

In A Guava Orchard

Safdar, Ajay and I dashed out of the classroom as the bell rang. It was the lunch break, and we had a whole hour to play. Safdar was the tallest, also the strongest amongst us. He was our leader. Ajay and I followed him meekly, like lambs!

We frisked about cheerfully over a path that led to a guava orchard. There was a mud wall round it. Safdar who was in high spirits leaped over it and bragged, "Look at the guavas! Come on, kids. Let's have a feast."

Ajay also leaped over the wall, saying, "What fun. How lovely!"

I smacked my Hps at the sight of the luscious green guavas in the orchard. I was however, afraid that we might be caught by the watchman. But Safdar's presence emboldened me.

I too jumped over the wall. There were trees and trees—all bursting with ripe and unripe guavas. We roamed freely. Safdar was greedily eating ripe guavas, while Ajay and I leaped like monkeys and devoured the unripe ones. I preferred raw guavas and I could never have enough. I stuffed my pockets. I wanted to carry them as

a souvenir of our daring expedition to the orchard. Wouldn't my classmates gape at them, eyes bulging!

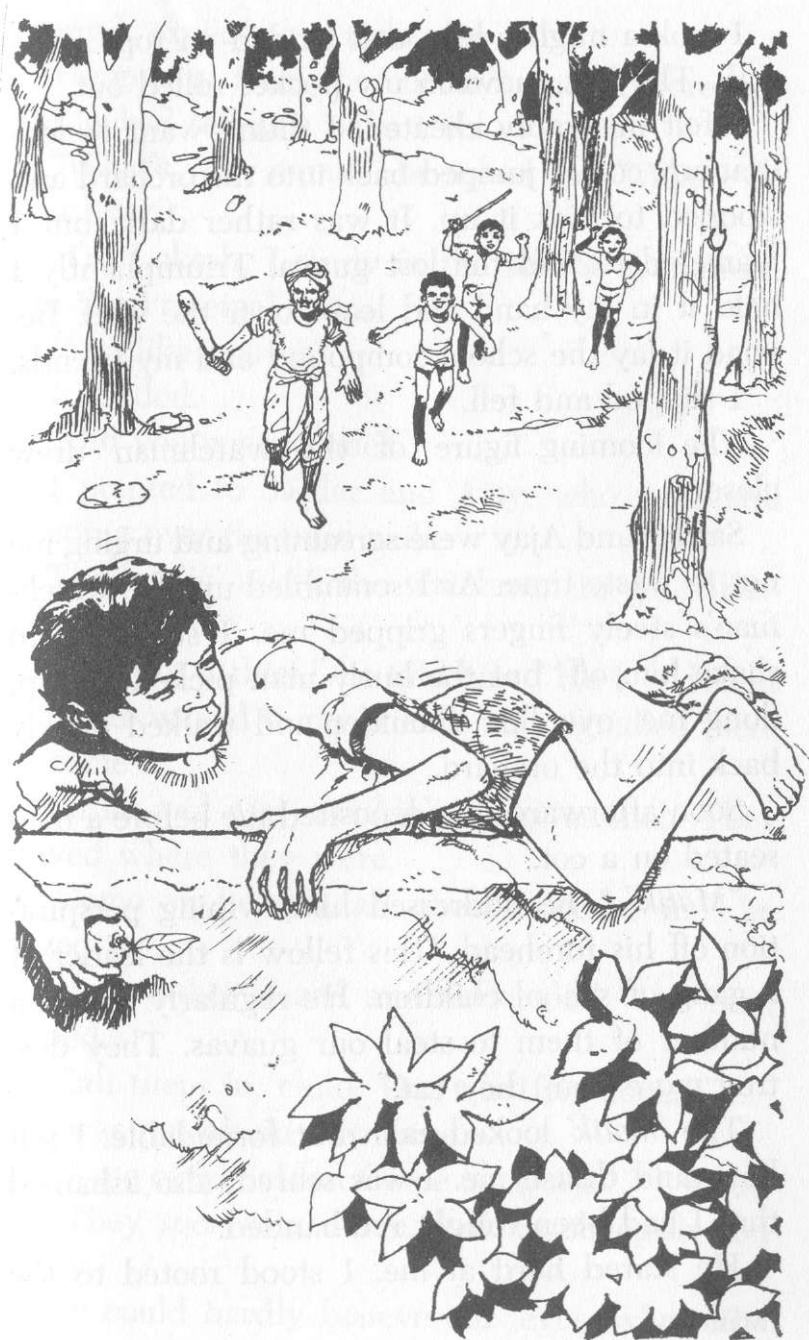
Suddenly, I heard Safdar's cry, "Ajay! Lokesh! Run, run! The watchman is coming." Perched on top of a branch, I saw the tall, sinister-looking figure of the watchman approaching. He was waving a staff in his hand. Safdar and Ajay were already on the ground, and had started running. The watchman waved his staff and ran after them, shouting, "Thieves! Thieves! See they don't escape." I lost no time; I jumped down from the tree and took to my heels. Safdar and Ajay were far ahead and I ran faster. As I leapt over ditches and boulders in the orchard, the guavas began to fall out of my pockets.

The watchman chased us furiously. After what seemed ages, the mud wall came into view. Safdar, who was the first to reach it took a flying leap over it. Ajay, close behind, managed to roll over.

Safdar kept shouting, "Run, Lokesh, run! The fellow is closing in!"

I put in every ounce of energy I had and ran like mad. The watchman came charging like a bull, bellowing curses. A host of street urchins had by then appeared from nowhere and joined the chase.

"Now jump," cried Safdar.



I took a mighty leap and landed on top of the wall. The last guava in my pocket rolled out.

I felt miserably cheated. I didn't want to lose it at any cost. I jumped back into the orchard and stooped to pick it up. It was rather dark, but I managed to find the lost guava. Triumphant I held it in my hand and leapt over the wall. Beyond it lay the school compound and my friends.

I slipped and fell.

The looming figure of the watchman drew closer.

Safdar and Ajay were screaming and urging me not to waste time. As I scrambled up, the watchman's steely fingers gripped me. I struggled to shake him off, but the burly man picked me up, flung me over his shoulder and walked briskly back into the orchard.

Soon afterwards, he deposited me before a man seated on a cot.

"*Malik*",* he addressed him, wiping perspiration off his forehead, "this fellow is the leader of a gang of school children. He regularly brings a number of them to steal our guavas. They destroy more than they eat."

The '*malik*' looked calm but formidable. I felt he would thrash me. I was scared, also ashamed that I had been caught red-handed.

He stared hard at me. I stood rooted to the

"Master.

ground, expecting a tight slap.

He got up from the cot and stood before me. He looked tall as a palm tree!

"What's your name?" he asked me. "Where do you live?"

"I'm Lokesh. I study in the school over there. I'm the Principal's son.

"You like guavas?"

I nodded. <

"Did you come alone?"

I pointed to Safdar and Ajay, who were still peeping over the mud wall.

The '*malik*' asked the watchman to get a basket of guavas.

"He's not a thief," he told him. "He is a decent kid." He waved to my friends and signalled them to come in.

Safdar and Ajay wouldn't budge an inch. They stayed where they were.

"Come on Lokesh, ask them to come in," he urged me.

I was rather dazed and undecided. The man smiled.

"Call them in, child. Don't be frightened."

I was not afraid any more.

"Come over, Safdar. Come over, Ajay," I shouted. They soon joined me, looking sheepish and guilty.

We could hardly believe our eyes when the

watchman came back with a ^basket of guavas. "Go ahead and eat as many as you want," said the *malik*.

We just stood looking at him. We had expected him to treat us like thieves.

"You're like my children," his gentle voice was soothing. This is your garden. You don't have to enter it like thieves. You go to the watchman. He'll help you."

Gratefully, we accepted the guavas he offered. Thanking him profusely we took leave of him.

There was a smile on his face as he bade us good-bye. "Remember children, do not do anything that makes you feel guilty. You must always be proud of what you do."

We left the orchard. I was limping a bit but my pockets were bulging with guavas.

His words are still fresh in my mind.

