

The New Kid

By Kanika G



Illustrated by Deepa Nath

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A Warm Welcome

Neha had just returned from a vacation with her parents. She was eager to meet her friends. *I wonder if Priya missed me,* she thought, as she skipped to Priya's apartment.

Priya's mother, Renu answered the doorbell. "Hello, Neha. How was your holiday? You went to Shimla, right? It must have been really cold."

Neha had been waiting for someone to ask. "Yes aunty. My aunt dropped me off at my dada-dadi's place in Indore. I stayed there for a few weeks. Then my parents joined us there, and we all went to Shimla together for a week. Shimla was amazing aunty. I saw snow for the first time ever! Where is Priya? I can't wait to tell her all about it."

"That is lovely Neha. Priya is taking a shower. She should be here in a minute." Renu walked to the corridor and called out loudly. "**Priya, are you done? Neha is here.**"



Just then Priya emerged, towelling her wet hair. She rushed over to give Neha a hug. "Oh hi Neha. You are finally back. I missed you. I'll be ready in a few minutes."

A few minutes later, the two 10 year old girls, stepped out of Priya's apartment. Neha was chattering away about snowmen and a horse ride on a snowy mountain. As they waited for the elevator, a woman stepped out of another apartment on the same floor and entered the elevator, with them. Neha frowned, but said nothing, until they were all out of the elevator. "Hey who was that lady? Doesn't Vibha dadi live there any more?"

Priya raised her eyebrows. "Oh I forgot. You have been

away more than a month. Vibha dadi had a bad fall. She was really weak. She loves staying alone you know, but the doctors said it is too dangerous. So her daughter finally managed to convince her to move to Bangalore. They have given the apartment on rent. The new tenants just moved in 10 days ago."

"Really? Do they have any kids our age?" Neha loved making new friends.

"Well yes." Priya seemed reluctant to talk about it.

"Is it a boy or a girl? Come on tell me." Neha asked curiously as they stepped in to the play area. Then she suddenly stopped, when she saw Arun playing with her friends, Rohan, Sasha and Nikhil. "Hey, how come Arun is playing with our group? I thought we got rid of him. He is such a bully."

"Oh! Arun is fine. He doesn't bully us any more. He is quite funny and knows a lot of stuff. He is almost 12 you know." Priya urged Neha along.



"Really? Wow! I guess a lot happens in a month." Neha hesitated as she approached the play area.

But just then Rohan, Sasha and Nikhil noticed Neha. They ran over in excitement. "Hey you are finally back." Sasha shouted giving her a hug.

Nikhil clapped her on the back. Being only 8, he was a little shorter than the rest. "Good to see you Neha. Tell us all about Shimla. Did it snow?"

"Yeah we missed you and your exaggerated stories and constant chatter." Rohan high-fived her.

Neha looked sceptically at Arun, but decided to give him the benefit of doubt. "Hi Arun. Had a good holiday?"

"Yeah. Sounds like you had a magical trip." He grinned. "I am sorry about my behavior in the past. I am trying to be better."

Neha nodded and smiled. "Apology accepted. So what are we playing?"

"There are 6 of us. So we can make teams and play basket ball." Sasha suggested.

The kids were having a great time. The game was getting competitive. Neha scored her second basket and whooped with joy as her team mates high-fived her. "Yes! I haven't lost my touch." Suddenly the celebrations stopped as the kids started nudging each other and giggling.

"What's going on?" Neha asked, surprised.

"You remember asking me about the kid who moved in next door to me?" Priya whispered.

"Yeah. Then we forgot about it. So who is it?"

"That boy there." Priya pointed at a boy in crutches about a hundred metres away. His face was strange, sort of crooked, and he walked quite awkwardly. He looked at them miserably and then turned around and limped away.

The kids all began to laugh. Arun crept closer to him and then began to imitate his limp. Now the kids were laughing really loudly. The boy on crutches turned and saw Arun. Anger clouded his expression, but he decided to ignore it. Emboldened, Sasha and Nikhil joined Arun.

Neha could not believe what she was seeing. How could her beloved friends be so mean? Had they all turned in to monsters or been replaced by aliens in the month that she was away?



The poor boy in crutches was so flustered by the girls and boys relentlessly teasing him, that he turned around and shouted something. Neha did not understand what he said because his speech was halting and forced.

To her horror, she realised, that he had shouted this out several times before, because all her friends knew he was trying to say "Stop it. Just stop it. Go Away and leave me alone." They chanted it imitating his awkward

pronunciation. Even her best friend, Priya, was chanting and dancing. They all thought it was so funny, they did not notice, that Neha did not join in their amusement.

Ostracised

That evening Neha was miserable. How could her friends be so cruel? Couldn't they see that they were bullying the boy, much like Arun had bullied them some time ago. And Arun, of course, had changed nothing, other than his target. She felt even worse because she hadn't said anything to stop them.

The next day Neha approached Priya. "Priya, why were you all bullying that poor boy yesterday?"

"What do you mean bullying? You were there, right? We were just making fun of him. He is so funny. What a ridiculous walk!" Priya imitated his walk and laughed.

"But that is bullying. You made the poor boy so miserable."

"That's not bullying. We just wanted a laugh. We didn't hurt him or frighten him, like Arun used to do with us, or steal anything from him."

"But you hurt his feelings." Neha was getting angry now. What was wrong with her best friend?

"Big Whoopdeedoo! Don't be such a wet blanket. He can deal with a bit of good natured teasing."

"Oh! Then you have made friends with him?"

"No. Of course not. We did try to talk to him once. But he talks so weird." Priya imitated him "Gooo aaawaaayy. Lleeeaaave mii alooone." Then she burst out laughing. "Who would make friends with someone who talks like that?"

"Then how is your teasing good natured? It is just bullying."

"We don't hurt him, do we? We don't throw stones at him or take away his crutches. Stop calling me a bully."

"BULLY"



"Neha, go away. I don't want to ever see you, or talk to you again."

That evening, when Neha approached the play area, the warm welcome she had received the previous day was replaced by cold stares. She tried to smile at her friends, but

they met her smile with stony looks. So she returned home, fetched her bike and decided to cycle by herself.

A New Friend

While she was cycling, she saw the boy in crutches walking with difficulty at snails pace. She stopped her bike near him and introduced herself. "Hi, I am Neha. Are you new here?"



"Gooo aawaay. Ieee saaw yooou wiith the meeaan chhildren yeassterrday. Just leeaave meeaa alone."

Neha persisted. "Please. I am sorry my friends teased you. It was really mean. I don't know why they are being like that. I am sorry, I did not try to stop them yesterday. But I did try today."

"Aaaere the-the-ey go-o-ing too st-st-stoopp?"

"No. But they are not talking to me either."

"I-is th-th-at why you are here?"

"I am here, because I thought you could use a friend, because you are new here." Neha was starting to get annoyed. Why was he fighting her? She hadn't hurt him.

"I-ee aaam so-sorrry. I-i-it is dii-dii-ffi—cult foor me to tr--ust peo—ple."

"I understand." Neha nodded. "So what do you like to do? I am guessing biking is not an option for you."

"I li-li-ke mew-mew--jic and .."

"Sorry. I did not catch that. What did you say?"

"Mew—jiic" He mimicked playing the piano.

"Oh music. Do you play the piano?"

"Yess" the boy nodded enthusiastically

"Great. I am learning to play the guitar. But I am not very good. You can bring your keyboard down tomorrow, and I'll bring my guitar and maybe we can practice together. By the way, I am Neha. What's your name?"

"Iee aam Miehier."

Neha parked her bike and walked with Mihir for a while.

"What school do you go to?"

"Maay Iee u—u-je miiiy pho—pho—ne to chaat?"

Neha blinked her eyes "Huh?"

Mihir pulled out his phone and rapidly typed something and showed her.

Neha read it, "May I use my phone to chat."

She nodded. "Yes of course. You type really fast."

Mihir smiled as he typed. "Yes I needed to find an effective way to communicate."

Neha read and giggled. "This is a weird way to have a conversation, but it works. So, what school do you go to?"

"At the moment, I don't. We just moved into the city. My parents do a lot of research on how different schools accommodate special needs kids before choosing one. My mom will home school me till they find a good school."

"Oh. Did you like your old school?"

"Yes. I had good friends there. I miss them. It is very difficult for me to start over in a new place."

"Hmm.. What else do you like besides music?" Neha asked.

"Video games and basketball."

"Basketball?" Neha was stunned. "Can you play that?"

"Yes, from a wheel chair."

"Oh!" Neha's face fell. "Then we can't play it."

"It would be complicated. But, we can still shoot baskets."

"Oh! Okay. Where do you play wheelchair basket ball?"

"I used to stay in Bangalore before. There I played at a club, where they had a weekly wheel chair basketball game. But, here, we will have to find a place where people play it. I used to play in the court, in the housing society too, but that requires the other kids to be accommodating."

The next evening Neha took her guitar to the society lawn. Mihir had brought his keyboard. It was difficult for him to sit on the grass, but he managed with a little help from Neha.

"I need to tune up my guitar. So why don't you play me your favourite piece of music in the mean time." Neha said struggling with her guitar.

A beautiful melody caught her ears. "Oh my. You are really good at this. I guess we can't really play together. I am still learning Happy Birthday. What are you playing?"

"The Allegro in Beethoven's Pastoral" Mihir typed on his

phone. By now, Neha was used to this form of communication.

"Oh wow! Do you compose music too?" Neha asked in awe.

Mihir nodded. "Should I play one of my compositions?"

"Yes please do."



Mihir played a short, sweet melody and Neha clapped.

"It is a simple tune. I can teach it to you on your guitar if you like." Mihir typed.

"You know how to play the guitar too?" Neha's eye's were wide with wonder.

"Just a little." Mihir blushed.

"Is it okay if I ask what happened? Why can't you walk and talk normally?" Neha hoped she had not upset Mihir. She looked at him nervously.

"No I don't mind. I have cerebral palsy."

"Will it get better with time?"

"No. It won't, but at least it won't get worse either."

"How did it happen? An infection or something?"

"An infection like meningitis in infancy can cause it. In my case, it is probably because I was a preterm baby."

Neha looked glum. "I am sorry."

"Don't be. It is not as bad as it seems to you. I am used to it. Come on I'll give you some guitar lessons. You need them." Mihir winked.

Neha cheered up and picked up her guitar.

It took half an hour but Mihir was able to teach Neha most of the melody on the guitar. They played it together. Priya was passing by and looked up. She was amazed to see Neha and Mihir playing such beautiful music together.

Momentarily, she forgot her fight with Neha. "Wow Neha. You have never played so well at guitar class. What is that piece?"

"Mihir composed it" Neha said pointing at him. "And he taught me how to play it."

"He can play music?" Priya was astonished.

"Yes, he is very good. But why don't you ask him?"



Mihir was determinedly looking away from Priya. To focus on something he decided to play the allegro from Pastoral again.

The music was as good as Priya had ever heard. "I am sorry I have behaved so badly over the last week" Priya mumbled her cheeks turning crimson and left. Neha and Mihir played music for some more time, in which, Mihir taught Neha a another lovely tune. Many of Neha's friends wandered by, shooting them curious looks, but none of them stopped to speak.

A Change Of Heart

Later that evening, Neha convinced Mihir to get his wheelchair down so they could shoot some baskets. Mihir confidently wheeled himself to a point just beyond the three point line, bounced the ball a couple of times and took the shot. It went right through the basket.

Neha stared with a mixture of amazement and dismay. "Are you bad at anything? Anything at all?"

"Waa-lk-kiing aaandd taalk—kiing" A mischievous smile lit up Mihir's face. Mihir was really good at shooting baskets, so they decided to try an actual game, to give Neha some advantage. Mihir had to be careful not to run Neha over, and they had a lot of fun. They did not even notice a bunch of kids staring at them. Then Priya walked over and asked if she could join them. Neha looked at Mihir, and he nodded slightly. Priya smiled, looking relieved, and joined them.

Soon Rohan and Sasha asked to join in too. Rohan mumbled an apology to Neha. "Sorry, I behaved badly, but it was hard to be called a bully and know that you really are one. I should never have let Arun suck me in to this mess." Rohan said and Sasha nodded along.

Then Sasha turned to Mihir. "You are Mihir, right?"

"Yess" Mihir said not meeting her eyes.

"I am very sorry about my behaviour over the last few days. Before I saw Neha play with you, it was easy to think of you as a weirdo without any feelings. I thought I was being funny, imitating you. But when I saw Neha and you playing and joking together, just like anyone else, I realized, how much I must have hurt you. I really am sorry. I hope you can forgive me."

"Ieee caan. Youu—uu aaa—re brraa—ave tooo apo---aplo--log--eeesee sssss-sooooo ff-fra—nk—ly."

Sasha looked down and nodded. Rohan added, "Mihir, I too am sorry. I should have said something. But I lacked the courage to stand up for what I knew to be right. I hope you can forgive me too." Mihir nodded. Then Sasha and Rohan joined the game.

But as they started playing, Arun boomed "Are you guys so bad at basket ball that you want to play with a retard? What's the matter with you? Come Nikhil, lets go on a bike ride. The retard can't ride a bike, can he? So if you guys want to play with him, you should just pack up your bikes and say goodbye to them."

As Arun started to walk away, all eye's fell on Nikhil. What was he going to do? Nikhil hesitated and took a tentative step away from Arun.

"You are such a coward." Arun taunted. "Go play with the namby-pamby boy who talks gibberish and plays girly music."

"He plays beautiful music" Nikhil, who loved music, was too angry to be scared any more. "I looked up to you because you are so strong and I wanted to be like you. So I did everything you did. I was thrilled that you let me spend so much time with you. But you are just a coward, hurting people, who you think are weaker than you. You may be strong, but you have no character. Without your muscles, you would be nothing."



Nikhil was wiping away his tears and did not notice Arun charging at him. But someone else did. And at lightening speed, he arrived on his wheelchair, placing himself between Nikhil and Arun. Mihir had fairly strong arms and everyone always underestimated him. He easily parried the punch that Arun tried to land on him and returned with one of his own. Arun was taken by surprise and fell over.

"I think, the last time we confronted you, the lesson did not sink deep enough. Stay away from all of us, or be sure that we will face you collectively." Neha shouted at Arun.

Defeated, Arun got up and ran away. The kids celebrated and Nikhil thanked Mihir for protecting him, in spite of his awful behaviour in the past week.

"You were right Nikhil. He is a coward. Or he would not have tried to strike you, when you were not looking. You stood up to him, in spite of being afraid. I could not let him hurt you." Mihir typed.

Nikhil looked at the message and nodded. "Thanks. Wow! You type fast."

Mihir shrugged. "I have to." He typed.

This book is illustrated by Deepa Nath, the artist featured in Tania Visits An Art Exhibition, where I included a charcoal sketch by Deepa. But Deepa's artistic talents are not limited to paper. She is also an amazing food artist and makes the most gorgeous looking cakes, catering to both simple and exotic tastes. If you live in Bangalore, do consider ordering one of her culinary delights from Baker's Tray (https://www.facebook.com/bakerstraydeepa/?ref=br_rs).