

The Kite

The blue kite soared into the sky. The clouds were thin but enough to soothe the eyes. Not that the children cared, a scorching sun couldn't keep them away from flying their kites. He looked around, standing on the terrace; the sky was moderately filled with different colored kites. Few moments later Karthik was enjoying the tug of his kite onto the thread that he held. Ripples on the red-spotted blue kite indicated that the wind was perfect. He had been flying them for 3 years now. At that moment, he looked up, imagining himself as the kite. The kites were to children much more than a mere game. As he enjoyed a couple minutes of the daydream, he was brought to his senses by an orange kite approaching his territory from the right. The thread that connected to the kite was usually layered with glass powder, aiding the art of kite-fight. The fight was on. Hands moved ferociously as both the flyers tried to showcase the best of their skills and practice. Karthik had bought the new, better shredded glass this time, for layering his thread. It cost him 5 rupees extra for every 10 meters of thread. However, he was determined to win the war this season and hence his savings from the grocery store trips over the past 3 months were invested into it. The orange kite struggled for a couple of minutes and finally gave in against the might of the big blue! The sky suddenly echoed with the sound "Ooo Paaaaaaarrrrrr!!!!".

This meant victory. Karthik was very happy. The investment felt worth it. He lowered his kite a little and tied the thread to a small pipe along the railing to shift it to auto-pilot mode. The kite soared as he sat looking at it. This continued for a while before he was called downstairs by his mother. The kite was called down and the thread was rolled back into the holder for the next flight. His mother asked him to wash his hands and feet. "How you kids play around in all this heat? Look at you, how dark your skin has become." After the cleaning up session, she gave him some money and asked him to go down and pay the monthly rent to the landlord.

The game

The crosshairs marked the head, the trigger was pulled and ... headshot! It was quick. Girish didn't have time to celebrate his kill. He maybe had 10% of the moment, for celebration. Maybe. He had to run and kill the next target. He changed his gun to a short range and ran across the street. He hijacked a car and drove it, hitting people and poles alike. He shot at random people who screamed and ran. He enjoyed it. As he felt a bit safe inside the car, he had a quick scratch-the-balls session and his hands were back on the keypad and mouse in no time. He dived into the screen again as he reached the next battlefield. Guns roared, people ran, hid, killed and got killed. All along, Girish shouted commands, comments and requests over his headphones. On the other side of the line were his teammates playing the same game. "Akshay! Please man. What the fuck are you doing? You'll make us lose or "Rahi, I almost drained all of my juice. Please level me up with a med-kit if you have one?". She did, and he was back in action. This went on. He felt a gentle tap on his shoulder. He ignored it. On the third tap he turned and saw his mom placing a glass of milk shake and some snacks on the table. He said "Thank you mom!" and got back into the game again. His mom said, "Girish, could you please fetch me some rice and butter from the store? I need it for dinner." "Mom, not now please?", he replied. She looked at him and waited. "Okayyyy, I'll go get it in a while." She looked at him for a second and left. He adjusted his glasses, sipped the shake, put the headphones back and the bloodshed continued.

The shop

It was twilight. Karthik ran up to the terrace and felt the cool breeze. He walked to the other side and gazed at the seven chimneys of the power plant located near the horizon. The sky still had some of the flyers. This was his daily go-to place. He felt at peace here. He used to mumble a couple of songs. Sometimes, he sang them loudly while dancing but only after making sure that no one looked at him from the neighboring terraces. He came down after 10 minutes. "Mummy, my English book is filled. I need to buy a new one. Can I get some money please?" He received the usual 25 rupees. He climbed down the stairs and started walking towards the stationary shop in the next lane. As he walked, he thought about his friends and what they would play the next day in the lunch break at school. The road was filled with honking vehicles. However it did not bother him. He was used to the constant day-night honking by now. On the other side of the road was a parking space for scrapped government vehicles. After that, behind a thick and tall wall, there was a small field. It was a part of the city jail. The harvest was done by the inmates who could be seen sometimes, wearing the white dress. He reached the shop and greeted the owner. They exchanged some words on how they were doing. He asked the owner to show him some single-line ruled notebooks. The owner asked him for the budget. "25", he replied. "20, 23, 27, 24", the owner said as he slammed the books over the counter one by one. Now it was Karthik who needed to analyze the situation. He looked at the first book and put it right away. The pages were too shabby and he knew his English teacher wouldn't accept such a book for correction. The 24 rupee book and the 27 rupee book were kept beside each other. The 24 rupee book was alright. Pages were good. The cover was good. It had a photo of Usain Bolt, the fastest man alive, on the cover. However, his eyes and hands were drawn towards the other book. It was a "Classmate" notebook. This was the best notebook in the market at that time. Clean white pages, an index and a 'Did you know' section behind the covers, front and back, both. So cool! So many new things to learn, he thought. He was brought back to reality only by the money that he took out of his pocket, 25. The classmate book was for 27. Oops. His savings were gone in the kite thread. It was a worthy investment, he consoled himself. So he picked up the cheaper, 24 rupee notebook but suddenly, something struck him. A very tiny smile appeared on his lips at that very moment. He recalled that it was the MRP or the Maximum Retail Price he was looking at. He thought of trying his luck. He asked the owner, "How much for this classmate book uncle?" The owner replied with the same amount as before. "Yes, but that is the MRP na? That is just for the upper limit na uncle? I have 25 now, you think I can get it for 25?" The owner had been dealing with such bargains for years by now. He replied in the trained tone, "26 is the least I can give it for." "Come on uncle, you know me so well. 25 looks possible. Please Please.", he said with a puppy face and a smile. That's quite a deadly combo. After 5 minutes, there he was with his classmates notebook. The atmosphere had suddenly lit up. As he paid the owner, he glanced through the glass counter and saw a new eraser. He smiled and told himself "Next time!" and left. As he turned back and walked, he opened up the book and dived his head right into it. He smelled the new book and almost fainted because of how good he felt. This was pure happiness. Jumping around, he reached home.

The Gift

He took out his bike from the parking space and drove to the supermarket. Girish enjoyed riding his Suzuki scooter. He and his bike, both, had a couple of scars here and there but this didn't stop them enjoying each other's company. He browsed through the sections of the market and got what his mom had asked. He bought a few candies and a coke for himself. On his way back home, he saw a big banner which made him stop. It was an advertisement banner for the new Sony Playstation VR. He looked at it with wide eyes. "Increased memory, faster processor, New look, New feel. Enter your dream world with PS-VR.", it read. There was a picture of a boy and a girl, both wearing the Virtual Reality headset, standing in a battlefield. He could imagine himself in place of that boy. Girish's imagination was disturbed by a call. He picked up the call and was asked to be back soon as his father was also already on his way back home. Sitting on the bed with his phone, he scrolled through his instagram. Mother sat on the couch, with her phone. After some time, Mr. Mahajan rang the bell. Girish opened the door and was handed over a box of sweets he liked. The box was accompanied by a pack of 2 CDs. These were the game CDs that Girish had requested his father for. His father, a tech savvy guy, also shared similar gaming interests as Girish. Girish was surprised and happy. He hugged his dad and thanked him. The family had dinner and wrapped things up for the day. Girish went to his room and kept the CDs in the game drawer with his other collection. He scrolled through some more timelines and got into the bed.

The Night...

As he laid on the bed, beside his father, Karthik just kept thinking about the classmate notebook. He imagined writing on the first page. He told himself, maybe it was time he tried improving his handwriting. Maybe this classmate notebook will help him with this. He thought of showing it to other friends and reading out the list of interesting facts behind the covers together. He also laughed at himself for being so silly sometimes. It's just a book. When he had his first tricycle, he had kept it beside him the first night and refused to sleep without it. His parents always laughed while telling this story to him or to anyone else. He maybe wanted to do the same with the book but he told himself that he is too old now to act this way. "Let's act like grown ups.", he murmured and went to sleep.

Rolling on his bed, Girish couldn't stop thinking about the Sony Playstation banner he saw in the evening. He planned when to play the games his father gifted him and wished that his computer was powerful enough to run them at the full resolution. He imagined himself buying and wearing the VR headset. He closed his eyes, trying to focus and recreate a scene from the game he usually played. He jumped around, killed a few, drove cars but everything was fuzzy. He opened his eyes and stared at the glowing, fluorescent-starry ceiling. It was almost 12. School was at 8 in the morning. He must sleep now, he thought. But he struggled with his restless mind. He entered the dream world at around 1. In the other room, the father hoped that his son was happy with the gifts as he got ready for the bed.

The night was dark and the seven chimneys in the distance puffed out smoke into the air...