

Tania's Monsoon Adventure



By Kanika G

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Herd~~ing~~ Cats



Tania and her friends stepped out of the auditorium at *The Playright Theater* in Juhu. They were jumping up and down and hugging each other in excitement. Tania was clutching the big trophy they had just won, as first prize at the inter-school children's drama competition.

While the kids rejoiced their victory, Miss Gupta and Miss John, the teachers who had escorted them, were worried. Would they be able to make it home? It had been raining cats and dogs for hours. And soon it

was going to be high tide. Even the theater courtyard was waterlogged.

Miss Gupta was trying to get the kids to line up, so they could all walk to the school bus in the parking lot. But it was like herding cats.

Karishma and Sonali were holding hands and dancing. Vivek and Nikhil were jumping up and down in the courtyard, trying to see how high they could make the splashing water drops go. Tania and Tanisha were taking victory laps, whilst loudly singing "We won. We won. Yay, yay, yay." And Rajiv seemed to have completely disappeared.

All this would have been very amusing, if time wasn't of the essence. It had been raining all night, but the intensity had dramatically increased in the last few hours, during the competition.

"Where were you Rajiv?" An annoyed Miss Gupta shouted, as Rajiv suddenly appeared. "Hurry up. Lets get in to

the bus. Now, everyone. Move it. I mean it, or you can get left behind."

The kids were startled to hear the usually cheerful and soft spoken Miss Gupta, practically barking at them. They scurried in to the bus, with out another word, though Karishma and Sonali failed to suppress their giggles. A stern look from Miss Gupta, quickly shut them up.

Soon they were all in the bus, and the teachers relaxed. But, less than five minutes later, as the bus ploughed through knee deep water, the engine sputtered and groaned to a halt. The driver made some futile attempts to start it up, and then looked helplessly at the teachers.

Two teachers, seven kids, and a bus driver, were stranded in the middle of a water logged road, far away from where they needed to be. What were they going to do? With the rain pouring, it would not be easy to find transportation.

Stranded



"What do we do now?" cried Miss John in dismay.

"Now let's calm down and think." Miss Gupta switched to crisis mode, and she was good at it. "Any of you kids have relatives nearby?"

"I am not sure. Where are we?" Tanisha asked, confused.

"I know where we are!" Tania exclaimed. "I recognize that tall building. My aunt Nisha lives there. She is my mother's cousin."

"But will your aunt be home? I don't want you all scurrying there in the rain, only to be stranded again." Miss Gupta sounded skeptical.

Tania gave Miss Gupta, Nisha's cell phone number. Nisha offered to keep the kids overnight, if necessary. She even offered to have the teachers stay over, but they said they would make it home somehow and did not want to impose on her. Then Miss Gupta turned to the kids. "You will all be staying with Tania's aunt Nisha till the rain stops. You may have to stay there all night. It seems like the safest option."

"But our parents will be worried about us, if we don't come home." Tanisha was upset.

"You can all call your parents from Nisha's house and let them know." Miss John said. "But right now, we need to get you there safely." Miss Gupta and Miss John helped the kids get out of the bus, and then Miss John addressed them again. "The water

is quite deep and I don't want any of you to fall down. There could also be an open manhole or ditch somewhere, that we can't see. So form a chain by holding on to each others hands tightly."

Miss Gupta led the chain of kids, and Miss John brought up the rear.

Walking like this was uncomfortable, and quite a spectacle. But there was no one loitering to watch.

Fortunately, it wasn't long before they were at Nisha's apartment.

Boys Don't Wear Dresses



Nisha was thrilled to have the kids over. Her own kids were attending college in America, and she missed having little kids around. The kids could smell the hot cocoa she was making and dashed for the kitchen.

But Nisha was firm. "First you need to go to the bathroom one by one, wash up and take off your wet clothes."

"But what will we wear then?" Karishma asked. "We don't have any spare clothes."

"I know. That is a problem. I have been wondering about that ever since Miss Gupta called, and I have a solution."

"What?" All the kids asked, intrigued.

"You can all wear my T-shirts. You'll find a stack of seven laundered T-shirts and seven clean towels on that chair there. Take your pick."

The girls nodded and scurried off to choose their T-shirts, but the boys did not budge. "Your T-shirts will look like dresses on us." Nikhil complained. The rest nodded in agreement. Nisha was a remarkably tall woman.

"So what?" Nisha asked, unmoved by the stony stares the boys were giving her.

"So what?" Rajiv sputtered.

"Boys don't wear dresses." Vivek added indignantly.

"Why not?" Nisha asked unperturbed.

The boys looked confused. "It is just not done." Nikhil said, weakly.

"Someone has to do it first. Nowadays, boys don't wear frills on their clothes, but in the olden days kings and knights wore frills on their clothes. Does that mean there was something wrong with them? Wouldn't you boys rather wear a clean T-shirt, than those dirty wet clothes?"

The boys looked at their clothes unhappily. Now that it had been pointed out to them, the wetness made them feel icky. "Some of the water

could have been from the gutters," Tanisha pointed out, mischievously.

That made the boys cringe. "Nisha aunty, can we at least have uncle's T-shirts to wear?" Vivek pleaded.

"Of course, dear. I think that is a splendid compromise. You boys are smart and brave." Nisha trotted off to get a few of her husband's T-shirts.

When all the kids finished washing up and changing, Nisha brought out eight steaming cups of hot cocoa and home made onion *pakodas*. The kids enjoyed tucking in and told Nisha all about their play.

After they had satiated their hunger, the kids were eager to talk to their parents. But none of them could contact their parents!

The Big Problem



The heavy rains had resulted in a collapse of the cell phone network. Nisha's land-line was working. But none of the land-lines, in the housing society where Tania and the other kids lived, were working. Each of the kids tried calling on their home phone numbers, but got an automated message *This line is not working*. Then they tried calling a few neighbors and got the same response.

"Sometimes, when it rains so heavily, all the phone lines in a particular

area stop working." Nisha told the worried children.

"But our parents will be so worried." Tania's brows knitted in a frown.

"My *dada-dadi* wont know where we are, or when we are going to get home. They wont know that we are safe. We must get a message to them somehow. We must!" Sonali was on the verge of tears.

"My *nana-nani* will be worried too." Vivek bit his lip.

Before Nisha could say anything, the phone rang. It was her husband. He said he would not be able to make it home, and would stay the night in office.

Then Tania had an idea. "May be I can call Papa in office, and he can tell Mama when he gets home. Then Mama and Papa will tell all your parents too." Tania's eyes shone with hope and everyone nodded.

"It is worth a try." Nisha conceded.

Tania knew Papa's office phone number. "Oh Tania! Thank goodness you are safe at Nisha's house. I was wondering about you. I can't get home today, you know. The roads are really bad. I'll have to stay in office all night. And I can't contact Mama either." Tania's hopes were dashed in one fell swoop. "But then how do we get the message to Mama? She will be so worried about us."

"I don't know. But I am working on it. Maybe, Nisha will be able to figure something out."

Tania returned to her friends looking hopeless. Each of the kids took turns at calling their parents in office. Both of Karishma's parents worked, but they usually left around 10:00 a.m. and the rain was so bad then, that they never went. Tanisha's and Nikhil's dads were out town. Vivek's parents were stuck in their offices, and were worried about how to reach his grandparents, who may be

panicking at home. Rajiv's dad's office phone wasn't working, and Sonali did not know her parent's office phone numbers, because she usually called them on their mobile phones.

"What now?" Rajiv's hand cupped his chin. "We are safe, but we have no way of informing our families. This is a disaster."

"Nisha aunty will figure something out. Won't you aunty?" Tania looked at her hopefully.

"Don't be silly, Tania." Vivek snapped. "What can she possibly do? We have to accept there is nothing, that can be done. I hope my grandparents don't get too worried."

"Vivek is right. There is nothing we can do." Karishma rested her chin on her hands and stared despondently into space.

"I wouldn't give up so easily, Karishma." Nisha took a deep breath.

"I have one more idea. Let's see if it works. I need to go talk to my neighbor." She took out some bread, butter, cheese and jam. "Help yourselves to sandwiches, if you are hungry. I'll be back in a jiffy."

But none of the kids felt like eating. They watched Nisha go, wondering what she was up to. There was complete silence in the room as the seven kids brooded, in their oversized T-shirts. The morning had started off so well with them performing a play at the famous *Playright Theater*, and then winning first prize. But now, they all felt as gloomy as the weather.

When Nisha returned, she was smiling. "A couple moved in next door a month ago. The man is a doctor. He practices at the hospital near your housing society. The phones in the hospital are working. So I asked his wife, if he could get a message sent across to your parents. There are a couple of nurses working there, who

live in your housing society. They have agreed to take the message to Tania's mother. I told them to say that you are safe with me and will be staying here for the night, and they can pick you up tomorrow when the rain ebbs. I also mentioned that Tania's dad and Vivek's parents are safe, but won't make it home tonight.

The children all started cheering up. Tania added, "Mama will definitely convey the message to your parents and grandparents. Yipee! I feel so much better now. Let's eat some sandwiches."

"You know, when something makes me tense, I can't eat at all. But as soon as the tension has passed, I feel like I could eat a whole Tandoori chicken and a couple of goats." Vivek said salivating and patting his tummy. Everyone giggled.

"We better get busy making the sandwiches." Tanisha said, looking worried. "Or Vivek may just start eating the pillows." Tania went to

the kitchen to get some plates and a few cucumbers, when it suddenly went all dark and quiet. Tania stopped abruptly, terrified.

The Noisy Ghost



"Oh no! It is a power cut." Tania heard Nisha exclaim. Of course, that is what it was, Tania thought. *Silly me. My imagination sure got the better of me.* Tania fumbled in the dark kitchen looking for plates and cucumbers. It was only 4:00 p.m., but the sky was overcast with dense gray clouds, and not a shred of sunlight made it through.

When Tania returned with the plates and cucumbers, she heard Nisha

telling everyone, "They often cut the power when there is flooding to prevent short circuits and electrocution. Water is an excellent conductor of electricity, you see." Nisha had lit up a few candles. The flames were flickering, and the moving shadows gave the room a ghostly appearance.

"We can eat in the dark, and tell each other ghost stories. It will be fun." Karishma's eyes shone with excitement.

"That is a great idea." Nikhil nodded, as the kids put together their choice of sandwich, jam, cheese or cucumber with butter. Some of them made sandwiches with butter on one side, and jam on the other.

Rajiv wanted to know what a jam with cucumber sandwich would taste like."I like to experiment." He said, pompously.

Rajiv's expression, when he tasted his creation, made it quite clear,

that it was just as disgusting as it sounded. Nikhil sniggered. Rajiv sheepishly removed the cucumber and quietly ate his mundane jam sandwich.

Once every one was armed with a few sandwiches, Sonali began telling a ghost story. It was about a British officer, who oppressed the residents of the village under his purview. He had loud clanging bells on his horse. Whenever the villagers heard them, they would tremble in fear wondering what cruelty awaited one or more of them. Sonali described how he tormented some villagers in gruesome detail.

After much deliberation the villagers came up with a way to get rid of him. Knowing the neighboring jungle much better than he did, the villagers managed to trick the British officer in to going in to the den of a viscous tiger.

"Then what happened?" Nikhil asked, his eyes wide as saucers.

"Well," Sonali paused, relishing the attention from her captive audience. "The tiger ate him and his screams of pain and anguish were so loud, they could be heard in the village. The villagers rejoiced, but that wasn't the end of it. He decided to haunt the village for ever. The very next day, the villagers heard the dreaded clanging sound and ...

A loud clanging sound came from the kitchen. Vivek jumped and Nikhil screamed. Tania and Tanisha hugged each other in fright. "Wh-wh-what was t-t-that?" Rajiv stammered, while Karishma hid under the dining table. Sonali too jumped on to Nisha's lap. "Was it a ghost? It must be a ghost. It is dark and rainy and ideal for ghosts. What do we do?"

"Oh, don't be silly. There are no ghosts." Nisha said, heading for the kitchen.

The kids followed timidly behind her. When they entered the kitchen, there was some movement and the sponge next

to the sink fell on the floor. It may have been a trick of the dim lighting, but a small silvery glow appeared to zip across the kitchen platform. "Well at least, it is a small ghost." Nisha said, trying to make light of it. But the kids were not amused. They clutched each other, terrified.

Next, the trash can rattled. "Well, ghosts are not supposed to be so clumsy unless..."

"Unless what?" The kids chorused holding their breath.

"Unless it is a poltergeist or, course!" Nisha said with an evil grin.

"Wh-wh-wh-at's a p-p-polter-polter?" Rajiv seemed to be have developed a persistent stammer.

"A poltergeist," Nisha said, "is a type of ghost who throws things around and makes noise."

"Are they real?" Tania whispered, afraid the poltergeist may hear her.

"No, Honey. You are smart. You know that ghosts and spirits are not real."

Tania gulped. "I know aunty. But in the dark, with these strange noises and movements, I can't help feeling scared. I am trying not be scared. I know in my brain that they are not real, but my feelings won't listen to my brain."

Nisha's tone softened. "I know what you mean Tania. I promise all of you, it is not a ghost. It may help if you focus your mind on doing something. So lets hunt around, and try to figure out what is causing the sound."

Reassured, the kids started hunting around. Tania got the flashlight from her uncle's cupboard, so they could see better. And then Vivek finally spotted the culprit.

"Yiiieee" Tanisha screamed, and ran out of the kitchen. "Oh my god! Oh help. Please," Nikhil shouted, from a safe distance. Nisha came from the other side of the room, to see what was frightening the kids, so much more than the idea of a ghost had.

But as soon as she saw it, she jumped on to the dining table yelling, "Help! Do something. Get it out of here. Please, just get it out." She sat on the table, head hidden in her knees sobbing.

The Chase



"Aunty. Are you okay? Don't worry. It is just a mouse." Tania said, perplexed to see her brave and level headed aunty so scared.

"I know. I am really scared of mice. It is probably the only thing I am scared of. I can deal with lizards,

cockroaches and even snakes, but mice..." Nisha shuddered. "No I can't even think of them. No no no. AAAAAaaa!" She screamed as the mouse raced passed the bottom of the dining table

"I don't understand. How can you be so scared of mice, but not snakes or ghosts?" Rajiv asked, confused. "Mice are relatively harmless. They are not unknown, like ghosts or dangerous, like some poisonous snakes."

"It is like Tania said. My brain knows not to be scared, but my body and feelings just won't respond to it. I have musophobia as derived from the Greek word for mouse or suriphobia as derived from the French word for mouse.

"So what do we do now?" Tania asked.

Tanisha called out from the other room, where she was hiding. "Please somebody get rid of it. I won't be able to sleep knowing it is in the house. What if it nibbles my toes?"

"What if it licks my face?" Nikhil added.

"No please. Don't say such things." Nisha pleaded.

Just then, the mouse showed up again, and this time it dashed across the room, running over Nikhil's feet. Nikhil started jumping up and down and screaming hysterically. Nisha and Tanisha started screaming too. The rest of the kids wondered what to do. Then, there was a knock on the door.

All the screaming had attracted the attention of Anushka, the lady next door, who had helped them get a message to Tania's mother. "Is something wrong?" Anushka asked, concerned.

Tania, Vivek, Rajiv , Karishma and Sonali all explained the situation to Anushka. She smiled and said, "I have a cat at home. I can bring her here and see if she can catch the mouse." The kids were relieved to see a calm

and composed grown up with a plan.
Anushka went to get her cat.

The cat, however did not appreciate being plonked among so many strangers. She started hissing and spitting. When the mouse showed up, the cat was momentarily distracted. But then, a loud clap of thunder startled Karishma and she knocked a glass of water off the coffee table. The water fell on the cat. Now the cat was angry and terrified and raced out of the front door, that nobody had remembered to close. Anushka shrugged apologetically, and ran after her cat, closing the door behind her.

For the next hour Tanisha, Nisha and Nikhil cowered uselessly on the dining table while the rest of the kids made futile attempts to catch the elusive mouse. At one point, Tania, in a hurry to make a grab for the mouse, tripped over Vivek and fell on Sonali.

Sonali was outraged. "Can't you look where you are going?"

"I was just trying to catch the mouse. Vivek tripped me. It is his fault." Tania snarled.

"My fault!" spluttered Vivek in rage. "You are the one who dashed without looking. Besides, this is all your fault. You brought us here to stay with this loony aunt of yours. What kind of a grown up is she?"

"Yes, Tania. This is all your fault. Why did you bring us here to your nutty aunt?" Karishma complained. "The teachers may have found a better solution."

"She is not crazy. I love Nisha aunty, and I won't have you speak of her like that." Tania was shouting now. "We were stranded, and I got us to a safe dry place. Nisha aunty gave us food, clean clothes, a place to stay all night, and found a way to get a message to our parents. She has been very nice to us. Now she is

scared of the mouse, just like we were terrified of ghosts a moment ago. The five of us are not scared of the mouse. So surely we can help her out, for all she has done for us."

"I agree with Tania." Rajiv piped in. "But I also think we should take a break and work out a plan. What we have been doing so far, is clearly not working."

The kids realized they were frustrated, and it wasn't fair to vent it out on Tania, who had only helped them. Tania, for her part, apologized to Sonali for hurting her, and to Vivek for unfairly blaming him. Exhausted, the kids sat down to take a break and think. After a few moments of silence Sonali said, "The problem is that the mouse is a quick and tiny target. May be if we could trap it in something big, instead of trying to catch it."

"Hmm, how about a bucket? May be we can trap it inside a bucket." Karishma suggested.

"I know. There is a big round plastic tub in the bathroom. I'll get it."

The next time the kids saw the mouse, it was poking its head out from behind the entertainment center. As per their plan, Rajiv banged on one end of the furniture, forcing the mouse to come out of the other end. Their plan worked like clockwork.

Tania neatly placed the tub over the mouse, and Vivek placed a couple of heavy books on the bucket to prevent the mouse from toppling it."

"Yes! Finally." Tania clapped Sonali on the shoulder.

"Awesome teamwork." Vivek thumped Rajiv on the back.

"What a relief!" Karishma exclaimed, as she and Sonali high-fived each other.

Nisha, Tanisha and Nikhil finally got off the table. Tania and Sonali approached the tub, where the mouse was scuttling around frantically. Tania and Sonali, who were

particularly fond of animals, felt very sorry for it. Nisha hugged Tania and said, "Thanks so much all of you. I am sorry, I couldn't behave like a proper grown up, but you all did very well."

Tania still looked sad. "Aunty what do we do with the mouse now? You promise not to hurt it, right?"

"But if the cat had caught it, it would have died right? And you did not object then." Rajiv pointed out.

"I know." Tania said. "I just realized that. At the time, I was so focused on catching the mouse to help Aunty Nisha, Tanisha and Nikhil, that I did not really think it through. I am glad that the cat could not catch the mouse."

"Me too. Yes aunty. Please don't hurt the mouse." Sonali pleaded.

With the mouse trapped, Nisha was thinking rationally again. "No. Of course not, darlings. You helped me

and I would never do that to you. I know how much you love animals. I love them too. It's just mice. I don't understand why, but I am terrified of them. But I don't want to hurt them."

Reassured, Tania asked, "So what do we do then?"

"Well, it is a really good thing you caught it so close to the front door. The door doesn't have a threshold either. So very slowly if we drag the tub out, without lifting it, the mouse will move along. Tania and Sonali you can go out with the tub. We can close the front door, and then you can pick up the tub and let the mouse run free. When the mouse is far away from the front door, knock, and I'll open it."

Moving the bucket weighed down by heavy books, without hurting the little mouse within, or letting it escape was hard work. The kids and even Nisha took turns at it. Finally the tub was out of the door. Tania

and Sonali returned five minutes later looking happy.

Everyone was happy but exhausted. The kids polished off their sandwiches hungrily, but that wasn't nearly enough food, especially for Vivek, who was now ready to eat a whole Tandoori chicken and half a dozen goats.

So Nisha made some boiled eggs and tea and took out a couple of large Swiss chocolate bars for dessert. No one was in the mood for ghost stories any more, so they ate in silence, enjoying the food.

After the meal, the kids were very tired from the day's adventures. Nisha spread out two large mats and put mattresses on them. The kids covered the mattresses with clean sheets and snuggled under covers. Soon, they were fast asleep.

At an hour past midnight, when Tania woke up for a drink of water, it was very quiet. Something seemed

different. Tania walked up to the window. Moonlight was streaming in. Guess what? The clouds had cleared up, and the rain had completely stopped. Yay, thought Tania. *I can go home tomorrow morning. It has been an adventurous day, but it would be nice to be home with Mama, Papa and little Sonia. I have so much to tell them. I hope the little mouse has found a cozy place to sleep.*