not enter through the front door? Try the back!’ He went there only to discover that his father had securely padlocked it from inside. He returned to the front, where the door loomed large and unfriendly—the same door that used to respond so willingly to his slam-bang methods so many times a day! The trees began to throw weird shadows against the street and, though Amar prided himself on his courage—‘I’m no mouse,’ he repeated to himself over and over again—he began to feel a little scared.

But soon his never-say-die spirit asserted itself. He surveyed his house with great curiosity from the outside and examined various possibilities. Finally, he decided to climb the big mango tree that grew by the side of the house. It would help him reach the parapet around the tiled portion of the roof. This would be the tricky part, for he would have to crawl over the tiles and go to the other side. From there, a small leap would take him to a tiny landing on the first floor, near the window of his room, a window that he hoped had not been latched properly. He knew, though his parents didn’t, that two of the bars of the window were loose. Regular testing of his strength on them had made them so.

As he climbed the tree, he stepped on a dry and brittle branch that gave way.

‘Whee!’ he gave an involuntary shout and went slithering down with a lot of noise until another branch broke his descent. The neighbourhood dogs woke up eagerly to the intimation of a lively night’s happenings and began barking with fervour. The yelping woke up some of the neighbours, who began to switch on lights and come out of their houses. Someone called the police.

Hardly daring to breathe, Amar froze on the branch, cursing his rotten luck. While waiting for the noise around to cease, he checked for injuries and found he only had a few scratches and grazes. Wiping his hands on his trousers, he resumed his ascent. He reached the top without further mishap. Taking a deep breath, he jumped from the tree and on to the parapet, barely managing to get his hands over the parapet’s edge. He hung there precariously like an out-of-form cat burglar, his heart in his mouth.

The dogs began barking again. Not daring to look down, he slowly managed to pull himself up and over to safety. He walked along the narrow parapet and, reaching the tiled portion without much ado, began to climb up. He reached the top after several failed attempts, since it had rained heavily three days before and the tiles were still clinnerv with a thin film of moss growing on them. Once he

the tiles were slimy, with a thin film of moss growing on them. Once he reached there, he began the descent to the other side, which became swifter than he had bargained for.

He had just placed his foot on the topmost tile when it broke and Amar lost his balance. Flailing his arms about, desperately trying to grasp at thin air, he went crashing down over the tiles, overshot the landing and flew right into a small group of people who had already gathered in his garden near the lily pond. Someone shone a torch, spotlighting his mad dive. He broke his fall on a man who had been looking up in shock. Thud! Both splash-landed in the pond.

‘Get him!’ shouted a spectator.

‘Ooh, help! Get your fat body off me!’ Amar said in a hollow, breathless manner, pushing the man away and plucking a lily from his mouth.

‘Amar!’ the ‘fat’ man spluttered. ‘I should have guessed!’ It was his father.

The neighbours helped father and son out. Mr Kishen, who seemed to be in considerable pain, didn’t realize he was holding something he had got entangled with in the pond. It was a plastic bag. The police arrived at that moment. They had found a man moving suspiciously down the street close by as they had made their way to Amar’s house, and they had nabbed him. It turned out to be the other thief.

‘Now we have to find the gold,’ the inspector said.

‘Ah, I think I’ve twisted my ankle! Inspector, I found this in the pond.’ Mr Kishen winced and handed over the bag.

The inspector opened it and found another bag inside it and yet another one inside that. He finally, and literally, struck gold. ‘The stolen gold! It’s here!’ he announced with joy. ‘So that’s why the burglar was headed here. They must have hidden it in the pond, hoping to get it later. Thank you, sir.’ He beamed at Mr Kishen.

‘I think you should thank Butterfingers, I mean Amar, my son. I don’t know how, but he’s at the bottom of this.’

‘I was at the bottom of the pond, anyway,’ said Amar, laughing, though he was now covered in bruises. ‘But, Dad, how come you’re here? Did you miss your flight?’

‘No, my flight’s delayed—it’s only at 11 p.m. now, and a good thing too, for I discovered I’d taken the wrong file and returned to get the right one.’

‘Mr Kishen! Mr Kishen! What’s the matter? What happened?’ It was Suresh,

his colleague.

‘Oh, Suresh, how come you’re here?’

‘I got a phone alert that the flight was delayed, so I thought I’d come here and we could go to the airport together. But what’s going on? You seem to have hurt yourself badly!’ Suresh looked concerned.

‘I think I have, among other things, twisted my ankle, if not fractured it, and dislocated an elbow.’

‘I think you should see a doctor right away! You certainly can’t come for the meeting.’

‘Ah, yes, I certainly can’t,’ said Mr Kishen, brightening. *Every fall has its silver lining.*

‘Don’t worry. I’ll explain to Mr Srivastava. He’ll understand,’ Suresh reassured him.

‘Thanks, Suresh, and please take my file too and present the project on my behalf.’

‘But how can you give the file unless you get into the house, Dad?’ Amar asked. ‘You can’t. We’re locked out. All this happened because I left the key inside!’

‘Don’t worry, Amar, I have the spare key with me.’

The next evening, as Amar and his father settled down cosily before the TV to watch the football final, Amar’s mother returned.

‘How come you are here?’ she asked her husband in amazement. Quickly the surprise turned to shock. ‘Goodness, so many bandages between the two of you! What’s been happening here?’

‘It’s a long story, and your son had a great role to play in it, but finally,’ Mr Kishen said, winking at his son, ‘all’s well that ends in the well, rather, pond!’



Kidnapped

A long weekend is inevitably followed by a reluctance on the part of students to go back to school. Amar was no exception to this rule; rather, he was a great votary of it. He woke up on Monday, poking his head out with studied slowness from under his sheet, like a snail peeping out of his shell after a delicious period of hibernation. In fact, he wouldn't have woken up at all if the alarm his mother had insisted on setting the previous night hadn't gone off near his ear like a squalling hen. He was woken up all right, but he didn't wish to get out of bed. Eyes closed, he muttered, 'Mmmm! How warm and cosy this bed is!' and stretched his arms out lazily only to find them being gripped by someone.

It was his mother. 'Amar! Come on, get up, quick, else you'll be late for school.'

He broke free and, flinging off his bedclothes in a hurry, leapt out of his warm and cosy bed.

'So, what's new?' commented his father, peeking into the room.

Amar caught sight of the corner of the newspaper he was holding and asked with his natural optimism, 'Any strike today, Dad? Any VIP dead? Any chance of a holiday?'

'Humph!' snorted Mr Kishen, withdrawing his head.

'Don't be silly, Amar,' his mother retorted. 'Another holiday after these four days? Go, get ready and make it fast. Breakfast's on the table. Such a big boy and doesn't want to go to school! Look at Umang!'

'Where? Where's Umang?' asked Amar. 'Umang! Umang! Where are you?' He pretended to look under the bed and inside the cupboard. He closed the cupboard with a loud bang and opened the table's drawers, one after the other. 'Gone!' Umang was Amar's neighbour, who lived four houses away and was a class II student of Green Park School.

'Stop fooling around!' said his mother, smiling faintly at his antics. 'Umang's always eager to go to school, unlike you. His mother was telling me yesterday he can't wait to take his new water bottle to school.'

‘That’s exactly it!’ Amar retorted. ‘He’s got a good reason. I’ve been asking for a new water bottle for centuries, but no, I’m asked to make do with an ancient one that’s beginning to leak.’

‘Don’t be silly, Amar! Leaking, indeed! You’ve lost three water bottles already this term. You’re a big boy and should learn to take care of your things. Now stop all this nonsense and get ready.’

‘I’m a big boy now, but when I wish to get home late, I’m a small boy,’ Amar grumbled under his breath. ‘I have a water bottle that looks like a squashed cucumber and actually leaks, but no one cares. I can’t take that specimen to school any longer, Ma. I might die of thirst one of these days and then you . . .’ But his mother didn’t wait around to listen to the rest of his morbid prophecy.

Ten minutes later, Amar was gobbling his breakfast in such a hurry that he was half-choking on it, when the doorbell rang. Mr Kishen, who went to get the door, returned almost immediately, scowling. ‘It’s Umang and his mother,’ he mumbled to his wife. He snatched up his briefcase in a flash and disappeared from the scene like an agile ghost.

Umang’s mother, Mrs Meera Mathur, came to the dining room, an anxious look on her face. ‘Has Amar left for school?’ she asked Mrs Kishen.

‘Not yet. He woke up late and has as usual missed his school bus,’ said Mrs Kishen matter-of-factly.

‘Thank goodness for that,’ Mrs Mathur looked pleased. ‘That means he’ll have to take a city bus to school.’

‘Yes, but why hasn’t Umang gone?’ asked Mrs Kishen, looking at the neat, spruce little boy standing patiently by his mother.

‘Umang had a problem with his shoes. They were pinching him, and by the time I could locate and polish his old pair, we were quite late. Could Amar take him to school? My husband’s gone to pick up a colleague who’ll be with us for a couple of days. Otherwise he’d have dropped Umang. And I have to fix breakfast. Umang’s father and the guest will be here any minute now and then they have to leave for the office immediately after breakfast. I hope Amar won’t mind?’ She looked uncertainly at Amar, whose face, while this long narration was going on, had got longer and longer. His expression made it clear that he definitely minded this intrusion.

‘Yes, I . . .’ he began.

‘Yes. of course he’ll take him.’ Mrs Kishen interrupted him hastily. ‘You will.

won't you, Amar?'

'That's so sweet of you, Amar!' said Mrs Mathur. 'Here's the money for Umang's ticket and here are his things—his bag, umbrella and water bottle. He'll carry his own bag. Bye, Umang, be good. Listen to Amar *bhaiya*.' She left the house after placing a resounding kiss on her son's cheek that he promptly wiped away.

'What does she mean "He'll carry his own bag"? Does it mean I must carry his umbrella and water bottle?' asked Amar, making a face.

'Why not, Amar? You're a big boy and can do that easily.'

'Why don't we take a taxi?' asked Amar. 'That will take us to school quickly and can carry all of Umang's stuff too.'

'No, Amar, you are too small to take a taxi by yourself.'

'Small now! An auto, then?' Amar suggested.

'No, I don't want you to go in a strange auto.' His mother shook her head. 'We've been hearing of kidnappings. Now go on, run off to the bus stop. Here's your money. Bye, Amar, Umang! Have a good day!'

Amar shook his head in a disapproving manner, stuffed the money into his pocket, adjusted his bag on his right shoulder and picked up Umang's water bottle and umbrella. The water bottle was in the shape of a football and captured Amar's interest. 'What an awesome water bottle! Cool! Where did you get it?'

'My uncle's gift. But I don't like its shape. I like cricket and I want a bottle shaped like a cricket bat!' Umang pouted.

'Fat lot of water such a bottle would hold,' Amar scoffed. He slung the bottle on his left shoulder, held the umbrella in one hand, reached for Umang's hand with the other and together they left the house. The little boy struggled to keep pace with Amar's long legs as Amar practically airlifted him to the bus stop.

They had just reached it when they sighted the bus in the distance. The moment it screeched to a halt, the crowd waiting for it rushed towards the door in a disorganized manner. Amar let go of Umang's hand to get the money from his pocket and as he thrust his hand in, someone gave him a hard shove from behind and he dropped the umbrella. When he bent to retrieve it, the water bottle slipped off his shoulder and rolled away.

'Oops!' he exclaimed, turning in circles to retrieve it for it was being kicked around by the frenzied feet of people trying to get on the bus. Impatient hands

now pushed, pulled and jostled him. A fat lady tripped over him, recovered her balance and, like an expert footballer, kicked the ball straight to his face. With a yowl of pain, he managed to get his fingers around the bottle's strap. He straightened up and, holding both the bottle and the umbrella awkwardly in one hand, he felt around with the other for Umang. Locating the little hand, he held it tightly and managed to scramble on to the already crowded bus. A few more people got in, the door closed and they were off.

'Phew! Just about managed it!' he exclaimed. 'Are you okay, Umang?' He glanced down to find it wasn't Umang but a strange boy who was looking up at him. Stunned, he asked, 'Who are you? Where's Umang? Umang!'

He shoved people aside in his desperation and twisted and turned to catch a glimpse of the bus stop. A further shock awaited him when he saw Umang being pushed into a car. Dismayed, he turned to his fellow passengers. 'That boy's being kidnapped!' he said hoarsely.

'Don't poke my ribs with your stupid umbrella!' was one response.

'Why an umbrella on such a pleasant day?' was another.

'Schoolboys with torture weapons!' a third voice joined in.

'Mr Conductor, please help!' he turned to the conductor, who had reached close.

'Don't thrust this hand grenade into my face!' the conductor said angrily, pushing the water bottle back.

'Tickets, please.' Mutely, Amar gave the money.

'Two tickets?' asked the conductor. Amar nodded.

'Lost your voice?' The conductor sniggered and pressed the tickets into his hand.

Amar's mind was in turmoil. Had Umang been kidnapped? Who had kidnapped him? And had *he* kidnapped an unknown kid? He looked down at the child, who seemed to enjoy being packed like a sardine in the bus. The boy was wearing the Green Park uniform and looked vaguely familiar. He must have seen him about school, Amar thought.

The bus soon reached the bus stop, and Amar and the strange boy got out. Amar looked at the boy more closely. He appeared a cheeky little fellow, wearing a crumpled uniform, no socks and unpolished shoes. His hair was tousled and he was empty-handed. Two front teeth were missing.

'What's your name?' Amar asked.

‘Won’t tell.’ The boy grinned, blowing air through the gap in his teeth.

‘What were you doing alone at the bus stop?’ asked Amar, dragging him along.

‘Ran away, ran away!’ he said and, tearing himself away from Amar’s grasp, scuttled off in the direction of the school. Amar gave him hot chase and caught up with him at the school gates. He was so engrossed in reaching the boy that he hadn’t noticed the crowd there.

‘Caught you!’ he said and looked up to see Mr Jagmohan and, wonder of wonders, the principal was actually smiling!

A man and a woman fell upon the boy, embracing him and showering him with kisses. ‘Bunty! Bunty! Who took you? Where did you go? Who rescued you?’ The boy wriggled out of the oppressive tentacles and pointed at Amar.

‘You’re a hero, boy! What’s your name?’ asked the man as the woman pinched Amar’s cheeks enthusiastically.



‘Amar,’ responded the hero, promptly dropping the umbrella.

‘Always a butterfingers! But well done, Amar!’ said Mr Jagmohan, sounding approving for a change, and went to the extent of patting him on the back. ‘Where did you find him? Smart of you to bring him to school!’

Before the bewildered Amar could say anything, the boy’s father, who had got the story out of the boy, said, ‘So that’s what happened! Bunty says he wanted to come to school on his own. He always wanted to behave like a big boy. So he just got into his uniform and left the house. We thought he had been kidnapped—his bag was at home. We didn’t think he’d have gone to school all by himself. He could very easily have been kidnapped. This good boy saw him at the bus stop and brought him to school. Your students are so responsible, Mr Jagmohan.’

Mr Jagmohan coughed. At that moment, Bunty’s father got a call on his mobile. ‘What? Well, that’s wonderful! Don’t worry about my son. He’s been found. I’ll come and explain everything.’ Turning to the others, he said, ‘Acting on my complaint, the police went into action. Three people were nabbed at the railway station, and they’ve confessed to the couple of kidnappings here. So that’s something good that’s come of this episode. But you gave us a heart attack, Bunty. I think I’ll take him home, Mr Jagmohan. We’ve all had enough excitement for the day. Thank you again, Amar. I’ll get your address from your principal and come to your house this evening.’

‘Everybody get back to class,’ ordered Mr Jagmohan.

In class, Amar was racked with guilt. Where was Umang? Had the kidnappers told the police where they were keeping him? Had he been found? Should he tell Mr Jagmohan the truth about what had actually happened?

Agonizing over what to do throughout the day, Amar had finally decided to go to Mr Jagmohan with his fears, when the bell rang and everyone swarmed out. And who did he see racing past his class but Umang!

‘Umang! Umang!’ he shouted, but the shouts were lost in the general tumult. He tried to give chase, but there were too many boys about, and by the time he could free himself from the crowd and run towards the gate, he could only catch a glimpse of Umang getting into a car . . .

He didn’t know whether to be relieved or worried, and remained lost in thought till he reached home, holding the water bottle and the umbrella in one hand to find quite a few people there

hand, to find quite a few people there.

‘Thank you for bringing the umbrella and the water bottle safe!’ said Mrs Mathur, bestowing a broad smile upon him.

Umang snatched the bottle from Amar. Amar took some time to figure out what had happened, but after some explanations, he finally understood the sequence of events. After Mr Mathur had picked up his colleague, he’d realized there was time to drop off Umang at school. He had called up his home and when his wife told him about Amar taking Umang to the bus stop, he had gone there. Umang saw the car and told his father that Amar had taken the bus.

‘Why did you take the bus, Amar?’ Mr Mathur asked. ‘We could have dropped you to school too.’ Amar merely smiled, still looking a little flummoxed.

‘But it was good he took the bus,’ said Bunty’s father, who was one of those present. ‘Thank you for taking Bunty to school. That was very responsible of you. Here’s a small gift.’ He gave him a parcel.

‘Thanks!’ Amar opened it to find a water bottle shaped like a cricket bat and smiled. He exchanged glances with Umang and then they exchanged bottles.



De-Stressed

‘Oh no, my exams are round the corner, my exams are round the corner!’ muttered Amar, pacing the drawing room like a hungry tiger in a cage. He was jittery because Mr Jagmohan, who had earlier announced that Monday would be a holiday for the whole school, so the students could use the day for revision, cancelled it on Friday without warning. Amar and his friends had made a timetable to study for the exams, taking into consideration the holiday on Monday. The students had believed that Mr Jagmohan, who had gone to meet Mr Vijay, chairman of the board of trustees, would be on leave on Friday. But Mr Jagmohan had unexpectedly returned to school during the lunch interval and was furious to find most of the students, from classes I to XII, playing on the grounds or in their classrooms without a care in the world.

‘I’m cancelling Monday’s study leave,’ he’d announced to the school over the public address system. ‘Exams are round the corner and what do I see? Everyone playing! Total lack of seriousness; shocking! Looks like the students have finished revising. Well, then, I’ve advanced the date of the exams to Monday.’ He was already in a bad mood because Mr Vijay wanted him to take his family around that weekend while Mr Jagmohan and his wife had made plans to visit a resort with friends. He felt much better after the announcement.

‘Lost one whole day!’ Amar muttered as he picked up the family photo from the side table, looked at it, made a face and almost dropped it as he put it back. ‘Oops!’

His father, who was busy working on his laptop, looked up impatiently. His son had been getting on his nerves for some time. But Amar didn’t even notice the annoyed glance. He had already turned his attention to the flower vase. His mother had just made a pretty arrangement with fresh flowers from the garden. He lifted the vase and tilted it to smell the flowers better. ‘Mmm, this is lovely! I can feel some stress flowing out of me.’

‘And I can see some water flowing out of the vase! Careful!’ warned Mr Kishen, jumping to move his laptop out of harm’s way.

Mrs Kishen came into the room at this moment, holding a newspaper in her hand. 'Oh, Amar!' she said, putting the paper down hurriedly to rescue the vase and then proceed to mop the floor. 'Why don't you go and study, Amar, instead of wasting time moping about? It'll do you no good. Anyway you've lost a day, there's nothing to be done about that. Having lost all that time, you should make the best use of what's available.'

'First time I'm seeing him nervous about exams,' observed Mr Kishen. 'I wouldn't have thought losing a day would make any difference to you, Amar.'

It wouldn't have but for the fact that Mr Shyam, Amar's class teacher, had threatened to keep him in every evening for the rest of the term if his performance didn't improve.

'If Amar's exams had got over, I could have taken him for a movie,' Mrs Kishen said, taking up the paper again. '*Sunlight in the Night* is playing. I've read very good reviews about it.'

'What? '*Sunlight in the Night* has been released?' Amar brightened up like the sun, but almost instantly his face took on the dark hues of the night sky. 'Exams, exams, horrible exams! Whoever invented them? How will I ever finish studying?'

'You have to *begin* studying to finish,' said his father. 'Listen, I have an idea.' He turned to his wife. 'Why don't you take Amar with you to see the movie anyway? It might de-stress him.' He could do with some de-stressing himself, and he knew that only Amar's absence could help him do that. 'Anyway, it'd take only a couple of hours, and he'd only use that time to grumble and complain and make a perfect nuisance of himself here. After a movie he might be in the mood to study.'

Mrs Kishen looked a little uncertain. This logic beat her. But she wanted to see the film, so she agreed. 'All right, Amar, go get ready. And we'll make a quick visit to the supermarket on the way back.'

Amar thought he must be dreaming. His parents were actually encouraging him to see a movie two days before his exams! 'You are the best!' he exclaimed and tripped over the rug in his hurry to race upstairs and get ready, very much his normal self now.

Mr Kishen heaved a sigh of relief and returned to his laptop. He now believed he could complete his work before the deadline.

Amar and his mother left on Mrs Kishen's two-wheeler. At the theatre.

Amar's mother asked him to wait near the gate while she went to get the tickets. 'This might take some time, Amar. Just look at the long queues! Stay here.'

'I told you to book online, Ma!' Amar grumbled as he waited, looking at the posters, then at the vehicles. He watched a quarrel between two cab drivers moderated by the gatekeeper. When that ended, he went outside. And what did he see walking towards him but a large and lovely golden retriever! Amar recognized the breed immediately for he had done an assignment on gun dogs and had mixed up a golden retriever's characteristics with a cocker spaniel's, much to his teacher's annoyance, and the resultant punishment had made him very familiar with the features and characteristics of both dogs. Of the two he preferred the golden retriever and was delighted to see one in the flesh. It was on a leash and his attention was so completely on the dog that he jumped when he heard a familiar voice exclaim, 'Amar!' He hadn't noticed it was his principal at the other end of the leash.

'What are you doing at the theatre, Amar?' Mr Jagmohan looked disapproving.

'My parents thought a movie might de-stress me, sir,' Amar replied, caressing the dog's head. It was a friendly dog and gave a happy bark. 'You took away a study holiday, sir,' he added, trying to look dejected.

'Looks like I shouldn't have given you the weekend either. Coming to watch a movie! De-stress indeed! Idiotic psychological notions! Are you waiting for someone?'

'My mother. She's gone to get tickets.'

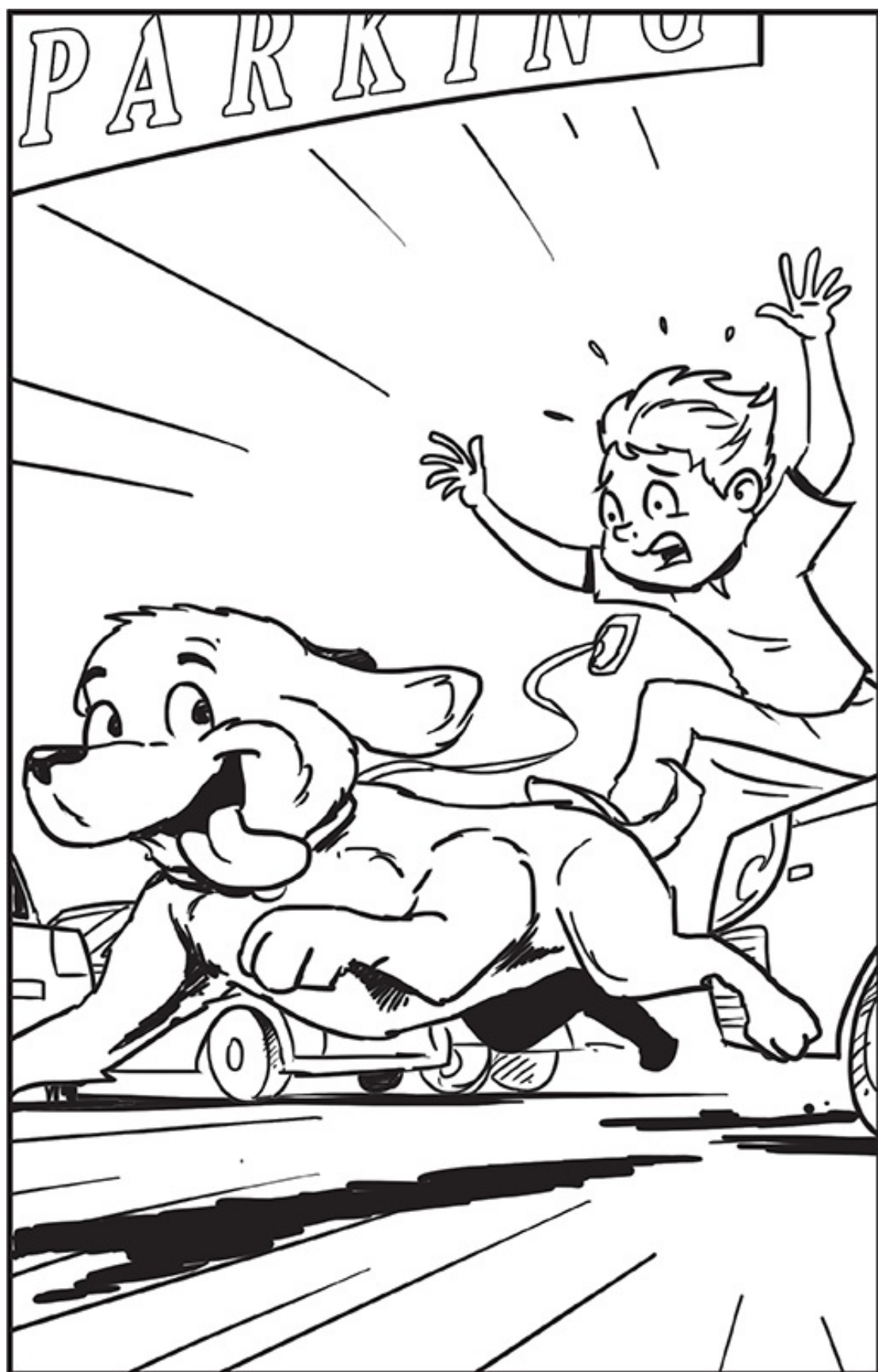
'Then she'll take some time.' Mr Jagmohan looked thoughtful and, after musing for a while, said, 'Amar, could you hold the leash for a while? I think our trustee Mr Vijay and his wife seem to have got lost. They went shopping and haven't got back. I came looking for them. It'd be easier without the dog.'

'Oh, sure, sir,' exclaimed Amar, delighted.

'Be careful, Amar. I'll be back soon.' Suppressing his misgivings, Mr Jagmohan entrusted Amar with the dog and disappeared.

Amar tickled the dog, who seemed to like it. Then he felt the urge to show off and took the dog for a walk. He was walking up and down with it when he noticed a little kid pick up a stone to throw at the dog. 'No, you don't!' he shouted, raising his hand warningly and dropping the leash.

Off went the retriever in a flash, into one of the queues that had overflowed all the way out of the theatre. It was just a friendly dog and, exulting in its newfound freedom, wanted to nuzzle against as many people as possible. But the people mistook its intentions and responded with screams. Some ran this way, some that and there was panic. All the shouting frightened the dog too, and it shot off into the underground parking area, and Amar raced after him. He didn't know its name, so he shouted after him, 'Golden Retriever! Come back!' His words echoed in the parking area. The dog barked in reply and there was the echo again. The dog began to love this game and ran faster and faster, barking all the while, so it sounded like the area was full of dogs, all named Golden Retriever, for Amar, not to be out-barked, was yelping 'Golden Retriever!' all the time.



Tiring of this at last, it came out of the parking lot and Amar gave it chase. He finally caught up with it and managed to get his fingers around the leash. But it was a big dog and began to control the proceedings. Soon it wasn't Amar walking the dog but the dog walking Amar. He pulled Amar along, leading him in a merry dance. A shocked Mrs Kishen and an appalled Mr Jagmohan, who had both reached the gate, watched as at last the dog slowed down and Amar was able to get the better of it.

'I should have known!' said Mr Jagmohan bitterly as Amar pulled the dog towards him.

Two people who stood beside him, and had been watching anxiously too, called out, 'Goldfinger! Good boy! Come here!'

'Amar! What have you been doing?' asked Mrs Kishen, holding out her right hand. Her tickets were in that hand, but not for long.

Snap! Quick as a flash, Goldfinger snatched them away and began to chew them. 'Loves paper!' Mrs Vijay laughed.

'Good punishment!' said Mr Jagmohan angrily. Mr Vijay had already expressed his annoyance when Mr Jagmohan had told him he had left the dog with his student and it hadn't improved the principal's mood any. 'De-stress indeed!' Mr Jagmohan repeated. 'Never heard such nonsense before! And please write 300 times, "I will not drop the leash and spread panic," and bring it to me on Monday.'

'But, sir, I have my exams on Monday!' Amar protested.

'This might improve your handwriting for the exams,' said Mr Jagmohan, unmoved, and left with his guests and Goldfinger.

Amar and his mother were able to retrieve two tiny bits of the tickets that had fallen out of the dog's mouth and went in to try their luck. But though there were many witnesses to what had happened, the usher believed in seeing the tickets, the whole tickets and nothing but the tickets.

'That's it, Amar,' said Mrs Kishen, trying to hide her disappointment. 'There's no point in wasting any more time. And the movie's started. Can't get fresh tickets either; sold out. Come, let's go! We'll stop by the supermarket on the way home.'

'Sorry, Ma,' said Amar in a small voice. They went to the supermarket and Mrs Kishen asked Amar to hold the shopping bag as she went to park the two-wheeler. There was no parking space and she had to take it far away. Amar

wheeler. There was no parking space and she had to take it far away. Amar whiled away the time by walking among the parked cars. And then he noticed a familiar number—Mr Jagmohan's car! So they, too, had come to the supermarket. And the golden retriever was inside the vehicle. It seemed to be nodding its head at Amar.

'Hey, Goldfinger! What a time you showed me! Good to meet you again.' He tapped on the window. Goldfinger's head lolled to one side.

'Haha, another game, eh?' said Amar, holding his own head at an angle and wagging his tongue. But, to his shock, the dog responded by collapsing on the seat and rolled off it to the floor.

'Goldfinger! Goldfinger! Get up!' Amar tapped on the glass desperately. He tried the doors. They were locked. All the windows were up. The dog lay still. Amar saw his mother approaching in the distance. He ran to her and, pointing to the car, said, 'The dog's in there. In danger! See what you can do, Ma!' Placing his faith in his mother's ability to work miracles at chosen moments, he rushed into the supermarket. Every passing second was precious. He ran from section to section, ramming into indignant shoppers like a distressed goat and leaping athletically over their baskets like a more self-possessed one, totally oblivious to the confusion he was creating as he searched for Mr Jagmohan and Mr Vijay. A brainwave and a few quick vaults that would have done a frolicsome kangaroo proud led him to the section that sold dog accessories, where he found them.

'Mr Jagmohan!' he screeched in relief.

'Amar! You again!' Mr Jagmohan looked black as thunder.

'Sir, come quickly. Goldfinger's fainted. He could be dead.' Amar's sense of the dramatic got the better of his diplomacy.

'What!' Mr and Mrs Vijay exclaimed. Mr Vijay asked Mr Jagmohan in a shaky voice, 'Didn't you leave the engine and the AC on? Have you killed my dog?'

Mr Jagmohan turned ashen and all of them rushed to the car with loud cries. A group of curious onlookers followed them to the door and watched the proceedings from that vantage point. Mr Jagmohan used the remote-control key and Mrs Kishen, who was by the car, opened the door and carried the unconscious dog, with some difficulty, out. Mr Vijay snatched it from her and cuddled it, making crooning noises. As everyone watched anxiously, Goldfinger made a low sound and stirred ever so slightly. There was a huge sense of relief.

It was alive! It was a healthy dog and very soon it had recovered. It loved being fussed over and lapped up all the attention eagerly.

‘Mr Jagmohan!’ Mr Vijay sounded stern. ‘If it hadn’t been for this smart boy here, my Goldfinger would have suffocated to death. It was so careless of you, VERY, VERY careless!’

‘Mr Jagmohan’s usually very careful, sir,’ said Amar, jumping to his principal’s defence. ‘Very careful.’ He felt sorry for him. It was the first time he was witnessing this rarest of rare scenes—his principal, the past master at ticking others off, actually being ticked off himself.

‘So, boy, how can I reward you?’ Mr Vijay asked. ‘Ask for anything.’

‘I think I know what the boy and the rest of the school would like,’ Mr Jagmohan, who had recovered his sangfroid at Amar’s words, butted in. ‘A study holiday on Monday. And another on Tuesday. I’ll announce this. The exams will start on Wednesday. And Amar, er, there’s no need for the imposition either.’

‘Thank you, sir!’ Amar gushed.

Mr Vijay turned to Mrs Kishen and said, ‘I’m very sorry Goldfinger ate your tickets. I’ll send tickets to you for another day’s show. For the whole family.’

Before Mrs Kishen could reply, Amar said, ‘For the day after the exams, Mr Vijay, and thank you very much. But now I have an extra day! What do I do with it? I’m stressed out again and need to be de-stressed.’

Mrs Kishen and Mr Jagmohan rolled their eyes in exasperation.



- * Refer to *Howzzat Butterfingers!*
- * Refer to *Clean Bowled, Butterfingers!*

* Refer to *Run, It's Butterfingers Again!*

* Refer to *Howzzat Butterfingers!*

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And to my dear readers, relatives, friends, students, well-wishers and fans of Butterfingers, my love and profound thanks. Much obliged!

Read More by the Same Author

Howzzat Butterfingers!



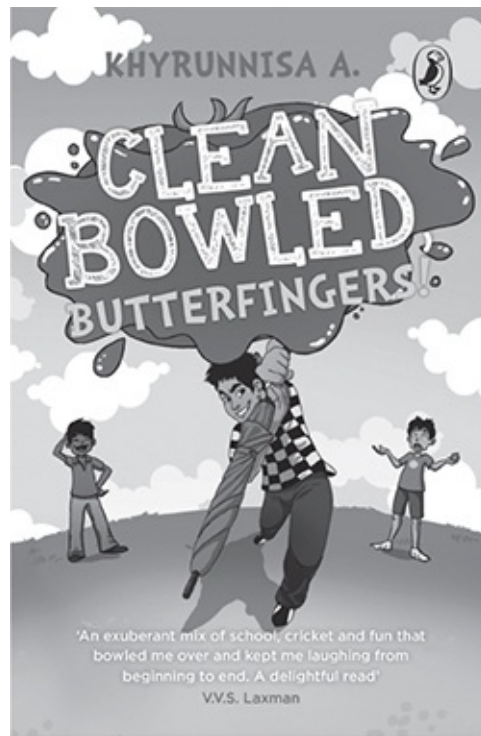
As the school term begins, the cricket team, of which Amar is appointed the vice-captain, has its task cut out—it has to win the Colonel Nadkarni Under-15 Inter-School Limited Overs Cricket Trophy. The team starts practising in earnest, but disasters follow in quick succession. Will they win the coveted trophy and save their school grounds—or will it slip from their grasp like a classic Butterfingers catch?

Goal, Butterfingers!



Obsessed with football, Amar comes up with a brilliant plan—a school football tournament where each class will play as a different country. But like all of Butterfingers’s plans, this, too, is doomed to face obstacles. With things hitting rock bottom, will Amar’s class finally lift the World Cup? And with Butterfingers as the goalie, does his team really have a chance?

Clean Bowled, Butterfingers!



What Amar really wants is to hold a cricket match to honour the memory of Colonel Nadkarni. And when the principal wants the teachers of Green Park School to be more healthy and active, Amar playfully proposes that teachers of the junior and senior schools play a match against each other—which actually gets accepted! How this turns out is anyone's guess!

The Misadventures of Butterfingers



Amar Kishen is not called Butterfingers for nothing. Wherever he goes, disaster hurtles along—but can things get any crazier? With Amar, they can! Join him as he whips up another tornado of trouble—tackling ghosts, pouncing on his principal, knocking a thief unconscious, stopping time and more!

Run, It's Butterfingers Again!



Everyone's favourite klutz, Amar Kishen, aka Butterfingers, has no problem getting into trouble . . . and that's the problem! Follow his mad escapades as he becomes a human cannonball, rides a runaway horse, takes up karate, acts as a Martian, oversees the great fall of china, tumbles into a river and tries his hand at fencing, with hilarious consequences, of course!



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