

THE STORYSMITHS



CBSE BUDDING AUTHORS PROGRAMME



CENTRAL SQUARE
FOUNDATION

PRATHAM BOOKS
storyweaver

THE STORYSMITHS

CBSE Budding Authors Programme

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PREFACE

The CBSE Budding Authors Programme was launched on August 23rd, 2022, as an extension of the CBSE Reading Mission. The initiative aimed to provide students with a platform to use their imagination and creative faculties, and express these through writing. The opportunity for creative expression was provided in both, English and Hindi languages, to students from classes V to X, studying in CBSE schools.

A key aspect of the programme was to encourage students to engage in reading a diverse range of stories with a view to gain insights about the finer nuances of writing. This included the unfolding of the plot, building of characters, sketching finer details to foster their writing skills. While reading helps students in exploring their imagination, writing provides an outlet to unleash creativity and imagination. Expression of ideas and thoughts in prose tends to strengthen the organizational abilities of students, develops logical thinking, and enables them to build powerful arguments promoting their cognitive growth. The National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes the need for students to become confident and articulate communicators who can express their thoughts and ideas clearly and coherently through written expression. It is in line with this that the CBSE Budding Authors Programme aims to cultivate a love for literature, language, and self-expression, thereby nurturing well rounded individuals.

The entries received underwent a thorough and meticulous evaluation process, overseen by a team of senior CBSE teachers. The assessment, done with a detailed criterion, ensured high standards of literary quality. Stories in English and Hindi were short-listed based on this evaluation criterion. These stories were re-evaluated from a writer's lens, and the winning entries were thus, finalized. This

rigorous selection process aimed to showcase the exceptional talent and creativity exhibited by the participating students.

Each chosen story exemplifies the excellence and ingenuity of students and is a testimony to the success of the Programme. From thrilling adventures to historical stories, from tales of responsibility and family values to acts of kindness that touch the heart, the young authors have woven this anthology of short stories. These offer a rich and diverse tapestry of narratives that captivate, entertain, and leave a lasting impression on the readers. The accompanying illustrations have added meaning and a new depth to the stories with their depiction of underlying emotions and the creation of the background ambience.

In providing a platform to students to express their ideas and build their writing skills, the CBSE Budding Authors Programme has nurtured a love for literature and encouraged young authors to showcase their potential.

We welcome you to enjoy this creation from our budding authors.

- Team CBSE



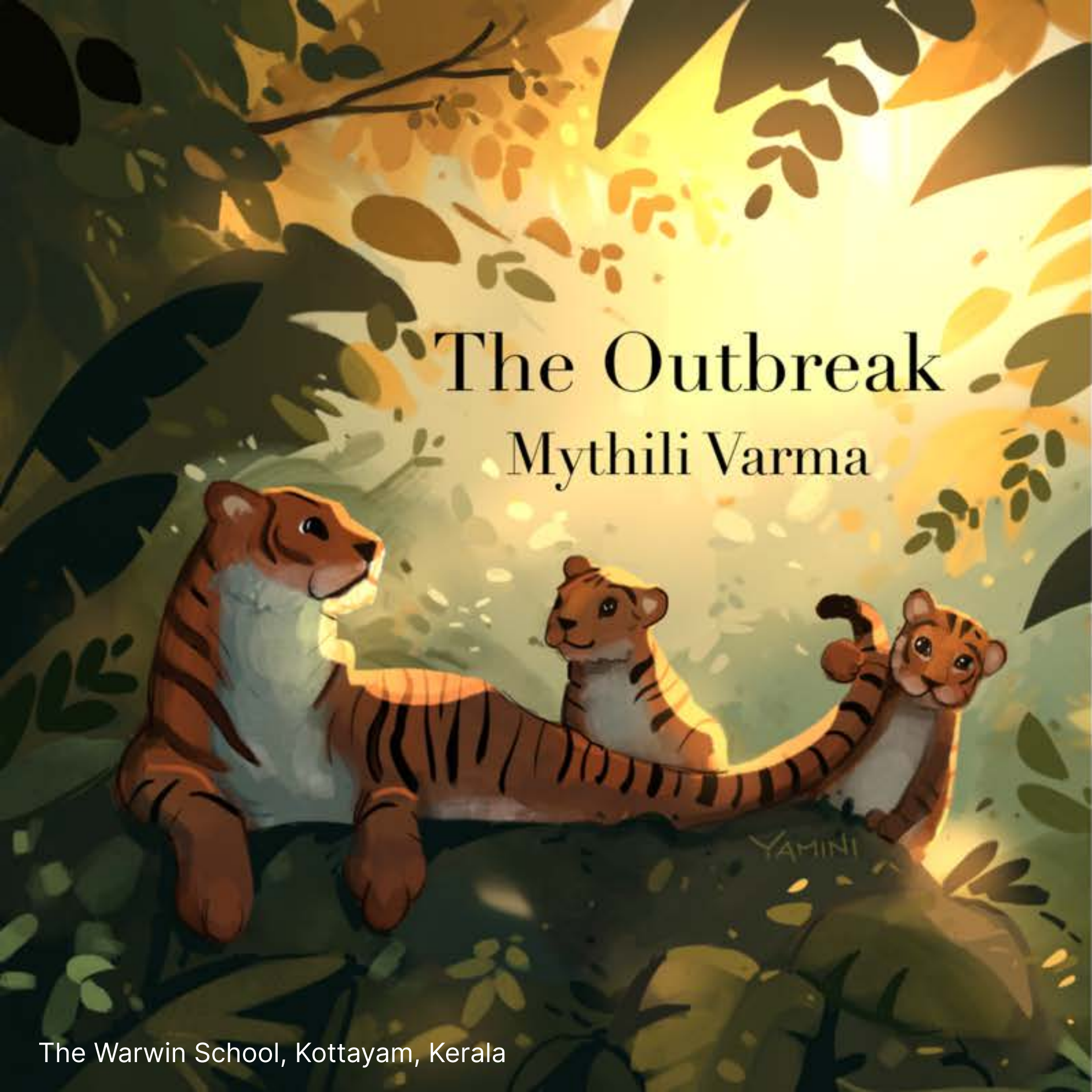
Index

1	The Outbreak	1
2	A Special Gift	7
3	The Treasure in Grandpa's House	13
4	Selfless Gangadhar and the Magic Flute	21
5	The Curious Case of Magical Canvas	27
6	Chronicles of Yuko and Eris	33
7	Beautiful Hands	39
8	The Lost Shoes	43
9	The Day the Tap Ran Dry	51
10	Village on Stilts	59
11	A Treasure Through Time	63
12	Anil & Anu: Case of the Missing Necklace	71
13	Abandoned	81
14	The Bully	87
15	Quest for the Witch's Secret	105



16	Chandra Meets the Alupians	113
17	Nest of Memories	123
18	The Diary of 2122	131
19	The Old Ceramic Plate	141
20	The Mystery of the Hidden Stream	147
21	Those Were the Days	153
22	Rajnandini	161
23	Escape to the Past	171
24	A Day in Ainsley's Life	179
25	Embedded Emotions	187
26	Nurturville's Magic Breakout	197
27	Unspoken Words	209
28	A Thirst to be Quenched	217
29	For the Dreams Left Undone	225
30	Caged	235





The Outbreak

Mythili Varma

Deep inside the jungle, there was a savanna that stretched on for several miles. A large streak of tigers had occupied this space and made it their home.

The tiger village, later known as 'Tier Dorpie', had the most intelligent, the most advanced, and the most powerful tigers living in absolute harmony with nature.

Kgosi, the head of the group, lived with his family in the middle of the village.

It was the onset of spring. Flowers bloomed and birds chirped loudly. The rivers moved peacefully, and waterfalls went rushing.

As had been their usual practice, Kgosi and his family were about to set off for their yearly picnic. On the night before their trip, his wife Aberash was cooking rabbit soup for dinner.

Their two daughter cubs, Itri and Zuri, were busy packing their toys and cookies.

Kgosi was in front of the television, watching evening news on his favourite channel TNN (Tiger News Network). Suddenly, there was a breaking news scroll on the screen. Kgosi's eyes were filled with fear. A chill ran down his spine.

"Cubs, come over right now." Kgosi's unusually serious tone made the cubs stop what they were doing. They ran to their dad.



"We can't go tomorrow. There is a human outbreak in the forest!"

Kgosi sounded worried.

"Humans? What are they? Any monsters?" Itri asked.

"Yes, kind of. They are extremely dangerous. With their handmade weapons, they kill for fun. Not just other animals, they don't even mind killing other humans." Kgosi explained.

"Oh, God!" Zuri sounded nervous.

"Till this outbreak is contained, we should stay indoors. I must go right now to address the village. Will be back in an hour." Saying this, Kgosi went out.

An urgent village meeting was arranged right away at the riverbank.

Kgosi took his place on top of a large boulder and started speaking in a loud and firm voice. The group listened intently.

"Brothers and sisters, there is a suspected human outbreak in the jungle. All of us must stay quarantined till this threat is over. Remember, this tiny two-legged creature called humans are the most dangerous animals on Earth! No available vaccines can protect us from them."

"Your Highness, we are more powerful than them. Can't we attack them?" Amari - a young tiger from the group asked.



“Amari, power isn’t about strength. Strength that we possess is NOT to attack but to defend. Nothing is more powerful than loving and protecting each other. Recklessness is a human trait. Let us not be like them. Let us stay true to what we are.”

“YES!” There was a cheer from the crowd.

“Stay indoors, keep a safe distance from humans, stay safe till the threat is over.” Kgosi concluded the meeting.

“Your Highness, is there a permanent solution for this threat?” Amari came near Kgosi and asked.


“See Amari. Humans aren’t happy with what they have. They can never live peacefully. Our medical team is working on a new medicine called ‘Liefde’. Once ready, we will arm every arboreal animal, load every tree branch with dosages of this medicine.

The moment humans are inside the jungle; this medicine will be sprinkled all over them. Within a few seconds, the medicine will start taking effect. Humans will feel peaceful, harmonious, and relaxed.

The medicine will trigger that long forgotten feeling of love within them.







More of them will come to the jungle in search of peace. Slowly, we will be able to transform these monsters through love. But till then, let us stay indoors and keep ourselves safe.”

Kgosi led everyone back to their dens. Locking themselves indoors, Tier Dorpie village braced for the human virus attack.

Tier Dorpie= Tiger Village (in Afrikaans language)
Liefde= Love (in Afrikaans language)





A Special Gift

Aki Ogura

Global Indian International School (GIIS)
Tokyo, Japan

YAMINI

*Hmm... What should I buy for my sister's first birthday? Candies? A plushie?
Yes! That's a great idea!*

I decided to go and look in the toy store. I took out all the money I had been saving in my desk drawer, and headed out. It was a dull, cloudy day. The weather forecast said that it would rain soon. I couldn't find anything that might be a good present for my sister at the store. As I headed to the exit, I felt as if someone was watching me. Feeling a bit scared, I looked around and saw a cute teddy bear. It was so adorable and cuddly that I was sure my sister would love it. The teddy bear seemed so real that I could imagine it moving. I glanced at the price. Yippee! I could pay for it!

I lifted the bear carefully from the shelf, and took it to the cashier. The lady looked at it with a frown and said, "I'm sorry dear, but this toy is reserved."

I sadly took the bear back to its original position. But I still wanted to gift it to my sister. I looked around, not a soul in sight. Without thinking twice, I quickly grabbed the bear and shoved it into my bag. I burst out of the shop. It was raining already.

When I reached home, I opened my bag to check if the bear was still dry, only to find the bear shouting, "Hey! Hey! Oliver!"

"Aaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Don't scream! I'm the bear that you stole from the shop!"



"...How come you can talk?"

"I don't know! Don't ask me! But I have something very important to tell you! Right now!"

"...What is it?"

"Actually, tomorrow, I am supposed to be a present for a girl," the bear said. "That's why I was reserved."

The bear looked me straight in the eye.

"Oliver, please stop this. I appreciate your love for your sister, but what about other people's feelings? Would you truly be happy giving your sister a stolen gift? We should go back to the store."

I was speechless, I just stared at the bear, and nodded. Then I heard my mom knocking at my door.

"Oliver? Are you there?"

"Mom?"

I looked down and saw an ordinary teddy bear smiling up at me from inside my bag. It didn't utter a word, leave aside a twitch.



"You're soaking wet! Do you want some hot cocoa?" my mom asked.

"No... no, thanks! I need to go to the toy store! Right now!!" I said and zipped my bag.

"Oliver? It's still raining! Go back tomorrow!" called my mom, but I shouted back, "It's urgent!" and dived into the pouring rain. I ran all the way back to the store, which was just about to close.

I rushed in, panting, and went straight to the cashier. The woman looked surprised at my entry, but quickly smiled warmly at me and asked, "How can I help you, young man?"

"Actually, I... s... stole this teddy bear earlier today to give it as a present to my baby sister," I explained hesitantly.

I thought she would scold me but she didn't.

"Hmm... Thank you for telling me," said the lady, smiling gently.

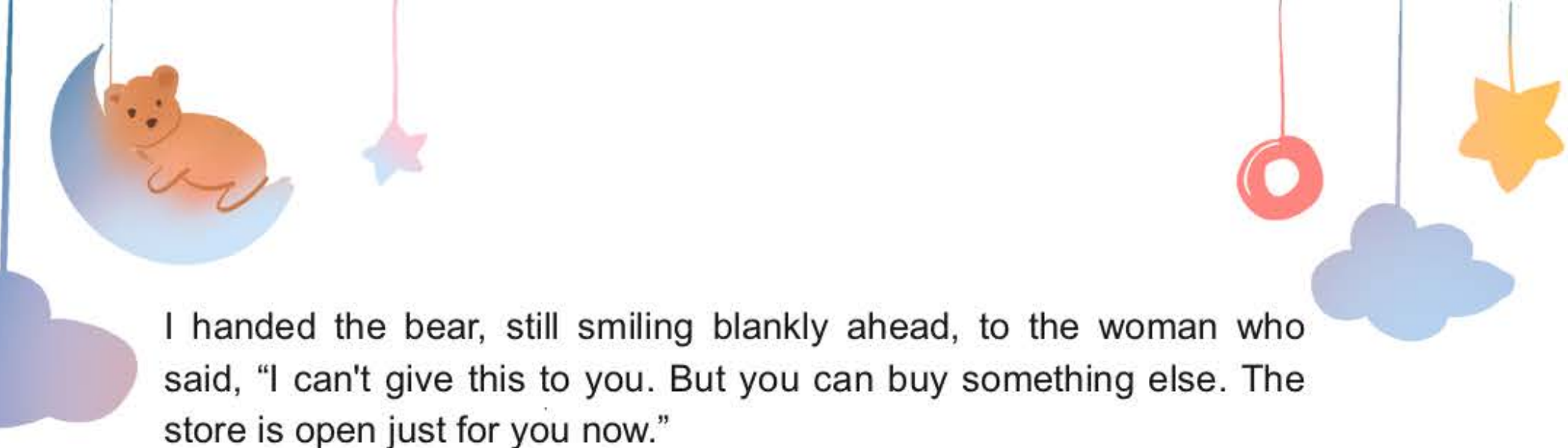
But then she dropped her smile and added, "it is very kind of you to think so fondly of your little sister. But you know you should not steal."

"...Yes"

"Can you hand me the bear, please?" she asked.







I handed the bear, still smiling blankly ahead, to the woman who said, “I can't give this to you. But you can buy something else. The store is open just for you now.”

I chose a regular stuffed bunny, took it to the cashier who kindly wrapped it in pink paper. When I headed out of the store, the rain had strangely stopped. Next day, my parents went shopping.

“Oliver, I want you to keep an eye on your sister. We will come back soon!” said my mom.

When my parents came back, they were carrying a package wrapped exactly in the same pink wrapping paper as the one around the bunny I had bought.

We opened the package excitedly and to my surprise, there was the bear! Suddenly, everything fell into place. My parents were the people who had reserved the bear, and the ‘girl’ the bear was talking about was my sister!

I looked at the bear in my sister’s hands. It might have been my imagination, but I could swear that the bear winked at me.

Not even once since my sister’s first birthday, I saw the teddy bear move ever again.



The Treasure in Grandpa's House

Shrishaya Gongopadhyay

It was a lazy sunday afternoon and the sky was a translucent blue. The twins, Aashish and Aashini were sitting at the Great Lake, by their grandparent's house. Their summer holidays were going on and they had plenty of free time. Aashish wore his swimming shorts and got a small towel before coming outside. He put on his swimming goggles and dived into the water.

The water was cold but comfortable as it was very hot day. His grandfather told him that there were many types of fish in the lake and when Aashish would go swimming he could go look at them. Since today was a hot day, Aashish decided to go swimming, and if he was lucky, take a look at some of the fish.

He dived into a lake and started swimming towards the bottom of the lake. On the way, he saw a school of small fish. He kept swimming down, admiring the incredible fish species he could find, and eventually reached the lake bed. Aashish could hold his breath for about three minutes while swimming very fast because he was a proficient swimmer.

As he kept going deeper, the environment became colder and darker. He saw some very tiny fish down there, but no sign of plant life. Suddenly, he saw something glow. He wanted to investigate, but he needed to get to the surface as fast as he could because was running out of breath. What he saw there was something he couldn't believe.

A golden box with precious stones embedded in it.

Aashish needed to do whatever he had to quickly because he was running out of breath. He grabbed the box and could see that it was stuck in a small hole. He started pulling the box, almost completely breathless, and eventually, it came out. The box was lighter than Aashish expected, so he grabbed the box tightly with both his hands and started swimming towards the surface. He was completely breathless now. He swam as fast as he could.

He gasped for air as he swam out of the water. He called out for Aashini, who was reading a book, and asked her to help him get the box out of the water. He handed the golden box to her. Aashish told Aashini everything that had happened while getting out of the water.

On hearing everything, she said, "So, should we see what's inside the box?"

"Why not?" replied Aashish while drying himself with his towel.

"But there is a keyhole...where is the key?"

Aashini flipped the box over and there was a small chamber with a handle to open it. Aashini pulled it but it was tightly sealed. So, they both pulled it together and as it opened, it revealed a small rusted iron key. Aashini took the key out and inserted it in the keyhole. It fit, and Aashini opened the box.



As the box opened, it revealed a piece of paper, yellowed with age but surprisingly dry.

There was something written on it.....

“If ya found this piece of paper,
crumpled up in this box,
ye found the treasure of Cap’n Squid,
beware though...
you don't know where to dig.”

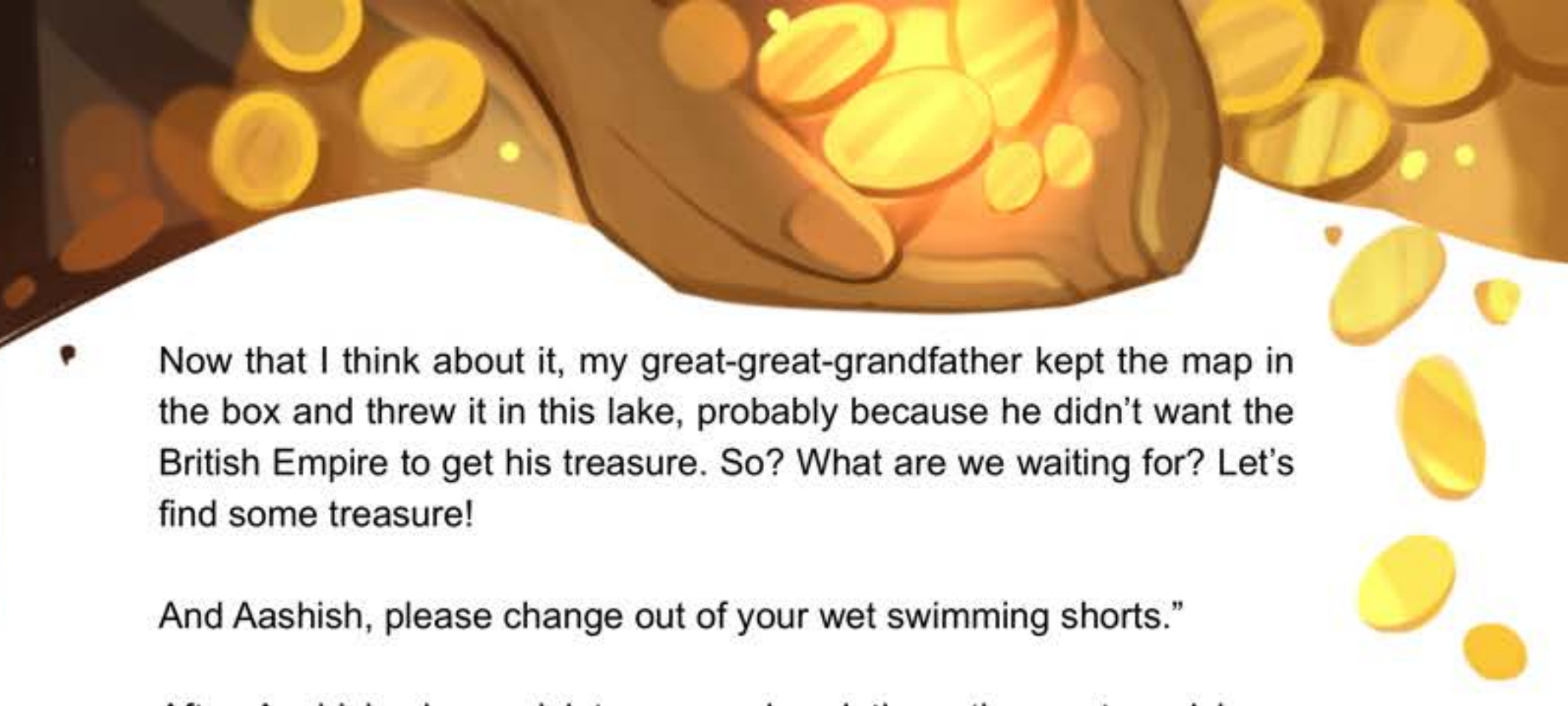
She flipped it over and there was a map. An actual map! And it started from their basement! They put the page inside the box and rushed to their grandpa. Aashish told him the whole story and he exclaimed,

“Sweet and sour seekh kebabs! This is the box of my great-great-grandfather. Not much is known about him. The only thing I know is that he used to work for the Britishers back when they ruled India, they called him Captain Squid because he once caught a giant squid while sailing across the Indian Ocean. He was a rich man and as far as I know, he had a golden box in which he kept his secret things.

Once, he fell very sick and kept all his fortune somewhere in this house along with his servant, and made a map. One day before he died, two things belonging to him vanished, they were the map and the box.







Now that I think about it, my great-great-grandfather kept the map in the box and threw it in this lake, probably because he didn't want the British Empire to get his treasure. So? What are we waiting for? Let's find some treasure!

And Aashish, please change out of your wet swimming shorts."

After Aashish changed into some dry clothes, they got a pickaxe because the map started from their basement and they might have to dig some rocks; a rope, a torch, and of course the map and the box. Aashish kept the box and the torch in a big, brown side bag and they headed down towards the basement.

In the basement, Grandfather looked at the map and said "It says here that there should be a trapdoor somewhere here. And according to my instincts, it is behind that cupboard. Aashish moved the cupboard a little to the right and Aashini started looking. After some time, she found a small mark on the floor where the cupboard should've been.

She said, "Grandpa, doesn't this look like the 'x mark' on the map?"

“It does. So why don’t we dig it?” replied Grandfather while giving Aashish the pickaxe.

As Aashish dug the stone floor he hit something wooden. They cleared out all the pieces of stone and VOILA! A trapdoor! Grandfather and Aashish both jumped in joy and exclaimed!

“HUZZAH! THE ENTRANCE!”

Aashish took the torch out of his side bag and gave it to Aashini, and the three detectives went down the trapdoor. At the end of a tunnel, they found another door with a keyhole, and a beautiful pond glowing beside it. There were some words carved on the stone floor and a hole under them which read-

“Roses are red, Violets are blue,
mix them together and
you’ll get something new.”

Aashish on reading this said, “Mix red and blue and you will get purple. And apparently, there is a purple gem, in the box!”

He took out the box from his side bag and withdrew the gem from it. Then he put the precious stone in the hole in the ground. It fit and rotated automatically, some levers turned and creaked, spiders scattered out in all directions, and the water from the pond drained and revealed a key.



Grandfather gave the rope to Aashish, who tied it around his waist and climbed down to get the key. After some time, he climbed up, key in hand, and put it into the keyhole.

Aashini exclaimed, “A perfect fit! Now Grandpa please open the door!”

The key turned and the door slid open and there it was! Shining and gleaming, heaps of gold and precious jewels.

They took some of the treasure and collected the purple gem and the key for safety and surprisingly, the door closed and the pond refilled with water. Aashish, Aashini, and Grandfather were the three happiest people in the world.

On returning home from shopping, even Grandma was happy after listening to the story.

At the end Aashish said, grinning broadly, “Well, we don't need to worry about money anymore.”

Listening to that, Grandfather said, “Oh, shush. Aren't you just 13 years old? Don't talk about money.”

And that is how a boring afternoon turned into a supremely exciting adventure. Especially, for Aashish and Aashini.

What a wonderful addition to the summer holiday fun.



Selfless Gangadhar and the Magic Flute

Abhirath Kandpal



Army Public School, Tezpur, Sonitpur, Assam

YAMINI

Dear readers, not very long ago, in the mystical land of Varanasi, lived two brothers. The elder one, Vidyadhar was very rich and possessed all the luxuries of life. But the younger one, Gangadhar was very poor, and lived a simple yet harsh life. Vidyadhar was known for his rude and miserly behaviour whereas Gangadhar was known for his kind and sharing nature. Gangadhar's jolly and kind nature spread wherever he went. He used to feed the stray dogs of the village even when he had little food for himself. If he saw anyone carrying heavy things on their own, Gangadhar would volunteer to help. The village's children loved him as he used to tell them stories about different kinds of things and gave them sweets whenever he could afford them.

One day, a sage called Dayanand was passing through the village. He was hungry and first went to Vidyadhar's house. Not very surprisingly, he was humiliated by Vidyadhar and the sage left without saying anything. He then went to Gangadhar's house where Gangadhar gave him whatever little he had, going hungry himself. The sage was surprised to see that a poor person like Gangadhar could have such a good attitude as in all the villages he had gone to, no one was this helpful. Pleased with this, the sage gave him a special flute. The flute, when played in front of sowed seeds, grew crops immediately. Gangadhar folded his hands and thanked the sage and went to try the magic of the flute in his little patch of land. After sowing some wheat seeds and playing the flute, the crops grew rapidly. Gangadhar slept happily with the thought that now he would not have to ration food to survive, the way he did before.



He could have grown extra crops but grew only the necessary quantity for himself and gave the extra to the needy. He helped other economically weak people in growing the crops and also in places that were dry. Now Gangadhar had become a respectful figure in the village. He was called “Selfless Gangadhar”.

Everyone was Gangadhar’s wellwisher except Vidhyadhar, who did not like his poor brother getting so much attention. He always wanted to steal the flute but never got a chance. One day, Gangadhar had to meet someone urgently and he went leaving his flute behind. Vidhyadhar jumped at the opportunity and exchanged the flute with a regular one. On his return, Gangadhar picked up the flute, went to grow some crops for the poor in another village. There, the flute did not work and Gangadhar wasn’t able to give anything to the people. He was now sure that the flute was not his, and he started searching for the magical one.

He searched a lot but was not able to find the flute. He thought of meeting the very sage who gave the flute to him. After talking to nomads of the forest, he came to know that the sage was in a deep forest, on a mountain, far away from the village. Gangadhar travelled to the mountain and found the sage, engaged in deep meditation near a huge banyan tree.

Gangadhar asked the sage, “Oh great sage, the magical flute you gave to me has been stolen. Help me, my lord.”

The sage opened his eyes and recited a shloka, and a dark box appeared in his hand.



He said,” Oh selfless Gangadhar, take this box which contains a special stone that throws light in the direction of the flute.” Gangadhar thanked the sage and went back to the village with the box.

After reaching the village, he went to the village Panchayat and told the people about what had happened. He said, “I have been given this box by the sage and when close enough, it emits a light pointing towards the flute.”

He took the stone out of the box and followed the light. Vidhyadhar, who had hidden the flute a few houses away from his house, was now sweating in fear of being caught. In a few minutes, the flute was found.

Scared and filled with guilt, Vidhyadhar told the truth. Gangadhar did not show any emotion of anger. Instead, he flashed a smile and hugged his brother and said, “It is more than enough, oh brother, for you to accept your mistake and repent for it. No punishment is required for you.”

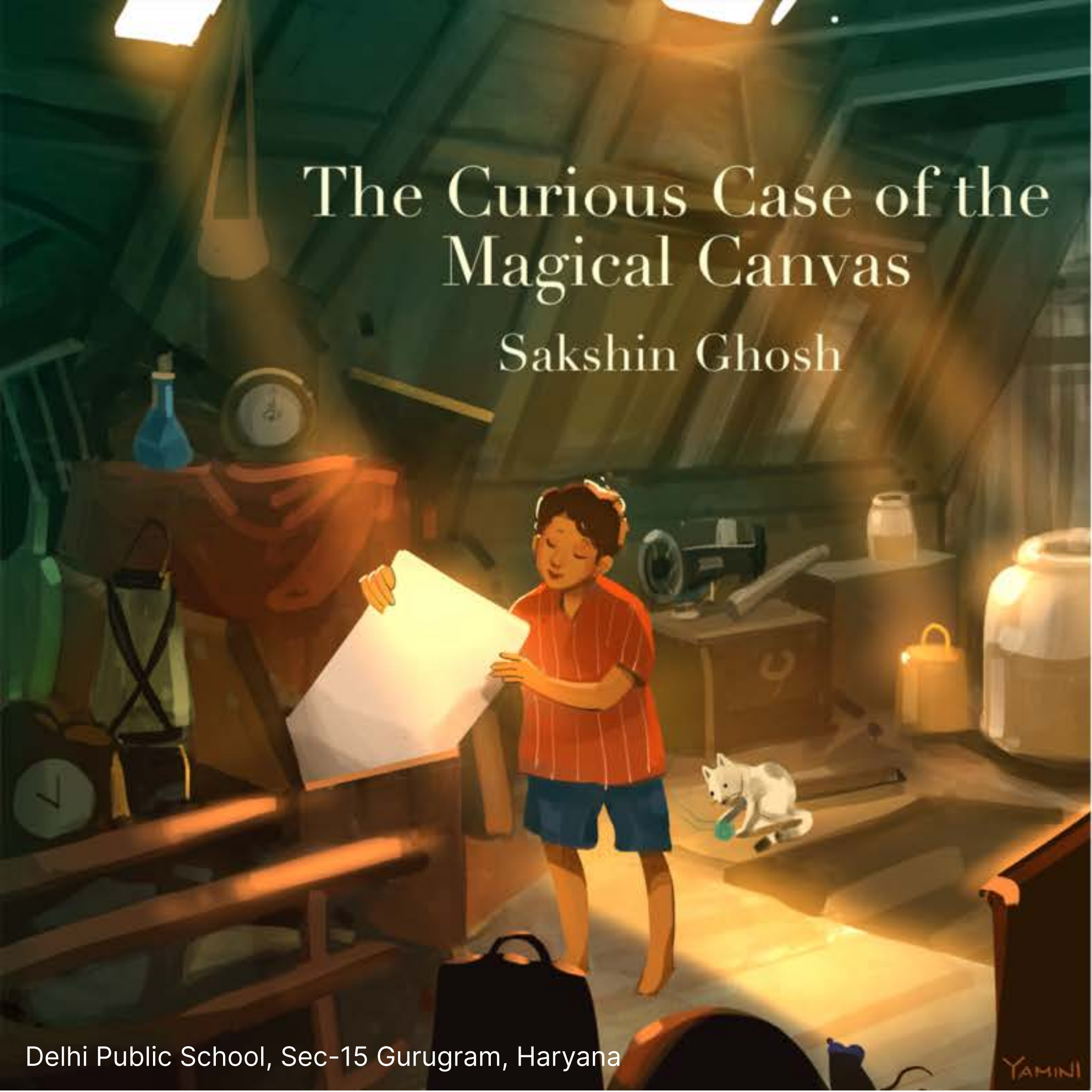
Tears ran through the faces of villagers and Vidyadhar. From that day, Vidyadhar stopped being greedy and joined his brother to help people in need of food everywhere.





The Curious Case of the Magical Canvas

Sakshin Ghosh



I was in the attic of my grandparents' house in Kolkata, playing 'Hide and Seek' with Mr Mews-a-lot, their pet cat, when suddenly I stumbled upon a blank canvas. It seemed worn out, but after some effort I was able to restore it.

Now, I love painting and it is my passion, so an empty canvas felt like a godsent after almost a month of not working on something worthwhile. I thought I would, for the first time ever, try a self-portrait. As usual, my lethargy got the better of me and I forgot about it. The summer vacation was now over, and I returned to Gurgaon with my parents along with the canvas.

A strange attraction pulled me towards the blank canvas like a moth to a flame. I held the canvas and started with the eyes. They were shimmering blue with a little twinkle at the top.

At school the next morning, I felt oddly confident and could easily speak to my classmates while usually I kept to myself.

In the evening that day I painted the eyebrows. Although most people assume that hair and eyebrows have a solid brown or black colour to them, us artists like to put a little bit of red to make it more vibrant.

Next day at school I ran a bad temper and was screaming at everyone who disturbed me even a little bit. I looked in the mirror of the washroom and was horrified at what I saw. My hair had gone from black to brown and my eyes from brown to blue!

The painting seemed to be changing how my face looked and how I behaved. Since blue made me more confident and extrovert, I painted my face, ears, and neck all blue. Although this didn't change my physical appearance (which can possibly be due to this being a second layer), it changed my behaviour considerably.

While, earlier I was known to be mild mannered, I was suddenly being called 'arrogant' and 'overconfident.' I realised that too much of something could be bad for me, so I tried adding a bit more brown to change me back to my original self. I added just a dash of blue and continued.

I then tried adding a bit of green as it was usually associated with prosperity. The next day, I felt as if I could help everyone and felt much calmer and more satisfied with what I was doing. Of course, too much of this couldn't be that bad, right?

So, once again, I foolishly coloured major parts of my face green for I thought it would make me happier.

It didn't go quite well! I became so relaxed that I eventually became lazy and boring. I didn't take into account that extreme happiness can cause you to be too lazy and not exactly very smart.





I painted with the various colours at hand, and the series of 'experiments' that I conducted helped me understand my strengths and weaknesses. Instead of having to guess how my life would be if I was happier, or more confident, I could now act on it.

Self-improvement became easier than ever. However, much of my time went towards painting on the canvas and I slowly began to realise just how closely my life had become linked to it. The painting was turning hideous due to my eagerness to control and manipulate my life. It started to get to me.

I realised that changing or controlling life makes it boring. I realised that it is the state of not knowing what lies ahead is what makes life interesting. In trying to control my life and emotions, I had given up on my main goal, which was to make a painting. I couldn't take it anymore.

I removed all the extra layers and started a new. I disregarded the canvas's magical powers and did what I loved to do.

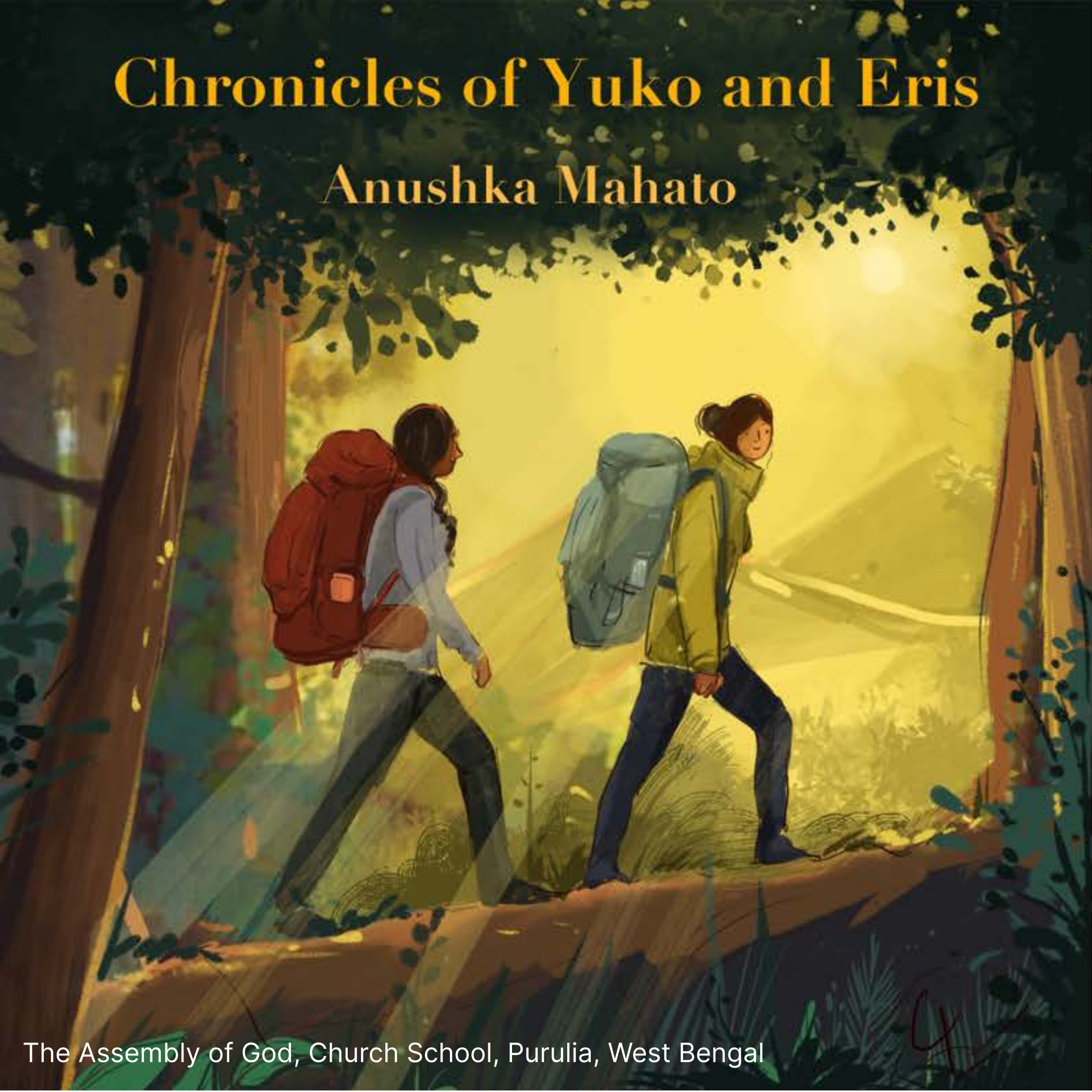
I just painted.





Chronicles of Yuko and Eris

Anushka Mahato



Sun rays beamed through the once gloomy clouds, and new green leaves have sprung up, and the once dreadful sea coast has cleared up its mist.

"The storm has cleared up!" says Yuko to her partner, pleasantly surprised at the sudden change of weather.

The atmosphere still felt heavy despite the breeze blowing gently. With the storm over, the two adventurers finally stepped outside to continue their expedition.

This place, Mount Sumeru, is believed to be the land where fallen deities would roam about.

It isn't exactly known for its kind weather. The longer you venture this land, the stronger the levels of corrosion and one could even lose their mind. Even the rain clearing up was a miracle in itself.

No human has ever set foot on this land, let alone ventured inside. Recent commotion from the mountain and disruptions in the ley lines lead to dispatching an investigation expedition with the two most expert adventurers known far and wide — Eris Azuma and Yuko Ryobu.

The history of this land dates back 500 thousand years, the war of Heriotza took place where Mount Sumeru is now. Deities fought for their control over the four nations, presently known as Eurus, Zephyrus, Boreas, and Notus named after the four wind gods — the only deities who survived the battle.

As for the fallen deities, they were deprived of their minds with corrosion consuming their consciousness and turning them into monsters. The Darcadean Witch sealed off the fallen deities with ley lines onto Mount Sumeru to protect humanity.

It was all going fine until an outer deity took an interest in the power of the ley lines. He proposed an idea to rule the world together by freeing the monsters. Her refusal to work with the deity resulted in her being sealed inside her own creation, her despair fills the mountain peak till this day.

Eris comes from a bloodline of researchers. Mountain Sumeru has remained a mystery for centuries and when given the chance to study the place with an experienced traveler, he couldn't give up the opportunity.

What he greatly underestimated was his partner. Not long into their journey, Eris starts grimacing. His traveling partner was extremely talkative. She would often get distracted by the scenery and asked questions whenever she could.



It was a bit hard to believe— how could someone be so cheerful whilst walking straight into danger's gate?

But considering how Yuko had taken up many risky commissions and had been to several treacherous journeys, she was dedicated to discovering both the wonders and horrors the world had to offer. Places like these weren't new for her.

His attention then diverted to the trees. As they continued their way up the mountains, the trees were more eroded and every footstep could be heard due to the scattered leaves. Strangely, they all had an orange tint.

"The weather phenomena is different from the coast," Yuko spoke up again. Despite Eris's silence she was determined to get him to talk and learn about her partner.

"You're right, it feels artificial, such distortions can't appear naturally."

Eris was completely reserved the whole journey so hearing him talk surprised Yuko.

"Could someone or something be behind this?"

Despite the menacing situation they were moving forward. Suddenly they heard footsteps that didn't belong to either of them.

Whatever it was, it was approaching them fast.



Eris, even though an expert in countless adventure skills and having studied the lifeforms of Sumeru extensively with whatever little historical sources he could find, never expected to encounter any.

Yuko swiftly reacting to the sounds and draws out her blade— before she could raise her katana to the noise she is taken down by an unknown entity. It must be one of the monsters.

Seeing Yuko disappear right before his eyes he was extremely confused but fear took over his curiosity. The same monster had appeared behind him before his vision went black.

“GAME OVER” a static screen appears.

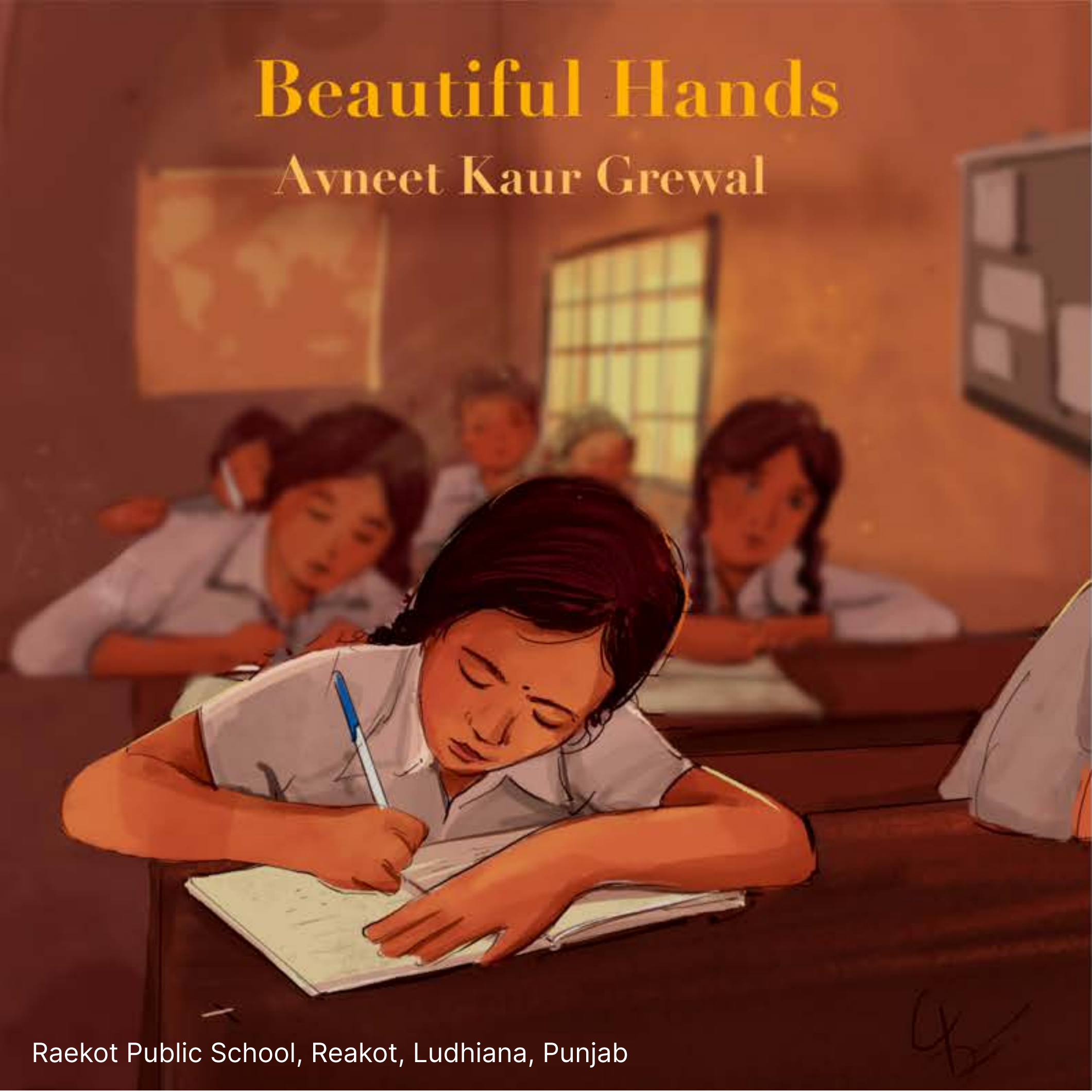
“YOU COULD’VE RUN”

“MY COMPUTER WAS LAGGING” shouts Erika defensively.

Her friend, Miu was extremely frustrated yet she couldn’t help but restart the game, again.

Beautiful Hands

Avneet Kaur Grewal



Raekot Public School, Raekot, Ludhiana, Punjab

Once upon a time, there was a girl named Neeru who lived in a small town named Gokuldhama. She was fifteen and was living happily with her parents and siblings.

Neeru was very intelligent and always secured good marks. She enjoyed going to school and was very punctual.

Her mother was a strong and devoted lady who had been bedridden due to an illness which left Neeru in charge of the household work. One day her mother's condition became serious and she died.

So, the entire responsibility came on Neeru's shoulders. She had to take care of the house and her younger siblings. Her father worked outside the village and he used to return late at night. To fulfill her responsibility, Neeru had to wake up early in the morning and do all the household work. She got her brother and sister ready for school and also packed their lunch boxes.

After doing all the household work, she went to school every day. However, she always reached school on time. She also used to study late at night. She was very punctual and hard working.

On the occasion of the prize distribution function Neeru was awarded the prize for punctuality, she also stood third in the class. When she came to the stage to get the prize, she was hesitant to hold the award. It seemed as if she was hiding her hands.

The chief guest saw the condition of her hands. They were rough, scaly and untidy. He was surprised to see the condition of her hands. When she was asked about it, she first refused to explain anything but later she narrated her difficult journey.



He was so impressed by her determination that he announced to give her the "Beautiful Hands" prize. He was amazed to see how a young girl not only took the responsibility of her family but also worked hard to achieve the goals of her life.

In the next special assembly, students were being awarded for their humanitarian traits. Now, it was time for the last award and that award was 'Beautiful Hands.' Neeru was not as pretty as the other girls. Nobody expected her to get this award.

However, her name was announced.

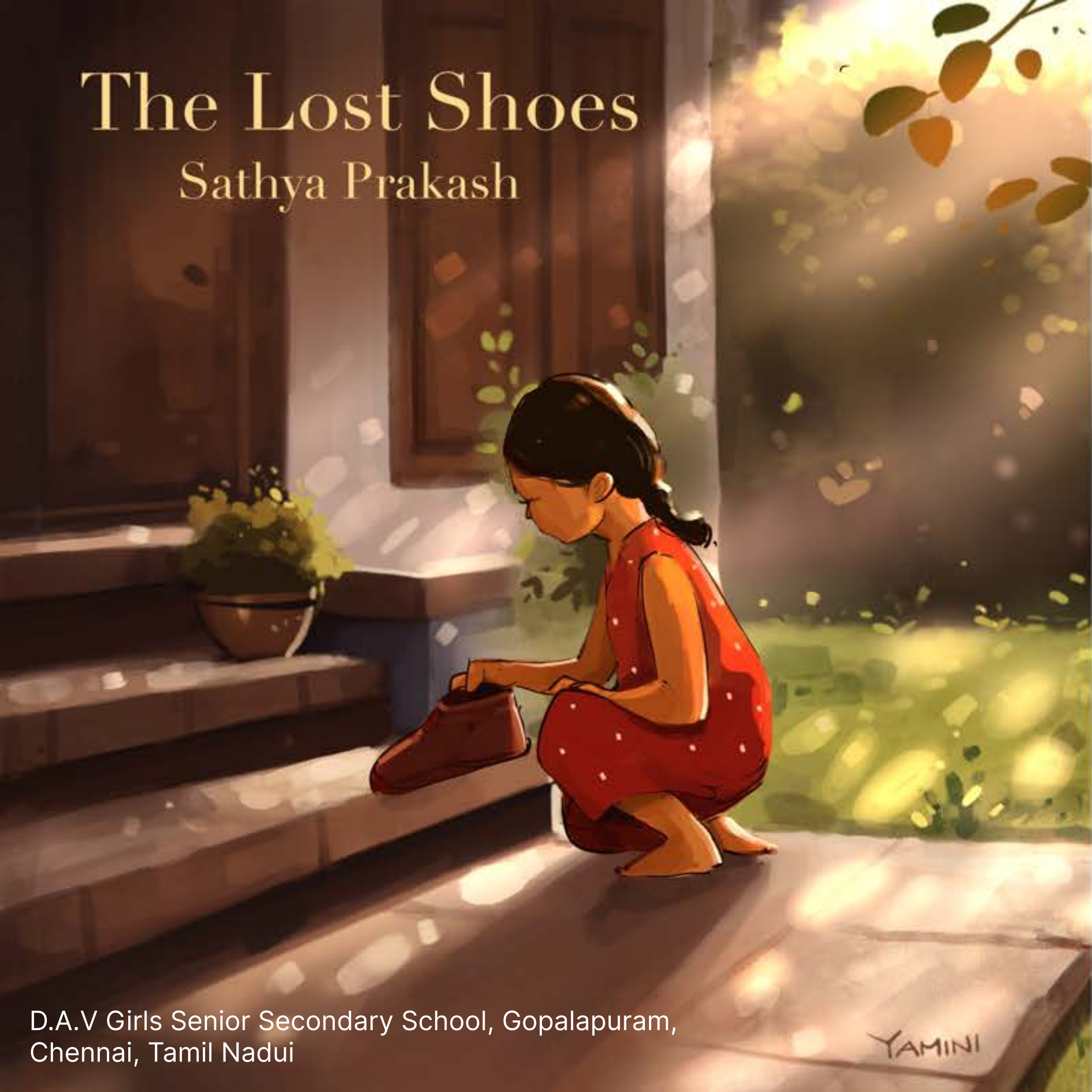
Her hands were not clean because of the household work she did, but even then, she got the prize. Everyone had a quizzical look on their faces, "Why was she receiving this award?"

The chief guest got up and said that the condition of Neeru's hands showed her hard-work. So, in the real sense, her hands were the most beautiful. Beautiful things cannot be judged by their external beauty.

MORAL : We should not judge people based on their external appearances; we must appreciate their inner beauty.

The Lost Shoes

Sathya Prakash



D.A.V Girls Senior Secondary School, Gopalapuram,
Chennai, Tamil Nadu

YAMINI

One Saturday morning Mr. Gopal was watching the news.

The breaking news was, single shoes were being stolen from the locality. This news caught the attention of his 9-year-old daughter Nivya, who was getting ready to go to school. She was having her delicious oats breakfast.

Nivya Gopal was a smart and brave girl. She always liked adventures.

On the way to school with her dad, she was curious about the news that was disturbing her, and was chatting about the lost shoes. Her dad told her that the police were doing their duty and they would solve the mystery very soon.

Mr. Gopal dropped Nivya at school and went to the office. Nivya entered the classroom and found that her friend Christine was sobbing. Nivya confronted Christine and asked what the matter was. Christine told her that she had lost one of her favorite and most expensive shoes. Nivya was surprised to know this. Seeing Christine sobbing, many of her classmates came to find out what the matter was.

Hearing the reason behind Christine crying, few of her classmates said that their single slippers and shoes were also missing from their homes, Nivya, Christine and all the children decided to solve the mystery of the "STOLEN SHOES".

Nivya and Christine spoke about it and decided to meet in the evening after they finished their school work to discuss this mystery further.

When Nivya reached home she told her mother about what had happened at school. Nivya's mother asked her to finish her school work and that they would discuss it when her father was back from work. Nivya's dad, Mr. Gopal, was back from office at 6. After he had his cup of coffee, Nivya and her mom told him about the incident at school.

Mr. Gopal instantly squashed the plan and scolded Nivya. His concern was that Nivya and Christine were too young for all this. Nivya pleaded and convinced her dad that she would definitely concentrate on studies and only then spend some time investigating the matter of the stolen shoes. Nivya's dad also agreed to help them.

Christine came to Nivya's house that evening. Nivya's parents greeted her. They all sat together in the lawn and had some snacks and coffee. They discussed various issues like school, studies, outings, shopping etc.

Nivya's parents asked Christine how she found out that her shoe was lost. Christine said that everybody in her house would keep their shoes and slippers in the shoe rack in front of their house. Last Monday, she had to attend a birthday party. She got dressed and when she was about to leave, she wanted to wear her favorite pair of shoes, but she couldn't find one of them. She was getting late for the party so she wore some other pair of slippers and went for the party.

She thought that she must have misplaced it somewhere and after returning

from the party she would search for it. But seeing the news on the television she realized that her shoe had actually been stolen. Nivya's parents asked if there was anything suspicious in and around their house. Christine tried to recollect and told that as it was a rainy season, she had seen some large footprints in the mud, some vehicle tyre marks and some animal footprints.

Next day being Sunday, Nivya and Christine decided to start early to investigate about this in the neighborhood. Nivya and Christine went door to door in the neighborhood and enquired if they had lost any shoes. Many in the neighborhood had lost a single shoe from a pair or single shoes from two pairs. They all were very worried as to who the thief was and why would he steal only a single shoe or slipper. Everybody in the neighborhood was also curious to know whose footprints were found in the mud.

On the way, they met Mr. Ravi, the investigating police officer. Mr. Ravi was very proud of these children, as at this young age they were curious to solve the mystery. Nivya and Christine accompanied Mr. Ravi in his neighborhood investigation. After an initial inquiry, Mr. Ravi came to the conclusion that the postman of the locality had visited all the affected houses to drop letters. This was the common link.

Mr. Ravi took Nivya and Christine in his jeep to the postman's house. It had started raining again. They reached the postman's house, got down and ran towards the house in order to save themselves from the rain. They rang the doorbell. The lady of the house came and opened the door. She looked



astonished to see the policeman and two girls in this weather at their doorstep.

Mr. Ravi told her not to worry and that they had just come by for some enquiry with the postman. By this time the postman had also come out of his room to see what was happening. They invited the children and policeman to come inside and assured that he would cooperate in whatever way possible. All of them sat together and had a general chit chat about the locality, people etc. The postman's wife went to the kitchen to bring some hot tea and pakodas for all, as it was raining and everybody would enjoy it.

Everybody had their tea and pakodas and were feeling comfortable to talk to each other. It was still drizzling.



Mr. Ravi asked the postman about the society where many shoes had strangely gone missing. The postman said that the society was a very peaceful one with all good people, but the roads were not in good condition. Also were many stray dogs in that locality and they would keep running behind strangers, so he always preferred to go by a mail van to that area.

“Stray dogs,” Mr. Ravi and the children looked at each other.

This was a new clue.

Being rainy season, everybody would be inside. These stray dogs would pick up some slippers or shoes lying in front of the house and play with them or tear them to pieces and roam about here and there.

After enquiring with the postman, Mr. Ravi and children left the postman's house. It was still raining. Mr. Ravi dropped the children at their respective houses and told them not to worry anymore and peacefully go to school the next day.

The next day, being Monday, Nivya was getting ready for school. Nivya's father was watching the local news channel and the news reporters were showing Mr. Ravi talking to press, about the mystery of the lost shoes and how the case had been solved by two young enthusiastic girls. He was asking the public not to worry, as the case was solved.



Nivya reached the school and was very excited to share her and Christine's experience with their classmates. All her friends and teachers appreciated their effort. The Principal of the school arranged a special assembly and congratulated both the girls for their courage. She encouraged all other students also to be responsible citizen and take up some social cause and work towards the betterment of society.



The Day the Tap Ran Dry

Vivvaan Bajpayee



“APPA! THERE’S NO WATER!” yelled Meenu.

Appa ran to the bathroom where she stood.

“What happened?” he asked, puzzled.

“There’s NO water!”

“How can there be no water?”

He tilted the handle to either side but could only hear air gush through.

WHOOSH.

He scowled and ran down.

Appa came back with his toolbox and tried to fix the tap. No water.

The duo ran to the kitchen. The tap was dry too.

Amma came out of the balcony holding Appa’s shirt and said that the washing machine had stopped. Madhav, Meenu’s brother, walked down the steps, his hair caked with bubbles from the unwashed shampoo.

“Appa, where is all the water?” Meenu asked anxiously.

The four went outside the house to check.

“Is the water purifier broken? There is not a drop to drink!” exclaimed Velu Anna.

“Why is the dishwasher not working? It was fine yesterday!” muttered Rangaswami Thatha.

All around them, people were complaining of NO WATER.

“How will I wash the vegetables and cook?” grumbled Kamala Ajji.

They all shook their heads in disbelief. Their world seemed to have come to a standstill.

Throughout the day, they ate only fruits and salads.

Meenu's Appa wandered down the lane and around the town, looking for water. By afternoon, people decided to drill for groundwater. As evening kicked in, gloom descended on the town.

After a quick meal of some fruits, they all hit the bed. They could barely sleep because of the hunger and uncertainty that gnawed at them.

Meenu lay in her bed, staring at the darkness, before falling asleep. All at once, Meenu found herself in a room with a table and a goblet of water. Instantly, she knew this was not home. She lifted the goblet to drink, to quench her thirst.



Suddenly, something flashed, and she saw a green and blue orb. It turned red and extremely hot. She watched as the blue parts faded away and the green parts turn black. The red and black colours spread throughout the orb. Momentarily, it vanished out of sight.

Just then, the water in the goblet spoke, "Hello Meenu."

"Who are you?" she asked, startled.

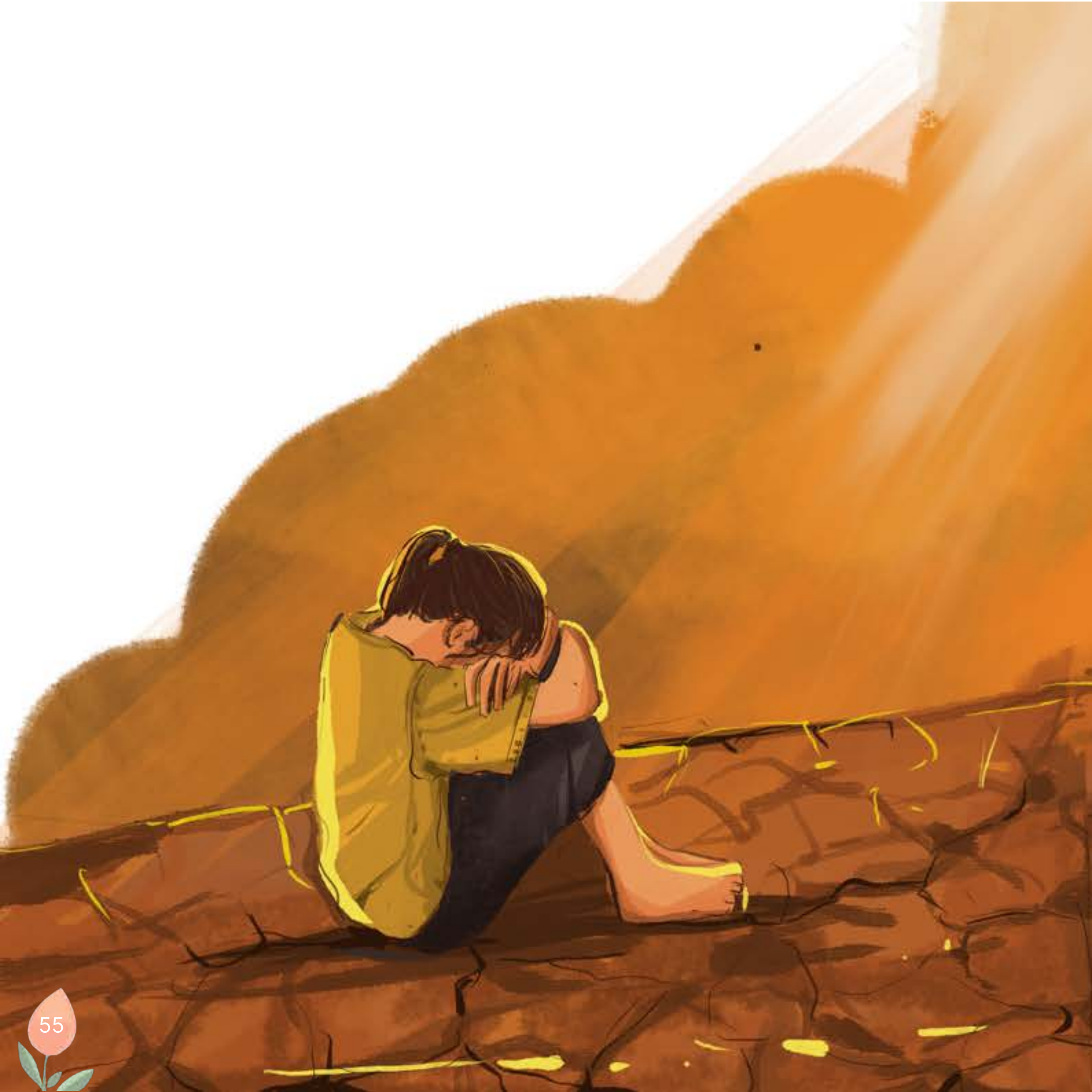
"I am WATER. You witnessed the fate of planet Earth. You have exhausted my supplies. You wasted my generosity and used your resources irresponsibly. In the years to come, I will leave Earth forever. Earth will dry up, grow extremely hot and become uninhabitable."

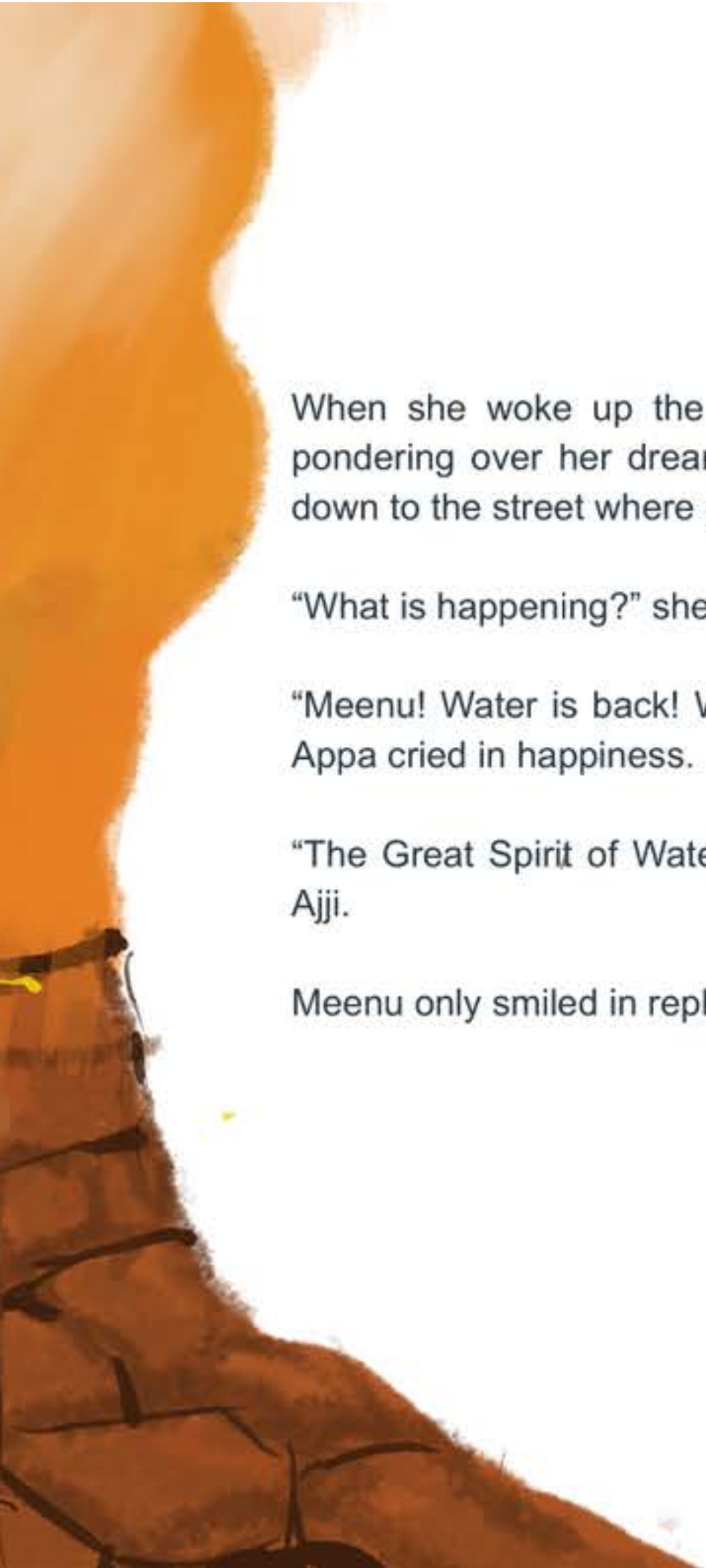
Meenu was rendered speechless.

"Please, return to Earth! We will use you judiciously from now on! We have learnt our lesson!" cried Meenu.

WATER thought and said, "Very well. Drink from this goblet."

Meenu gulped down the entire contents of the goblet.





When she woke up the next day, she felt confused and kept pondering over her dream until she heard a cry of joy. She ran down to the street where people were cheering and celebrating.

“What is happening?” she asked.

“Meenu! Water is back! We have found abundant groundwater!!” Appa cried in happiness.

“The Great Spirit of Water is shining on us!” proclaimed Kamala Ajji.

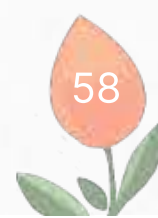
Meenu only smiled in reply.

----- Epilogue -----

Meenu never forgot the encounter with 'The Spirit of Water.' As a kid, she started using water efficiently and advised the same to others in the town and outside. When she grew up, she spearheaded campaigns to protect the water bodies. Meenu took every step to ensure that the diversity of water never left Earth!

Water, water running dry –
We cannot say to it – bye, bye.
In every river, in every bay,
Conserve water, so it'll stay!





Village on Stilts

Raghav Balaji



Once, not long ago, there was a village near the dense forest that housed many animals. The people in the village used to cut down the trees from the forest for their livelihood. As the days went by, the forest started to disappear.

The animals often visited the town in search of food and water. People started killing those animals out of fear. The villagers were worried about the animals and every day they would gather and talk. Harshaan, the young shepherd listened to this every day.

Harshaan was loving and kind boy. He was kind to everyone and was also fond of animals. He was worried that his loved ones, both the animals and people were struggling. He kept thinking of any possible solutions that would help the people and animals to coexist.

One day, Harshaan went to his farm as usual, but that day, a herd of elephants came out of the forest near the farm. Harshaan hid behind the bushes and watched them closely. The herd of elephants was playing with a little deer. The deer was darting in and out between the huge legs of the elephant. Looking at how the deer went through the legs of the elephant, Harshaan had his eureka moment.

Harshan got an idea on how to make both species co-exist. An idea which would allow the animals to roam on the ground freely. What if people built

their houses on stilts? He went and told the others. The villagers were impressed with this unique solution and decided to try it. They soon raised their houses from the ground level.

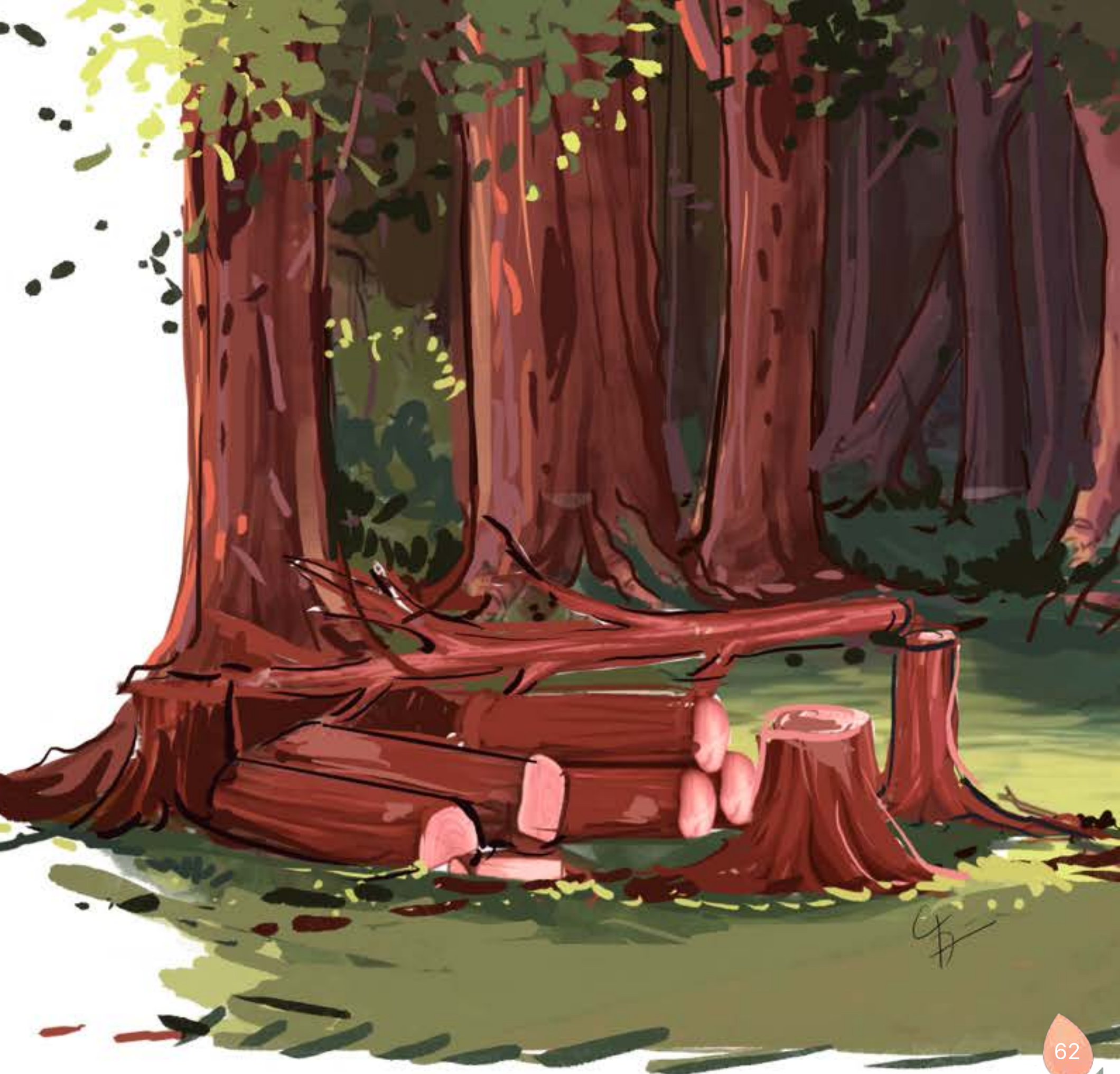
The idea worked! The animals were free to move on the ground and people over the stilts. Soon they had their poultry, cowsheds and everything moved up to the stilts and didn't disturb the animals living on the land.

They in fact had their poultry, water tanks built on stilts. And since the houses were on the stilts, the rain water harvesting happened naturally.

Soon the village became a tourist attraction as they were many animals in the vicinity. It caught everyone's attention. Harshaan was the hero of the village. Everyone who came to visit the village on stilts, met Harshan and asked what more could be done.

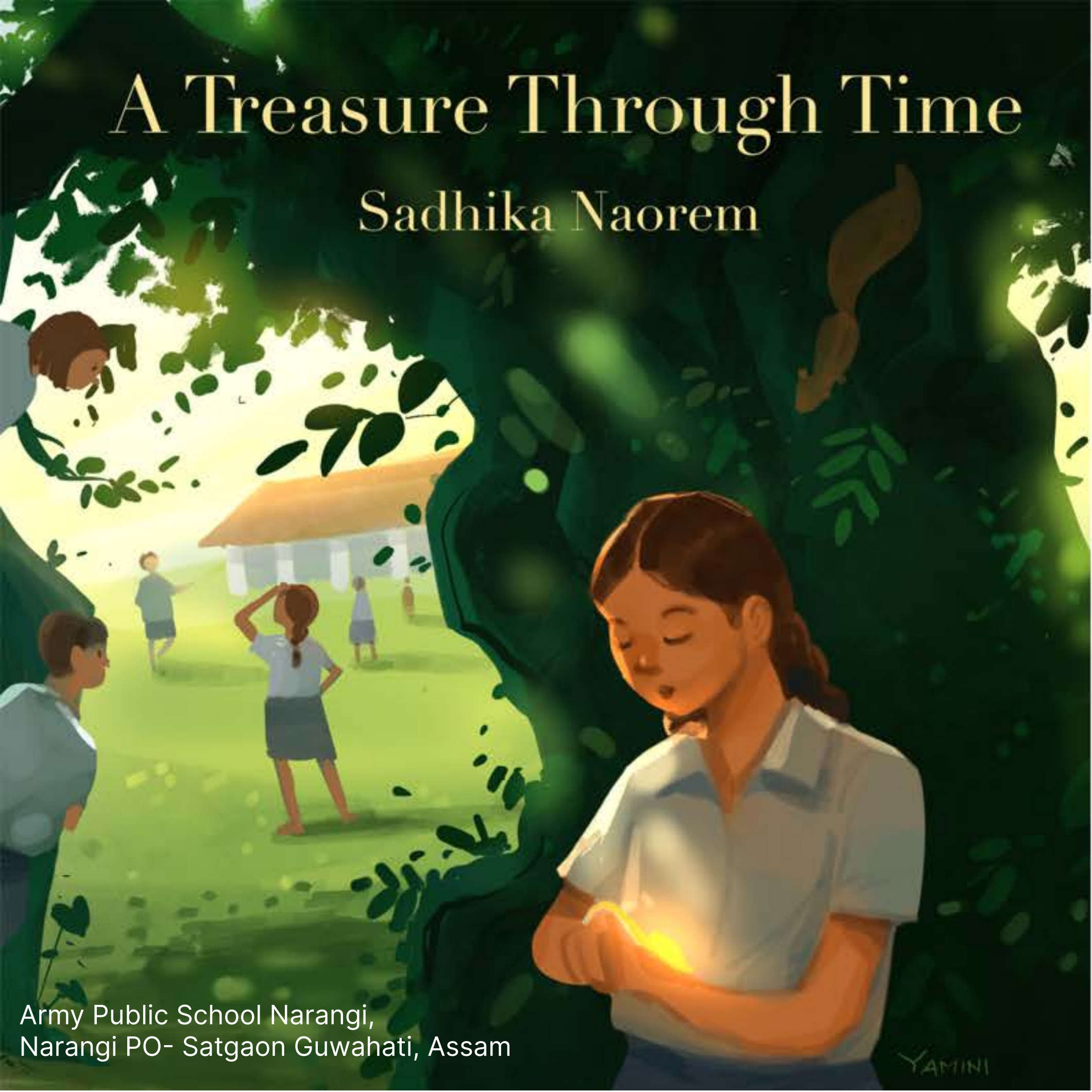
Harshan was smart and he asked for robots to pick up the plastic trash from the forest and the village. He also asked for CCTV cameras to be installed to track the animals and alert the villagers getting down while moving around.

Thus, the people of the village on stilts and the animals lived in harmony. Technology helped them to coexist.



A Treasure Through Time

Sadhika Naorem



Army Public School Narangi,
Narangi PO- Satgaon Guwahati, Assam

YAMINI

The day at school was like any other. My friends and I were playing hide and seek in the field during recess.

“One, Two, Three...” counted Saira.

I was concealed behind a tall tree with broad-reaching branches and a trunk so thick that I could easily hide behind it and remain unseen. As I watched Saira find my friends, I felt a faint tremor beneath my feet. Suddenly, the ground collapsed and I found myself in a pit!

I looked around to see where I was. A sparkle soon caught my eye and I started to dig in that area to find a shining circular box. I opened it and found an old manuscript and a strange device, roughly circular, that looked like a clock. It had seven hands, all marked with some strange symbols, and two circular discs on either side. There were a few knobs with strange symbols on the side of the object.

I looked at the manuscript with newfound curiosity. There was an illustration of the device with labels in the same strange language.

By that time, I had completely forgotten about my predicament of being stuck in a pit; too intrigued by the strange device! I took the manuscript as my guide and tinkered with the clock-like device. I moved a few knobs here and there. Then I heard a sudden ‘CLICK’ and my vision went white.

It’s hard to describe the sensation of being hurtled through seemingly nothing. It felt like being sucked into a faraway dream. One feels weightless



and as heavy at the same time. All in all, a very confusing sensation.

The sensation suddenly stopped and I caught myself on all fours to keep from falling and took a moment to collect myself. When I shook myself out of my stupor, I realized that I was no longer in my school field.

I had landed near the edge of a street. But the street was not bustling with cars like I was used to. Instead, the houses were made of old-style brick, stone, and mud. And oddly dressed people were walking around, going about their daily business. I started to walk towards a woman wearing a plain yellow sari, but as soon as she saw me, she got a strange expression on her face as if I were an alien. I turned away and kept walking.

Strangely, almost everyone who saw me reacted in a similar fashion. While I could understand that it was rather odd to see a girl, who was no older than 13 years, in a school uniform walking the street during school hours, I hardly thought that it could warrant such a reaction. Suddenly, I saw a scholarly-looking man talking to a person. I picked up my pace.

“Uhm... Excuse me, Sir,” I interrupted his conversation, “What is this place?”

The man looked shocked, “Do you mean that you don’t know where you are? Are you lost?”

I nodded.

“You are on the outskirts of the city of Nalanda. I can-”



He was interrupted by an aged voice, "I know her, Kubaer. She is a relative of mine. I will get her back to her parents."

"Of course, Guruji." Kubaer addressed me, "You are lucky to be a relative of one of the greatest minds in Nalanda. Goodbye!"

All my prior thoughts screeched to a stop. Did I hear correctly? Maybe this was all just some vivid hallucination cooked up by my overactive brain. Yes... that made sense. Or how else could I have traveled so far from Guwahati to NALANDA!! Distantly I noticed the old man put a blanket around me, saying, "Stay close. I think we are being followed." His actions snapped me out of my thoughts.

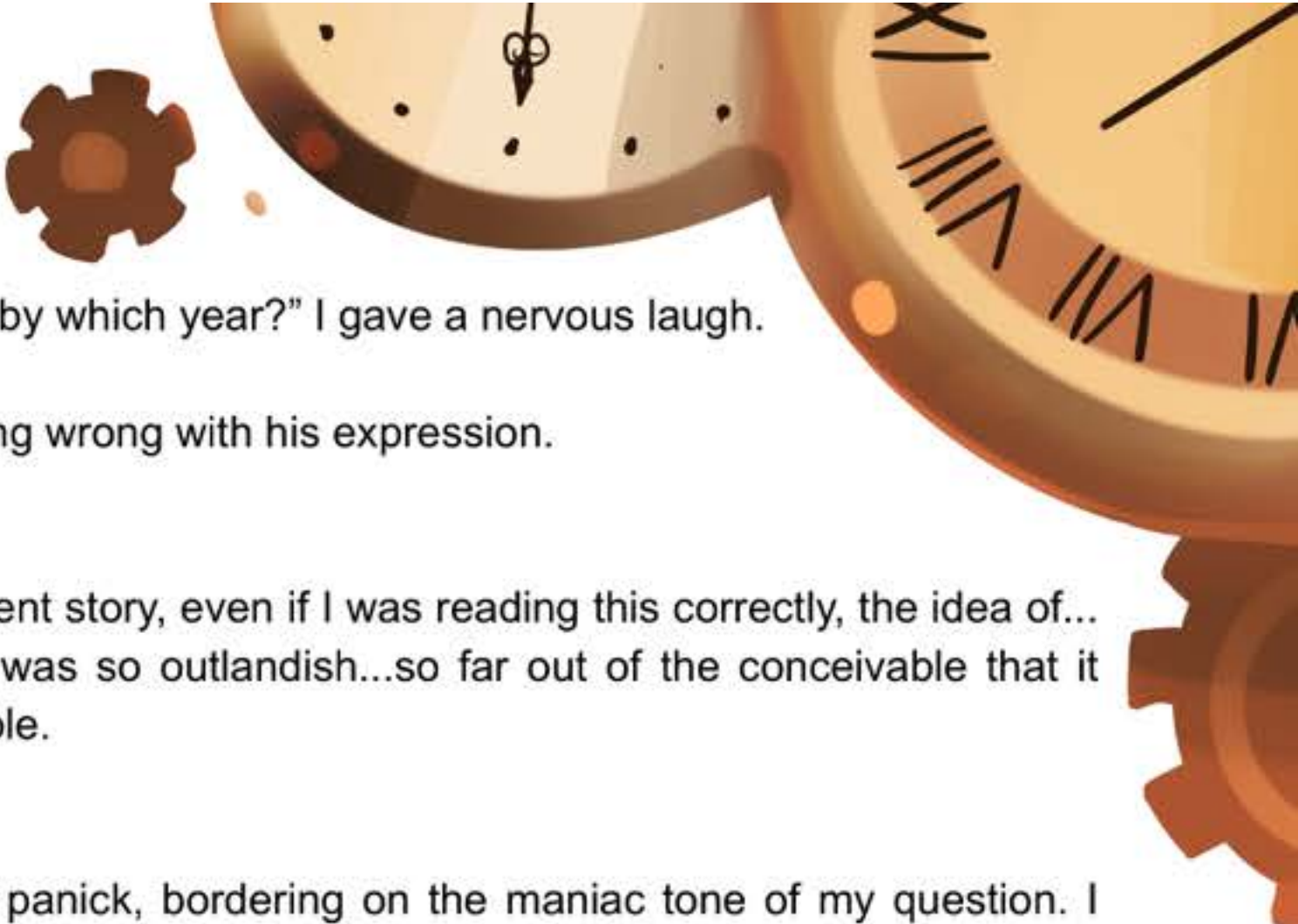
"Do you know me?!" I asked as he led me around the city. I never thought that Nalanda would be so... old-styled. It seemed much more village-like than I expected.

"Sort of..." was the old man's reply. "But first, tell me... who are you and how did you get that?" He gestured to the device.

I introduced myself and narrated the incident. During the explanation, a myriad of expressions flitted across his face- disbelief, shock, and realization.

"Do you know where- no... which year it is?"
I froze at his wording.





"What do you mean by which year?" I gave a nervous laugh.

"It's 2023..."

There was something wrong with his expression.

"...Isn't it?"

His face told a different story, even if I was reading this correctly, the idea of... no... it can't be... it was so outlandish...so far out of the conceivable that it should not be possible.

"ISN'T IT!?!"


I barely noticed the panick, bordering on the maniac tone of my question. I was trapped in my head.

The old man spoke gently, "My child, you have traveled back in time. The year is 1135."

I had time traveled... I was shocked.

"I am Guru Chitrugupta. Come with me and I will explain more once we get home."

We reached his hut, located in a secluded corner of the village. He locked the door and sighed in relief, before taking the device in his hands.



"This device is the same yantra," Guruji explained. "It is my invention and it allows the user to travel through time. The king got wind of my invention and he wanted to use it for his gain. I managed to get the king and his soldiers off my back by staging a fire where all my research and the device were burnt. But, I couldn't bear to destroy such a revolutionary device, so I threw it away into the river to ensure no one would ever find it. It seems it made its way to your place over time. But since people have seen you, I fear that the king might get a whiff of it and try to get hold of the same yantra. I suspect that the person following us might be a spy of the king."

"I must send you back before they arrive." He said, adjusting some of the knobs. "The longer you are present here, the more danger the both of us are in, not to mention the disruption of the timeline. I'm setting the device to your time, once you reach, destroy it. No one must-"

He was interrupted by a loud 'BANG' on the door. A glance through the window confirmed his worst fears; the soldiers had arrived. Our eyes widened in panic. While Guruji's old hands moved at lightning speed, tweaking the device, the door flew open with a resounding 'CRASH!' bringing us to our knees.

The next moment, the soldiers put daggers on both our throats. "Get up and surrender yourselves!" said one soldier.

I felt disassociated as if I was watching it all from an outsider's perspective.



Was this the end? Was this how I was fated to die; lost in the strands of time? I felt my life flash before my eyes. I felt true fear. My heart was racing as I desperately hoped, though it might have been useless, that I would somehow make it out of this alive.

Guruji, on the other hand, simply gave a resigned nod at the soldier's orders, as if he had already accepted his fate. But I noticed his eyes were locked on me, glinting with steely determination. He got up before suddenly pressing the same yantra into my hands.

My eyes widened with shock. The last thing I saw was Guruji's small smile, happy with the knowledge that the device would be out of the king's grasp. With a 'CLICK' the world went white again.

I was back in the pit, still reeling in shock from the previous events. I thought for a moment that I had hallucinated it all. But when I looked down, there... in my hand was the same yantra. I climbed out of the pit. I was so caught up in my thoughts of what had just happened; that I still couldn't believe most of it. My mind was so consumed that I was completely oblivious to the person standing right behind me.

"CAUGHT YOU, Arundhati!"



Anil & Anu: Case of the Missing Necklace

Vaishali Saravanan



Chettinad Vidyashram,
Rajah Annamalai Puram, Chennai, Tamil Nadu

YAMINI

Anil and Anu were bored!

Since their summer holidays had been announced, the innovative brother and adventurous sister were meandering around their neighborhood aimlessly, having nothing interesting to do at all.

"Find some friends or ride your bicycles", was the only answer they received from their mom when they complained of boredom.

On a hot day in April, Anil had a splendid thought. "Let's start a detective agency! Being young crime-solvers would catch everyone's eyes and it would help us to pass our time too."

As if reading his mind, Anu paused her crime-thriller movie and walked out to the kitchen where Anil was in a trance about the fabulous idea he had just brainstormed.

"You know, we should start a detective agency! We could have plenty of business since people like Anitha Auntie always lose stuff and mishaps happen here and there often."

"You read my mind, Banana."

Anu smiled at the nickname. Her older brother called her Banana for as long as she can remember. It was her favorite fruit after all.

"But wait, what will we do for space? We need a place to manage our stuff, right?" queried Anu.



"Let's talk to Amma. She might have an idea," piped out Anil.

Anil and Anu's talk with their Amma, Sumi, had been quite fruitful. Sumi had let the two investigators use the little garden house as their lair. Satisfied, Anu ran out to set up their office. Sumi chuckled at her two avid investigators. The next day, Anil used the printer at home to print about fifty pamphlets advertising their side hustle. Anu then went and distributed them around the neighborhood. Two days had passed and nobody had called them yet. Disheartened, Anil and Anu gave up. They had packed up and were about to leave when Vani Shanmugham, who was two houses away from them, rang the bell to the dainty little garden shaft.

"Are you Anil and Anu?"

"Yes."

"My necklace is missing. It is a family heirloom."

The brother and sister shared a look and invited Vani inside. Vani gazed inside the room, staring at the shovel and the cobweb with the spider at the corner, and said "Do you guys have any experience in these things?" and Anu suppressed a laugh in reply. The duo asked Vani to sit down and asked her to dive into the details of the mystery.

"So, the heirloom is passed on for generations and generations. As my great-grandma gave it to grandma, my grandma gave it to my mom."

"Okay."



"I keep it locked away in a petite ivory box at night which in turn, is kept in a drawer. I wear it every day. But after I wore it yesterday, I couldn't find it. We searched the entire house yesterday but it wasn't there anywhere in the house."

"Alright, did anyone else wear it or was it just you?"

"Usually only I wear it. But my younger sister borrowed it once or twice."

"Okay, can you describe it?"

"It is silver in color, has a plumeria in the middle with a tiny V hanging along with it."

"Mhmm, thank you, Vani. We will look right into it."

Vani muttered a tiny bye and rushed back home. Anil sighed. They were new to the 'detective' business after all. Anu spoke up after a moment of silence.

"What are we going to do now?"


Anil and Anu brought out their bicycles and started wandering around the neighborhood. They decided to make their first pit stop at Vani's house.

"Ding Ding"

Vani's Amma opened the door with a cheery smile.







"Oh! Vani was just talking about you. Come on in!"

The duo accepted the invite and stepped into the lovely Mediterranean house. Vani spotted them and came running.

"Hey, guys! Do you need something?"

"Do you have security cameras around here?"

"Uh, yeah, we do. Come, I'll show you."

The trio went to Vani's Appa's study. Mr. Shanmugham was a tall and thin man with a kind face. He let them look at the camera feed and asked "Have you found out who took it?"

"No Mama, but we surely will!" replied Anil.

As they watched the camera feed, the duo noticed a burly, young man standing outside a window and staring intently at something glittering inside. They asked Mr. Shanmugham about the young man.

"Mama, do you know who he is?"

"Oh him! He's Shyam, Ramu Ayya's son."

"Is Ramu away?"

"He's our watchman. Shyam lives in the outhouse along with Ramu Ayya and takes care of the garden. Do you want to go talk to him?"

They then went to meet Shyam in the outhouse. Shyam was standing outside, throwing and catching stones with his hand.

"Shyamm! Shyamm!" called out Mr. Shanmugham.

As soon as Shyam saw the group approaching him, he threw the stones down and started sprinting. A confused Vani and Mr. Shanmugham stared at Shyam, glued to their spots. Anil, who always wanted to be a police officer, took the lead and gave everyone instructions.

"Anu, you take the bicycle. Vani, you stay back at home. Shanmugham Mama, get your scooter and follow us."

They pursued Shyam and the three cornered him. Shyam started perspiring and whimpering. Anil put on his most serious face and questioned Shyam.



“Why did you run Shyam?”

“I was scared.”

“Why were you scared? Did you take something? Did you do something? Are you hiding anything?”

“Aiyo, Aiyo stop! I only stole the mangoes carrots and cabbages from the garden. I'm so sorry!”

Mr. Shanmugham looks at Shyam, dumbfounded. Anu and Anil stifle a laugh at his reaction.

“So, it was you who stole it! You told me it was a squirrel!”

“Mama, how can a tiny squirrel carry such a large cabbage? I thought you studied in IIT and all.”

Mr. Shanmugham twists Shyam's ear and drags him back to the house. An anxious Vani was waiting for them back at the house.

“Did you find it? Did Shyam have it?”

“Nope! Can we look around your house?”

“Uh, sure!”



And so the search began. Again.

Anil looked in the kitchen inside the flour containers and Vani looked in the showcase, coughing due to the heavy dust on her Appa's trophies. Anu looked under the sofa only to find a pair of eyes staring back at her.

"Aaaah, Aniiiiiiiii!!!"

Anil rushes over to her and at the same moment, Kutty, the Shanmugham household's pet dog, leapt on Vani and gave a loud yelp. Exhausted, Vani, Anil, and Anu sat on the couch simultaneously, sighing in sync. Being a detective is hard. Suddenly, a lightbulb clicked in Anu's head.

"Do you have a picture of the necklace?"

"I'm sure I do, somewhere..." trailed Vani.

Vani ran back to her room and brought back Amma's phone. She opened the gallery and chose a picture.

"There! That one."

The necklace was gorgeous. Anu was analyzing the chain when she had an idea.

"Does the chain have a clasp?"



“Yeah.”

“And the “pavadai-sattais” (skirt and blouse) you wear have a zip?”



“Yeah.”

It finally dawned on a confused Anil. Vani's necklace had gotten stuck in the zipper of her pavadai-sattai!

When Anil and Anu had thought the case was intriguing, it just flattened out to be the easiest case that they'd solved.

“Hey Vani, if you don't mind can we check your laundry?” grinned Anil.

Vani led them to the room and showed them the basket. Anu picked up the pavadai-sattai Vani wore yesterday. To Vani's surprise, the necklace was stuck in the zipper. Anu then explained that when Vani told her that the necklace did have a clasp, Anu figured out that the necklace could have been lodged along with the zipper. Vani's Amma served cold drinks and pastries as a reward. Anu and Anil were on cloud nine. They hadn't expected to be detectives, let alone solve a mystery. The duo thanked Vani's Amma and left.

When Sumi heard about the wonderful adventure Anil and Anu had, she couldn't help but say “All's well that ends well.”



Abandoned

Harika Cheppalli



Delhi Public School, Konanakunte Post,
Bangalore, Karnataka

YAHINI

"We have to move out!" said a hesitant whisper.

"Then what about Tom? He can't possibly live alone," spoke another.

"Oh come on! He's a dog! It can live for long enough on the streets. Please. We really cannot lose this opportunity, let's just leave it on the street and go!"

There was a long pause as if they were considering abandoning a friend as an option.

"Do you not think of Tom as something more than an animal?" replied a cracking voice, breaking the long silence.

"Of course I do!" The other replied.

"It's just for a year. And when we come back I promise you, we'll take him back," came another entreaty.

"Do you think he's going to be in one place for a whole year?" the other person replied, sending the sense of reality back to his kin.

"We'll get him attached to one place, he won't move then," the other said, still trying his luck.

"I'm done arguing with you. Do whatever you want!"

And so the following day on the cold, cruel streets far from home, was Tom, all



alone and abandoned. Ever since he was a puppy, he was in the warm comfortable home of the two brothers. He didn't know the ways of the world. Now, he sat down helpless and hungry.

From the corner of his eye, he spotted a possibly blind man, wearing glasses, with a hat outstretched in his right arm. The hat was filled with coins that people gave him out of pity. Tom looked at the money with hopeful eyes. Perhaps they would give him food if he sat there helplessly too, he thought. He approached the man, seating himself right beside him, barking in a whimpering tone, hoping that someone would give him a meal. Soon, a man extended his arm, revealing a half-eaten bag of chips as his meal for the day. Throughout the day, many people stopped by to give him leftovers. By the time it grew dark, Tom had collected enough food that would last him a week! He was so amused that he didn't notice that the blind man took off his glasses, and looked straight at Tom into his eyes, showing pure anger towards the creature.

"You're stealing my meals!" He said in a condescending tone.

The man then reached for a stone close to him, and within a matter of seconds, he threw it at Tom. The rock hit his eye, making it bleed instantly. He groaned in immense pain. Running away as quickly as he could, he left his hard-earned food and the scammer behind.

As the sun shone on Tom's golden-brown fur, a new day began, with barely any food, or water to drink. Tom woke up with excruciating pain in his eye. The dirty stone had infected the eye, eventually blinding it. It was noon and he hadn't eaten anything since the previous night. He was still dazed and had lost all his energy

while running away from the scammer the previous day. He was sure he didn't run out of the city, but he had never been to this place before.

From a distance, he spotted a small bakery with a red door and a bell attached to it to notify the entry of new customers. "Maybe, he could steal some bread?". He carefully waited till a woman entered the shop. He quietly followed her and entered along with the woman to not bring any attention to him.

"Welcome! How can I help you?" The shopkeeper asked the woman.

"One loaf of bread please," the woman replied.

Seizing the moment of engagement of the shopkeeper, Tom quickly grabbed something off the first shelf from the right, and ran as fast as he could, not seeing where he was going. The shopkeeper chased him with a stick in his hand.

"Oi! Stop right there you thief!" he screamed, as an attempt to stop him.

Yet, Tom kept running until he could no longer see the shopkeeper behind him. Tom looked around himself, trees, bushes, flowers, and the sound of a river flowing somewhere near him. He ended up running deep into a forest. He was injured and lost, but at least he had food. He quickly munched down the bread leaving nothing for dinner. Soon, the sun went down, and the night began to fall. Tom slowly found a place to sleep for the night.



Days turned to months, and months turned to a year. Tom lived his life in the forest, coming to the city every day to steal a meal for himself and making his way back to the forest. To him, the forest provided a safer place than the city, where people were much crueler than the wild lions and tigers.

On the other side of the city, the two brothers returned to the comfort of their old home. Days passed swiftly and yet they were least bothered about searching for Tom. One fine day while taking a stroll on the streets, they happened to enter the bakery that Tom got kicked out of. Suddenly there was a soft whimpering sound of a dog behind them, and as they turned around they found Tom, looking at them with tears of happiness filling his eyes.

Yet, that happiness was not seen in the brothers' eyes. Instead, they felt disgusted to look at the disheveled state of Tom; one eye blinded, one leg damaged to the point that it had to be amputated, dirt and mud covering the one majestic soft fur of the animal, cuts and bruises decorating his body.

"I think we shouldn't take him back. He's too used to the streets now, it will be a disgrace to have him now. Look at him," one of them said, as the other agreed with a nod.

Just by looking at them, Tom seemed to have understood them. Anger, disappointment, and despair filled his eyes. In an instant, he sank his teeth into the neck of one of the brothers, and ran away deep into the forest; a place he called home now. As he walked towards the forest, taking struts filled with pride, Tom reflected upon the two greatest lessons he learnt in his life, never to depend on someone, when you can take care of yourself, and to never trust a person who had already betrayed you.

He reached back, resting himself on a cool rock, waiting for the night to fall, happy that he would never have to set foot in that home again.



The Bully

Sujata Meshram



It was the first day of school. Sanat waved goodbye to Ma and walked towards the school gate apprehensively. He was going to miss his old home in the midst of moving from Pune and the excitement of attending a new school in the bustling city of Mumbai. He glanced at his new watch, a present from his parents on his twelfth birthday. It gleamed in the morning sun. It was his very first digital watch which had three displays. It could set alarms, tell the weather, count his footsteps, and change colors! Oh, how he loved it! 7:45 am! He was on time.

He unfolded the map in his hands and pondered over it. His mother had described the school and his classroom to him in great detail the previous night and he had drawn a rough map based on her descriptions before going to bed. He liked reading maps. They gave him a sense of direction and a feeling of knowing what he was doing, rather, than where he was going! Discovering new nooks and crannies was also one of his favorite pastimes. As he entered the huge school gate, the sight that greeted him took his breath away! There were children of all ages running around, screaming and yelling. Buses came through the rear gate and an old gardener pottered about! He walked inside the welcome hall with wonderment. There was chaos in there as well but a strange sense of calm filled Sanat as he looked around. Polished marble floors, whitewashed walls, and a tall, dome-shaped ceiling. Sanat was fascinated as he took his surroundings in. His eyes scanned over to where his class - 8B was, on the map, and he looked around for the flight of stairs as shown on it. His eyes spotted an elevator at the far end of the hall and he ran towards it. Ma must have forgotten to mention it earlier, he thought as he stepped inside. He made it a point to mark it on his map as soon as he got to class. When the doors opened, Sanat stepped out. He spotted 8B and ran over to it.



The classroom was empty. Unsure of where to sit, he stood beside the door and waited uncertainly. His eyes scanned the classroom furtively and rested on the map of India. A bell rang loudly. A stream of children ran into the classroom at once. Sanat shrank back against the door. They slowed down as they entered, in groups of twos and threes, and eyed him curiously. No one spoke to him. Sanat kept his eyes lowered.

A young lady in a soft cotton sari and sparkling earrings walked toward her desk. She saw him and smiled with two sweet dimples. 'You must be Sanat! Welcome to 8B! We are excited to have you join our class! Please come and introduce yourself.' Sanat felt a prickle of warmth spread through him. He stood shyly in front of the class and saw their eyes sparkling with interest. A few children stared at him as if looking right into his soul and sensing his nervousness. He shook the intrusive thoughts away.

'I am Sanat...' he began. Just then there was commotion outside the classroom and some children sniggered. Sanat's eyes darted toward the door. Five burly boys stood outside. 'May we come in, ma'am?' asked one of the boys politely.

'Late again! There is a new student today, at least don't disgrace yourselves in front of him! Come on in and take your seats!' Aparna ma'am looked resigned. It was as if this happened every day!

The group sauntered in and the boy who had spoken eyed Sanat lazily. After they had settled down, the teacher asked Sanat to continue.

'...I just moved to Mumbai after my father's transfer,' he said softly.

'Thank you, Sanat. I am Aparna, and I will be your class teacher for this academic year. You may take the seat next to the window. I hope you make friends soon and catch up on all the work done before the holidays!'

At 12:30, Sanat once again followed the map downstairs to the canteen for lunch, glad that he had sketched it out.

'Hey!!' he heard a call from behind him. 'New kid!'

Sanat turned to find the boy who had come late to class that morning and approached him. A badge that read SPORTS CAPTAIN glimmered on his chest. The boy was not very tall, but his muscles rippled under his shirt. He had long hair, and Sanat noticed that he was not wearing school shoes. Sanat suddenly felt a rush of nervousness, fear, and god knows what else!

'I get that you are new, but don't try to take too much attention!! I am the favourite of all the teachers, so stop trying to please Aparna ma'am, and win her favour.' Sanat was stunned.

'You are expected to respond,' the boy said imperiously.

Sanat nodded.

'That's better. I'm Dheer, by the way. New kids have to polish my shoes every

morning and complete my homework! Today I am feeling quite generous, so I will give these tasks to you.'

Sanat was taken aback. Dheer exuded power. He grinned evilly.

'I am not giving you an option, kiddo. I will give you my books tomorrow morning. If you tell anyone what I just said, you will regret it!' he said threateningly.

Sanat lowered his head. He gave a small nod. There did not seem to be any other way out.

Sanat returned to class after lunch. He saw Dheer and his gang crouching on the floor. He walked towards his desk trying to ignore them. He opened his drawer and checked the timetable. The next class was science. Ah, yes, science was a fun subject. Sanat was excited. He rummaged through his books to find his science textbook. It was not there. He searched for it frantically.

'Hey, Sanat?' Dheer beckoned to him, smiling slyly.

Sanat slowly walked towards Dheer and his eyes widened in horror. His science book was on the floor and Arjun was about to pour a bottle of ink on it. His hand teetered closer. Sanat made a desperate grab for his book but was tripped by Shriram and Sahil. Sanat recognized them from the incident in the morning. They were among the boys who had come late to class! Shriram was a plump monster of a boy with his hair falling to his eyes and a wicked grin. Sahil was a lanky boy with a navy cut and plump lips! They smirked.



Tears welled up in Sanat's eyes. He tried to blink them away, failing miserably.

'Look at him sniveling!' laughed Dheer.

His gang hooted with glee.

'Give it back! Please!!' Sanat pleaded.

Dheer grinned. The other children in the class were looking on silently, some pretending not to notice. It was clear that everyone was afraid of Dheer and his gang.

'Would you do me a favor in return?' Dheer asked.

Sanat was rooted to the spot. He nodded. Dheer's eyes glittered wickedly.

"Get me the answer sheet of today's science test from the staff room and you shall have your book back.'

Tears started rolling down Sanat's cheeks uncontrollably. He did not reply. Sanat realized he was shaking. He wiped his tears and fresh ones pooled in his eyes.

He walked slowly to the door, breaking into a run. Everyone in the class looked at him as he ran and he could feel their eyes on him. Dheer's gang's laughter resounded in his ears; he tried to shut it out.





Sanat stumbled down the stairs in a hurry. He scanned his surroundings desperately in search of the staff room. With trembling fingers, he took out the map and traced the staff room. Sanat peeped inside: there seemed to be no teacher in sight.

He closed the door behind him quietly.

He shut his eyes tight, unable to believe he had complied with what Dheer had ordered him to do. Tears threatened to break their dams for what seemed like the hundredth time that day, but he blinked them away. No, he didn't have the time to cry! Not now, maybe later in the bathroom! He hurried over to the science teacher's table and began to fumble through the papers.

His hands were trembling. Sweat beaded his forehead and he did not realise how many papers and files had fallen to the floor during his hasty search. He picked them up quickly and kept searching.

By this time, he was hyperventilating. Blurry thoughts crowded his mind. What if anyone suddenly came through the door and caught him red-handed?! How would he explain the situation? What if his parents were called to the school? What if Dheer used this incident to frame him and complain to the teacher about it!? What if he was expelled? WHAT IF...?

Sanat kept stealing glances toward the door. He got startled by the rustling of papers in the breeze, and jumped at the tiniest of sounds! At last, he found it! It was a neatly typed sheet. He grabbed it and tried to restore the room to a semblance of how it had been before he knocked everything to the floor and rushed out of the room, almost knocking on a teacher on his way out. Tears turned his vision blurry.

'I'm so sorry ma'am,' he muttered.

'What are you doing in the staff room, boy?' the teacher asked him suspiciously.

'Ma'am... I-I lost my way...'

Sanat could think of no other excuse, nothing to justify himself. He looked down. He had been caught. He would be punished now! He was shaking like a leaf. Sanat wished the ground would swallow him up! The teacher inspected him closely.

'Aren't you the new boy? Yes, Aparna ma'am did inform me. What is your name?'

'Sanat, ma'am.' he stuttered, unable to believe the teacher's kind voice.

'Hmm... Sanat! I am Smita ma'am, your science teacher... What are those papers you are holding?' Smitha ma'am looked at him doubtfully.

'Nothing ma'am... um... just the form I-I am to fill f-for my new sports uniform!'

Sanat quickly cooked up the first story he could think of! He cowered under the teacher's penetrating gaze, hoping that she would believe him and let him go.

'I was just going to the sports room to submit it ma'am and then I lost my way!'
The teacher looked at him sternly.



'Very well, Sanat, but it is my class with 8B now and there are only 5 mins for the lunch hour to end. Get to class immediately and please submit the form after school!'

'Yes ma'am. Ahem... thank you, ma'am!' He choked the words out and exhaled with relief.

Sanat jumped up the stairs two at a time and ran into the classroom, panting. He knew that all eyes were on him. He handed the papers to Dheer.

'Thank you. Here is your book.' Dheer handed him the book, smiled wickedly, and turned his back on him.

He walked slowly back to his desk, unable to believe what he had just done. The bell rang and Smitha ma'am strode in.

'All books inside! Be ready for the test!'
Dheer grinned smugly.

As soon as the last bell rang, Sanat cycled home fast and flung himself on his bed. The tears he had been holding back burst like a dam. Thank goodness he was alone at home! Ma and Baba were still at work! He sobbed, unable to control the hot tears coursing down his face.

He had already ruined everything on his first day! Would he be expelled? What would Ma and Baba say? No, he could not tell them. They would be so disappointed in him. He had made up his mind; he would not breathe a word of this incident to Ma and Baba... they would soon get to know of it after his expulsion from school. Fresh tears pooled in his eyes. He knew he could not lie to his parents. They would be even more hurt by his lying to them than by his actions! Sanat realized it would be wrong of him to hide the truth from his parents. He resolved to tell them as soon as they got home.

Just then the bell rang. Sanat glanced at the clock; it was 6:00 already! An hour had passed so fast! Sanat quickly wiped his tears and washed his face. He ran to open the door. A man with a long beard, wrinkled face, and stern expression accompanied his parents. He recognized him from Baba's office and greeted him. His parents welcomed Mr. Prasad to their home and, after making him comfortable, Ma hurried to the kitchen.

'Ma,' said Sanat quietly. 'I have to tell you something.'

'Not now, beta! Tell me later on, okay?'

Sanat turned away and went back to his room. Baba was talking to Mr. Prasad and Sanat was left alone.



Sanat did not get an opportunity to talk to his parents all evening. It began to rain. The Mumbai weather was quite a change for Sanat and he collapsed on his bed, trying to gather up the pieces of his life once again. As heavy rains drenched the city, Mr. Prasad decided to stay for dinner until it stopped pouring. Sanat ate his dinner quietly. He refrained from talking too much and only answered the few questions Mr. Prasad asked him cordially. His parents looked concerned. They knew they could not ask about Sanat's day at the table because of the guest who had decided to extend his stay. Sanat's mother constantly looked at her son and realized that something was bothering him. But she kept making small talk with Mr. Prasad. Sanat finished his food early and went back to the comfort of his room.

As rain poured down the window panes of his bedroom, he sat staring at them as the water poured down his cheeks too. The city was weeping with and for him. It was as if she wanted to share his grief when there was no one else to do so. He hugged his pillow and lay down. Before long, Sanat was asleep. That night, after Mr. Prasad had thanked his parents and left, Ma quietly went into Sanat's room. He was sleeping and a slight frown creased his brow. She kissed him softly and stroked his hair. Getting the blanket out from the cupboard, she covered him with it and left the room. Sanat opened his eyes. He could feel his mother's hand on his head and felt comforted.

"Thanks, Ma", he whispered.

Within minutes, he was asleep once more. It was a deep and restful sleep.

The next day, Baba left early for work. Sanat did not get a chance to talk to him, although his mother told him that he would talk to him as soon as he got back. She was curious to know how his first day at school had been but Sanat stayed quiet. Ma pressed him for more details but Sanat shook his head and told her he was not in a frame of mind to talk just then. His mother understood. She gave him a brief nod and did not insist. Breakfast was a silent affair. Ma was in a frenzy since she was getting late for work and she flew about the house getting ready. Sanat dawdled on his way to school. His bicycle slipped on the way due to puddles formed on the previous day. His shoes became muddy. At last, he saw the school entrance in front of him. He parked his bicycle and entered the school gate. His eyes were red and puffy. Suddenly, he was confronted by Dheer.

'You IDIOT!' Dheer said furiously to a cowering Sanat.

'You brought the wrong paper! That was the Term II answer sheet! You thought you would trick me, huh?'

Sanat stared at Dheer uncomprehendingly. It took him a moment to understand what Dheer was talking about. A ray of joy sliced through, cutting out all other thoughts! He had stolen the wrong paper! Dheer had not been able to cheat! He had not divulged any answers! He was overjoyed. He felt much better and less guilty. But he was unprepared for what came next as Dheer raised his water bottle to hit him.



'What is going on here?' came a voice from behind them. Dheer turned.

'Nothing ma'am, Sanat just wanted some water to drink, so I was giving it to him!' 'That is very helpful of you!' replied the teacher, her eyes narrowing.

'I would like to talk to Sanat alone, Dheer, would you excuse us, please?'

'Ma'am, I was just about to escort him to class...'

'That will not be necessary,' the teacher said.

Dheer stalked off, fear and fury in his eyes.

'Follow me, Sanat,' the teacher said. 'We have a lot to talk about.'

Sanat was fearful of what would happen next. He quietly complied and walked behind her.

He followed her into the staff room on the first floor.

'I'm Gayatri ma'am, the school counsellor.' She introduced herself.

'You don't have to be afraid at all,' she said kindly after seeing the fear on his face.

'But this does seem to be quite a serious matter. It has been recorded on one of the CCTV cameras in school that you had picked up a very important sheet of paper from the staff room on the second floor. You know, we received a very good report from your



previous school and it is unlikely that you would do something like this on your first day. Tell me dear, what prompted you to do this?’

Sanat blurted out everything to Gayatri ma'am. The words seemed to pour out of his lips. He did not stop until the entire incident was laid bare in front of the teacher. She was silent for a while.

‘That must have been difficult for you. I promise that Dheer will be counselled. Although I understand what you must have gone through, I am also very disappointed. I did not expect you to listen to Dheer, whatever may be the circumstances. Although Dheer will be punished, you too will be pulled up for this.’

Sanat sighed. He looked into Gayatri Ma'am's eyes.

‘You can go now,’ she said smilingly.

He thanked her and left the staff room. Dheer stood outside, shuffling his feet, his face red.

Sanat guessed that Dheer had heard everything. He exhaled and deliberately crossed Dheer. Ignoring Dheer, he walked to the elevator. Dheer followed him. As he was about to step into the elevator, Dheer came running up and ran into the elevator too. By this time, Sanat had had enough. The fear that had once enveloped him at the sight of the bully had been replaced by an inexpressible rage. Dheer had ruined his first day at

school, left a bad impression of him on his teachers, and made him worry incessantly about his stealing the paper. He looked at Dheer stonily, and ran back to the class, leaving Dheer to take the elevator alone.

He sat down at his desk, seething with rage. Dheer had ruined everything for him. How could anyone be such a bully? Sanat knew he had to complain to Aparna ma'am about Dheer. Boys like him had to be stopped. A fresh feeling of determination swamped him. The timid new boy who had been bullied felt a new surge of confidence and satisfaction. A scream interrupted his thoughts.

'Can someone please increase the speed of the fan?' he heard Sahil yell from behind.

'There is a power cut!' replied Ajit, one of his other classmates.

Sanat looked up at the ceiling; the fan was slowing down. He went back to his thoughts. Let Dheer come, he thought. Just let him come! Sanat looked at the door, expecting Dheer to stride in at any moment. He looked at his watch. Almost a minute had passed. Why was he taking so long, Sanat wondered.

Realization hit him. Ignoring the teacher who had just entered, he sped out of the classroom. He hurriedly jumped down the stairs two at a time, not caring how many people he bumped into on his way. He knew Dheer had wronged him, but this could not be the way Sanat meted out payback. Sanat sprinted down the corridor, hoping that Dheer would be okay.

He gasped at what he saw and ran to the staff room. Aparna Ma'am was sitting at her desk, correcting notebooks.



'Ma'am,' gasped Sanat. 'Dh-Dheer ma'am...!' He could barely speak. 'He is stuck in the elevator after the power cut! The elevator has stopped!'

Aparna Ma'am was trying to make sense of what Sanat was saying. Then she sprung into action. She dialed the secretary's office on her phone. She quickly explained what had happened and told the secretary to activate the elevator's emergency exit button. Sanat ran back to the elevator just in time to see the doors opening slowly. Dheer stepped out, sweat beading his face, looking petrified. Sanat was relieved; Dheer had been rescued. The thought of Dheer's bullying sliced through his mind once more. He turned away to go back to the class. A voice from behind stopped him in his tracks.

'Hey... can we talk?' Dheer stood there, looking extremely terrified but relieved. He seemed uncomfortable and at a huge loss for words.

Sanat veered around. Dheer was looking at him uncertainly. He was unable to meet Sanat's gaze.

'We are getting late for class...'

'I-I'm sorry, Sanat! Ho sake to... forgive and forget bro!'

Sanat smiled softly and stepped forward. Dheer locked eyes with him.

Sanat extended his hand. Dheer stepped forward and embraced him.
The bell rang signalling the end of the day. And the start of a new friendship!



Quest for the Witch's Secret

Prathisha Srivastava



"Come on, both of you! It's getting late."

As Mom called, Deepti and Mayank came running through the front door, and went straight into the car.

She smiled, "Be careful! We are going on an adventure."
The kids had waited for this moment the whole year.

By the time the family reached the Himachal Forest Range, everyone was tired and went to sleep. The next morning, Deepti and Mayank were up at the break of dawn and decided to explore the dense forests. Soon, they came across a dilapidated hut that was located atop a large fir tree.

"Wow! Let's explore this! " Mayank was excited, but Deepti stopped him and said, "Wait! Let me peep in and see if it's safe inside."

As Mayank shifted impatiently, a scream came from inside the hut. Alarmed, Mayank rushed in only to find Deepti holding a stick!

"Oh, God! You scared me out of my wits! What happened? Wait, is that a wand?" Mayank walked towards his elder sister but stepped back as soon as she looked up.

Deepti's eyes were burning with rage. She roared, "Don't you dare touch my silver wand!"

Mayank was terrified. Suddenly, Deepti fell. After a moment or two, she opened her eyes and stared blankly. Upon noticing an anxious Mayank, she asked, "What happened?"

When Mayank told her everything, she replied, "I only remember when I went inside and was checking the hut, something hit me unexpectedly."

Mayank was shaken. He thought, "This hut looks haunted. We should never go inside it ever again."

The adventure wasn't going as expected.

"Breakfast is ready!"

It was their mother calling them. A little later, the family went for a boat ride to a nearby lake. As they were enjoying the view, their father spotted the hut.

"Isn't this odd for someone to live here?" He asked the boatman.

"Oh! That's the Evil Queen's hut."

Looking at the surprised faces, the boatman continued, "The queen of Kiala Fort was ruthless and evil. One day, the kingdom's subjects revolted against her excesses and she was killed. However, her soul wanders here to seek revenge. People who go near the hut are never to be seen again."

Dad laughed out loud, "Come on! That is a silly old story."

Mom also nodded. Deepti's face was impassive. But Mayank was tense and wondered, "Perhaps, the boatman is right. I have to stop Deepti from going there."

Deepti, on the other hand, had been acting strange. She would often scream and blabber without any reason. This puzzled her parents, but Mayank was now sure of the legend. The next night, hearing a noise, Mayank woke up and found Deepti's bed vacant. Frightened, he got up and went in search of his sister.

He knew where to go: THE HUT!

Reaching there, he went inside, and a massive figure appeared before his eyes in the smoke-filled room.

"Wh-who are you?" Mayank asked, petrified.

It was none other than Deepti, wearing a black cloak and a black hat. She had a dusty pendant around her neck and wore a scary expression.

Glowering, Deepti turned around and screamed, "Those who bother the Queen shall be killed! Ha-ha-ha!"

"You are not some queen; you are my sister, Deepti!" Mayank shouted.

"Oh, it's you again. Well, you shall be cursed!"

Yelling, Deepti picked up the wand. But before she could do anything,



YAMINI



Mayank ran outside. He was breathless. Just then, the boatman appeared out of nowhere and whispered, "If you want to save your sister, the ruthless queen must take the Golden Lotus in her hands at dawn."

The boatman handed him a map with a riddle:

*'Always dusty and old, but as the mantra is chanted,
It always turns gold, and with the wand's touch your wish is granted!'*

"What does that mean?" He looked around but the boatman was nowhere to be found. Surprised, yet confident, now Mayank had a plan.

Taking cues from the map, Mayank found the Golden Lotus in a small pond deep inside a sinister cave. The lotus had a chant inscribed on its leaves.

Determined, he went to the Witch's hut. The Lotus exuded a sweet aroma capable of spellbinding anyone. With great effort, Mayank was able to restrain himself and sneaked inside the hut noiselessly. Quietly, he managed



to place the Lotus in the center of the hut. A few moments later, the witch came near the Lotus. She could not resist the aroma and took it in her hands just as the sun was rising!

Immediately, Mayank chanted the mantra. Soon enough, the ruthless queen was spellbound. At once, Mayank stripped the Witch of her silver wand and tried to break it. But nothing happened. Instead, she glared at him and yelled "How dare you take my wand!" She pushed Mayank so hard that he fell with a thud on the floor. Suddenly, Mayank noticed that the pendant Deepti was wearing looked different. From being old and dusty, it was now golden.

Instantly, the riddle hit him, "The pendant! That's what the riddle is about."

Without a second thought, he jumped forward, hitting the pendant with the wand. A bright glow filled the room.

"No!!" the queen shrieked and disappeared into white smoke. Deepti came back to her senses.

Mayank heaved a sigh of relief. Phew! A bewildered Deepti and an equally relieved Mayank walked back to the camp and got into their beds.

"Wake up, both of you! Vacation is over!" Both kids woke up with a start. Was it some dream? Though dazed, Mom's soothing voice comforted them.

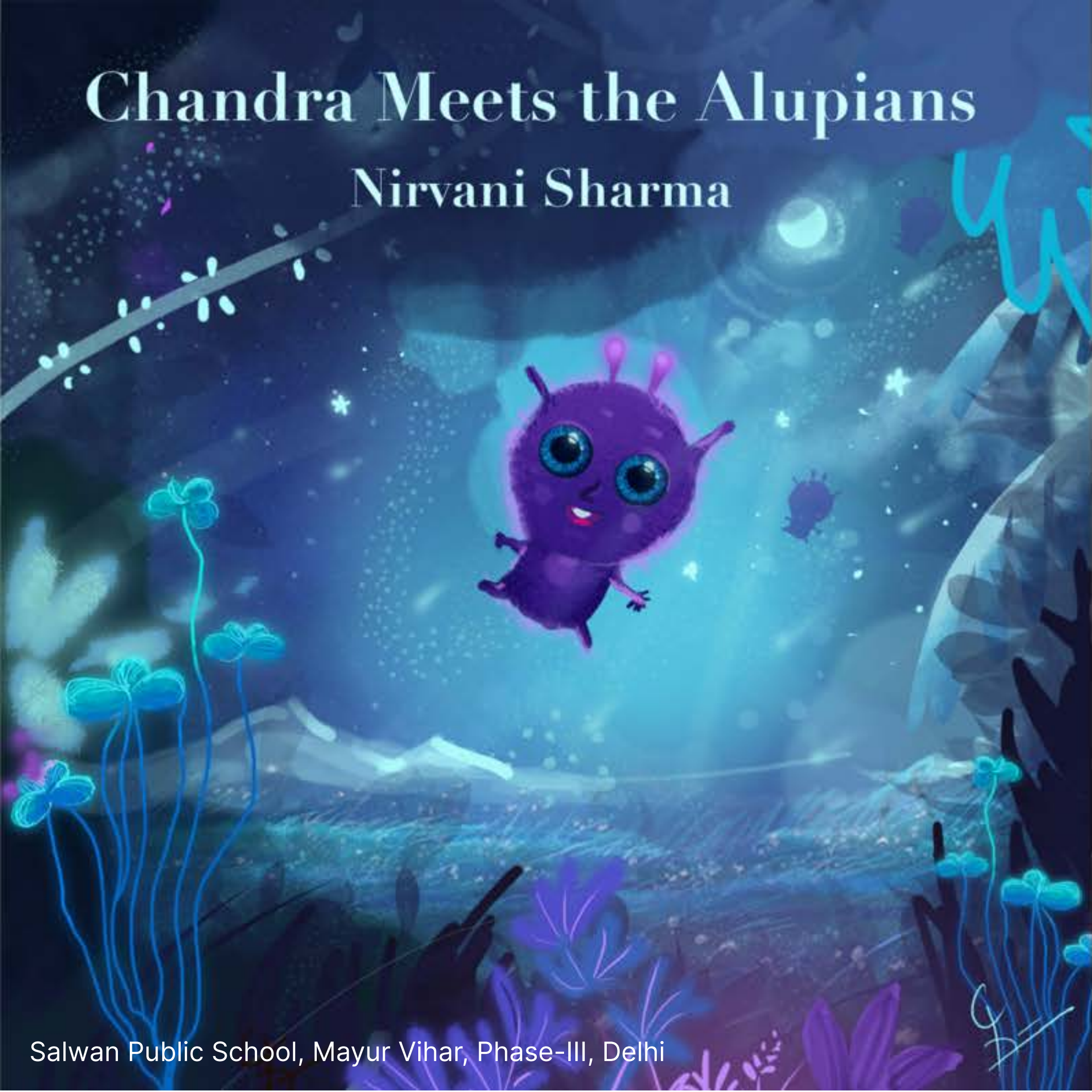


On their way back, Mayank was shocked to find that the boat and the boatman had disappeared; even the hut was missing. What's more, nobody seemed to remember anything!

But Mayank and Deepti, now with a strengthened bond, remembered it all! It was to be their little secret forever.

Chandra Meets the Alupians

Nirvani Sharma



A long time ago, in a Galaxy far away, there lived creatures on the planet Nyx called Alupians. These mystical intellectual creatures could glow and had crooked noses, purple skin, short legs, and blue eyes. During the Jurassic times, they survived the asteroid collision on Earth by escaping with the help of the Gem of Asterius, which gave them the power to open a portal and cross the galaxy to reach another planet called Nyx which had water and the same atmosphere as Earth. But while hurrying, they left the Gem of Asterius behind. The Alupians adapted to live on Nyx. For ages, the stone was lost on Earth, waiting for someone to find it.

Eons later, Professor Chandra Rameshwaram, a world-renowned physicist, and archaeologist, was exploring the newly dug-up excavation site at Kuno National Park. As he went inside the cave, Chandra was lost and separated from his crew. Chandra yelled to his assistants but his voice echoed back. Having no sense of direction, he moved ahead trusting his instinct. Suddenly, he saw a ray of light coming from a projecting rock. He found that the light source was a gem embedded in the rock. Excited, Chandra began using his chisel to chip away the rock to see the stone. The whole cave started to glow.

Suraj, his colleague, and Tara, his assistant, chased the radiance at the deep end of the cave looking for the professor. They reunited and rushed out of the cave with the gem. The stone was emitting some cosmic energy which urged Professor Chandra to research it. They figured out its chemical composition and concluded that the gem was an alien object.



Till now, the professor had only touched the stone with his gloves on, but being strangely lax, he picked it up with his bare hands. The light emitted by the stone was intensified. The gem channeled its power and teleported Chandra to London!

“How remarkable!” exclaimed Chandra.

After a few seconds of this eerie phenomenon, the gem teleported him to Egypt! What was happening? Rameshwaram pictured the lab in his mind and teleported back there.

“Extraordinary!” spoke the professor.

He shared his venture with his associates. He conducted various tests and experiments with the help of his colleagues, and his hard work paid off as he discovered the Gem's power. They worked hard day and night and chased excellence till dawn. After years of perseverance, he invented the first-ever teleportation machine!

The most outstanding innovation in history, the teleportation device, was programmed to teleport to other places and possibly planets. The Professor oriented the machine using AI (Artificial Intelligence) and modern NLP (Natural Language Processing) to respond to his commands. The machine was programmed to journey to the location the professor thought of! He was secretly wondering if he would receive a Nobel prize for this phenomenal discovery.



Professor Chandra always believed that we were not alone in the universe and there were many more habitable planets.

"Now I can show the world that we are not isolated in the cosmos. Tomorrow, we will proceed with the final test run. I request you all to rest and leave the machine alone. Hurray!" Professor Chandra clamored with delight.

He went home engrossed in the future of his invention. But alas! While finishing the remaining paperwork, his impetuous colleague, Suraj took Professor Chandra's words too literally and left the machine untouched. He did not turn it off. Tara reached the lab to pick up Professor Chandra's bags and files. She accidentally tripped and placed her hand on the controller. She left the lab clueless about the gradually opening portal.

Meanwhile, on Nyx, Jayden, a jovial Alupian, was hopping around in his garden. He saw the portal emerging from thin air in front of him. With the spirit of inquiry, he entered the portal, and BOOM! He teleported to Earth. After finding himself in the strange surroundings of Professor Chandra's laboratory, Jayden became frightened. He tried to escape and return to his home Nyx via the portal but all in vain. He could see his garden on Nyx through the portal but could not go through it. He became agitated and caused mayhem in the lab while searching for a way to return but alas, he couldn't. Gloomily, he slouched back into the corner of the lab, longingly looking at his distant home.

CF

The next day, Professor Chandra felt enthusiastic about unveiling his machine to the world. With a spring in his step, he entered his lab. Jayden heard footsteps and hid behind a cabinet.

The Professor was aghast when he found his lab in shambles. He wasn't sure what had happened since both Tara and Suraj were unaware of the incident. Chandra checked the CCTV footage and was awestruck to see an alien in his lab. Chandra saw the portal glowing in the room and knew what had happened. Tara was going bonkers with excitement and moved the cupboard to find the alien. Jayden jumped on her shoulders and started pulling her ears. Then he jumped towards Suraj who ran inside the toilet in fear and locked the door.

Jayden then faced Chandra who was very calm and smiling. Chandra extended his hand for friendship. Jayden was apprehensive but lifted his leg for the leg-hand shake as it was the norm on Nyx.

Chandra called Suraj out. He told Tara and a frightened Suraj to keep Jayden's visit a secret, otherwise, it would become a media circus.

Chandra studied the routine of this peculiar creature. They spoke a different language which he decoded by using one of his other inventions, the Transliterator. He discovered that they live on planet Nyx. The next day, Jayden asked the Professor for something to eat.

Chandra ordered many dishes from nearby restaurants not knowing what Jayden might like. Jayden tried them and vomited. The restaurant owner, Chef Roops was surprised at so many orders to Chandra's lab as only three people used to work there.

Suraj and Tara were worried about what to feed Jayden as he liked nothing and threw tantrums. They discarded the rejected dishes in a trash can in the alley.

Chef Roops saw that and became angry. She stormed into Chandra's lab to ask them why they were wasting food after ordering so many dishes. There she saw Jayden and screamed AAAAAHHHHH! Panic-stricken she fainted.

Roops opened her eyes when Suraj splashed water on her face. Chandra then explained how Jayden came to Earth. Roops was amazed and looked toward Jayden while listening to Chandra's story. Chandra was worried that Jayden would die if he didn't eat. Chef Roops agreed to keep Jayden's visit a secret and took responsibility for feeding him.

Chef Roops brought many Indian and international delicacies to the picky eater, but he liked none! She was an experienced 5-star chef who saw cooking for an alien as a challenge. She tried everything but Jayden wasn't accustomed to "Earth Food".

The chef was fed up with Jayden's tantrums and cried, "He doesn't like anything, now let him eat garbage".

The open-minded professor expressed his opinions and suggested this outburst as a great idea. Chef Roops put aside her culinary talents and created a unique, one-of-a-kind cuisine as a prank. She took two mugs of toilet water and put them in a cookery pot to boil. Then added veggies like peels, moldy bread, worms, and creepy crawlies. Simmered the stew, added snot for taste, finished it with some algae for aroma, and dressed the broth with fungi. She called it the 'Alupian cuddly soup'. The chef offered this relishing dish to the Alupian as a joke, but Jayden loved it. He tasted the soup and cherished it. It gulped the soup and licked the bowl with delight. Jayden expressed his regards to the chef for this great delicacy but asked for a little more salt next time. Chef Roops, relieved and annoyed by the pesky creature, left the lab.

Jayden stayed for a few days but felt homesick. Chandra caught Jayden looking at his worried parents searching for Jayden through the portal. He knew Jayden was longing to go back to his homeland, Nyx. Chandra felt obligated to fulfill his desire since it was because of his teleportation device Jayden had teleported to Earth by mistake. Chandra and Suraj toiled to make the portal work two ways. Ten days later, they found success.

Jayden was happy to go home. He invited Professor Chandra to Nyx. The professor happily accepted the invitation. He took some Alupian Cuddly Soup with him as an offering to their ruler, Alupiona-the Funky. On reaching Nyx, the king was delighted to see Jayden safe and sound. Jayden introduced King Alupiona to Professor Chandra. King Alupiona had listened to Jayden's experience on Planet Earth and appreciated the professor's kindness towards an alien. The king gave him a tour of their planet. King Alupiona told Professor Chandra the history of Alupians fleeing Earth and inhabiting planet Nyx.

Nyx was a magical place. Alupiona took Chandra to the river Vesta. He explained that the natives believed that all souls were fueled by sacred energy originating from the floating river of Vesta. All natives of Nyx worshipped the river as it carried the purest spirits with it, ensuring peace and harmony on the planet.

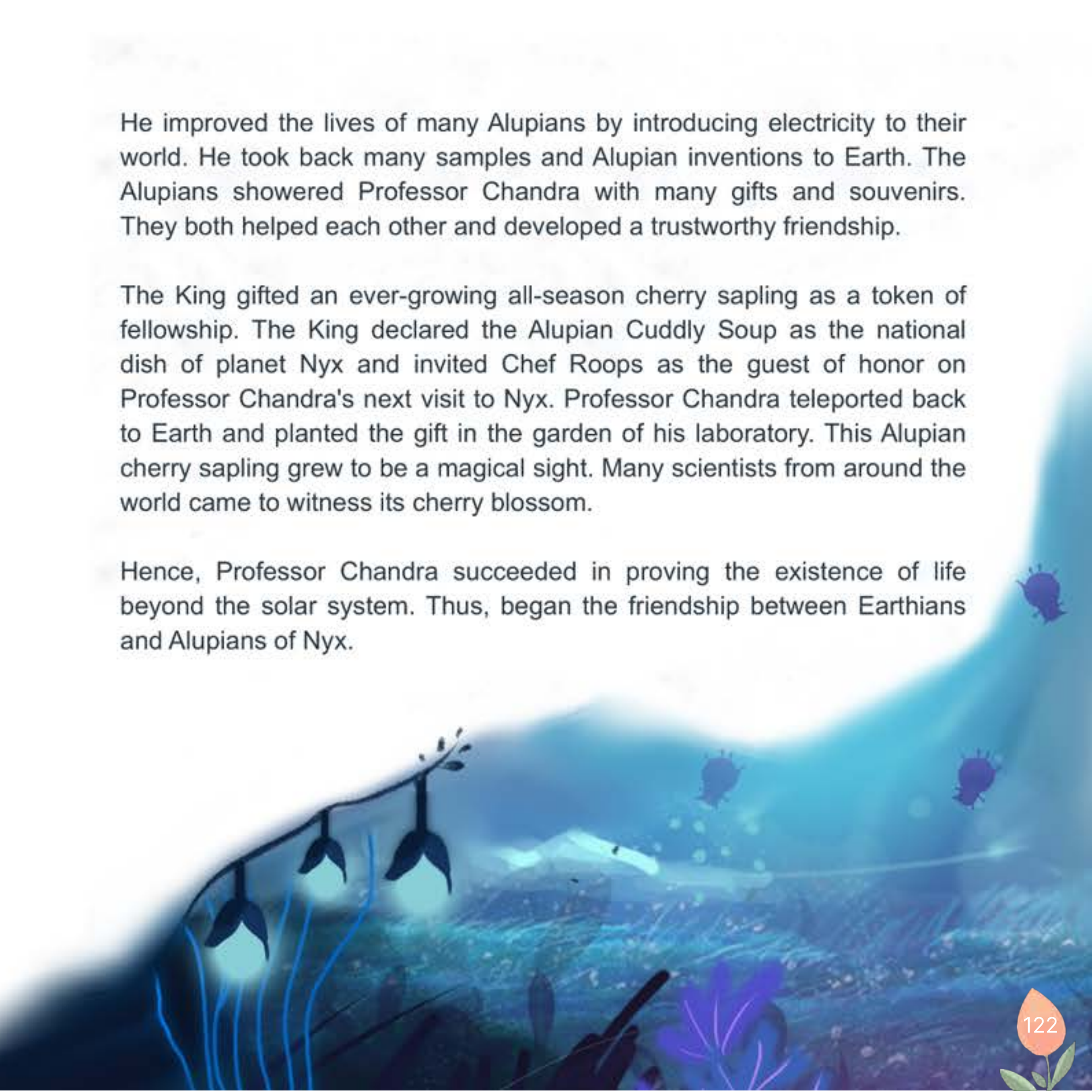
As an appreciation of the Alupians' hospitality, Chandra offered some Alupian Cuddly soup to the king. The king had never experienced such a roller coaster of flavors bursting in his mouth. He gave his compliments to Chef Roops.

The Professor introduced many of Earth's inventions to Alupian scientists.

He improved the lives of many Alupians by introducing electricity to their world. He took back many samples and Alupian inventions to Earth. The Alupians showered Professor Chandra with many gifts and souvenirs. They both helped each other and developed a trustworthy friendship.

The King gifted an ever-growing all-season cherry sapling as a token of fellowship. The King declared the Alupian Cuddly Soup as the national dish of planet Nyx and invited Chef Roops as the guest of honor on Professor Chandra's next visit to Nyx. Professor Chandra teleported back to Earth and planted the gift in the garden of his laboratory. This Alupian cherry sapling grew to be a magical sight. Many scientists from around the world came to witness its cherry blossom.

Hence, Professor Chandra succeeded in proving the existence of life beyond the solar system. Thus, began the friendship between Earthians and Alupians of Nyx.



Nest of Memories

Gautham Sagar



Bhavans Adarsha Vidyalaya, Kakkanad
Kochi, Ernakulam, Kerala

The bright sun rays peeped through the big wooden windows. Mrs. Mary opened her eyes and looked around. The book she was trying to read last night was lying open beside her in bed. The clock struck 7 A.M. There was a bed table in between Mrs. Mary and her husband, John's bed, that had tablets and medicines scattered all over.

John was already out of bed and was reading the newspaper, sitting in his armchair, at the corner of the long verandah. Mrs. Mary was around 58 but her grey hair made her look older. Mary and John lived in a two-storied ancestral home that stood alone amidst a vast area of lush green trees.

Something fluttered at the window on the right side of her bed. She could hear the chirping of a bird. Mary slowly got up, wore her glasses, and while tolerating the pain in her knees, she walked towards the window. A beautiful blue bird was busy creating a nest for her family. She may probably lay eggs and raise her kids in that nest. Mary's eyes welled up. Her memories flew back.

Years ago, when their children Sam and Joe were kids, they used to play with the birds in the garden. The children always played around on the farm. They loved helping their grandparents with farm work. Mary and John wanted their children to score high marks in academics. It was their dream to see their kids' study in a renowned school and go abroad for work. Most of their cousins and friends had settled abroad. Both Mary and John's parents were

farmers. They worked hard and raised enough money from their farmland. Mary and John didn't want to be farmers and thus, chose office jobs.

"Sam..... Joe..... where are you? Come and study for the entrance exam for admission at the city school", screamed Mary. Until 4th grade Sam and Joe went to the village school nearby.

"Sam..... Joe.....", John called out in anger.

Sam and Joe came running, drenched in sweat and mud.

"Where were you?", asked John.

"Dad, a beautiful blue bird is building a nest in our courtyard. We were watching that", said Sam.

"What are you up to? Do you both want to be farmers like your grandparents?", asked John.

"Yes, Dad. We don't want to go to a city school. Then we will have to stay in the boarding school. We will miss the land, our friends, the cows, the birds, and all the trees here. We don't want to go. We want to watch the bluebird lay its eggs and raise her young ones", said Joe.

John got angry. In a sudden rage, he rushed to the courtyard and destroyed the nest with a stick.



Sam and Joe spent the rest of their academic years in the city and eventually managed to acquire a nursing degree. And as John and Mary had wished, they were both now working abroad.

Mary remembered that it was time for her to take the tablets. She opened the box of medicines and swallowed the tablet with great difficulty. She then slowly walked towards John and sat beside him.

“Did Sam and Joe call you? it has been a few days since they called, right”, asked John.

“Mmm... they have got hectic work...day and night...They seem to be too busy to call us”,


Mary's eyes filled up with tears.

“John, do you remember, once you destroyed a bird's nest? Sam and Joe were crying the whole night worrying about the bird ”, said Mary.

“Yes... I remember... ”, John sighed.

“Same kind of bluebird is now building a nest near our window. It looks so happy...





And we just have money... no happiness", Mary burst into tears. John tried to console her.

And the phone rang...

"Hello... Mom, Sam, and Joe are here. Sorry, we were so busy that we couldn't call you. Got a few minutes break now and thought of having a quick call."

"My children... are you really happy there? You went abroad to fulfill our wish. And now we feel alone. We need you both near us. Could you please come back? A bluebird is building a nest in our courtyard. Don't you guys want to see that? Come back dear...Come back".

A FEW YEARS LATER

The stars were shining on top of cone-shaped trees. Carols were being sung loudly outside the house. It was Christmas. Grandma was baking a plum cake.

“Mom! The second egg has hatched!” Joe yelled in excitement.

The mother bird was feeding its child with earthworms and was looking at the newborn bird caringly. Sam and his Mom rushed to the window to see the newborn birds. Mary’s eyes filled with tears of joy. She looked up at the shining stars.

“This is the happiest day of my life.” She whispered with a smile.



The Diary of 2122

Dhyanam Mishra



Delhi Public School Dhaligaon, Dist. Chirang, Assam

It is the year 2122.

I was asleep in the bedroom with my brother, Prakash.

The alarm clock started beeping and its cool robotic voice said, "Wake up!!!!"

I got up, turned it off, and sat down on my study table, watching my brother sleep. I promised to help him complete his homework which was an essay on global warming. I had read that about a century ago, there was life on Earth's surface but global warming wiped off everything from it. Humans cut down trees recklessly, and used fossil fuels at a very fast pace, increasing the greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, they did not care about how they were destroying Earth. This wiped off 99.9% of life from our planet and our generation is paying the price...

Humans have now built underground cities and have been living like this for nearly eighty years. It is shocking how the Earth has been transformed by our activities in only twenty years.

My brother had woken up.

"Good morning Aakash.....," he said sleepily

"Good morning."

It was Sunday, and we got up later than usual. I reminded him of his unfinished essay.

After we had had some breakfast, I helped him complete the essay. He was fascinated when I told him that our ancestors used to breathe on the surface without any special suits, which is impossible now because of the extreme temperature and toxic air.

“What were trees and rivers?” he asked.

“Trees were a large version of the plants that commonly grew around naturally and rivers were a water body that flowed downwards because of gravity and some had forests around them.”

“Forests?”

“Forests were a place with many different types of trees and animals but they were destroyed because of drying up of rivers.”

He tried to ask me something, however, I interrupted.

“Ask no more. You will learn all these things next year.”

After an hour of hard work and a bit of my help, he completed the essay. He started playing games, hoping to beat my high score. And I went out to a stadium to play. Later, he too joined me there.

“Did you beat my score?” I asked.

“Nearly,” he said miserably.



“Is there a Sun on the surface?” he asked thoughtfully.

“Technically, it’s not on the surface but millions of miles above it.”

Even I wonder what lies on the surface. I have never seen the Sun or been to the surface.

I have only lived under artificial lights that change color and intensity corresponding to time. We have made developments through innovation and used cutting-edge technology to make our lives better, however, I will not be happy till I feel the sunlight and breathe fresh air...

I do not know if it is even normal to feel like this....

The lights of our city were dimming which indicated sunset was now taking place. So, we went back home. We saw our dad reading a book.

“Dad, can you tell us about Earth a hundred years back?” I asked him.

“Our ancestors lived on the surface and there were trees, rivers, and settlements but rapid development of our civilization, along with burning fossil fuels, without caring for the environment caused extreme global warming due to the increase of the greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide and methane in the atmosphere...”

“Did people do nothing?” I asked.







“People alone did act but unfortunately it was not enough as the countries that contributed the most did not assume responsibility. It is said, that scientists have made a time machine to go back in time and alert the people of their doomed future and it is kept secretly in a building near my office. It is just a rumor someone came up with to mislead people.”
He resumed reading and we went away to our room.

My brother and I sat down, wondering why the people were not intelligent enough to act.
Suddenly, I got an idea.

“Why don’t we explore that place?”

“We must do it now as it is getting darker and our parents can call us for dinner any moment.”

We made up an excellent excuse and went through the streets, talking about the technology of the ancients and the people on Mars.

We reached the place....

"Is anyone looking?" I whispered to my brother.

"Don't think so."

"Why has nobody bothered to put a lock on the door?"

"It could be a myth."

"There is only one way to find out..."

I pushed open the door with no difficulty and discovered something that made my brother scream.

"A time machine!"

"So, it's not a rumor that someone came up with...!"

The time machine, unlike the other things in the room, was still shiny. It had a small cabin inside which there were two seats. There was also a large screen in the front of the seats that were used to operate it. I found the manual of the time machine and Prakash found a lizard trapped in a jar, on the table.

He kept it in the time machine to check its safety. I programmed it to take the lizard 100 years back in time. It disappeared and its skeleton reappeared.

"It's not safe," my brother said, disappointed.

After thinking for a while, I said, "The lizard must have died as it lives less than 100 years and it did not know how to come back. This proves that the time machine should be safe..."

"Alright."

I programmed it to go to 2022.

I felt disoriented.....

We saw people, funny old-fashioned cars, skyscrapers, and whatnot! I observed some people cutting trees for construction, others littering, and the smoke from the chimneys of a factory and the vehicles.... I could see how Earth was somewhat unknowingly getting destroyed by them.

We talked to the people cutting trees but surprisingly, they did not reply nor did they seem to realise the fact that two young boys were desperately shouting to communicate with them. We crossed the road and came near a building, still trying to talk to people around us.

Then I looked at a glass pane that was fixed to the building's window, however, I did not see our reflection on it!! I saw the reflection of people, birds, vehicles, skyscrapers, the sky, and everything nearby but I could not see myself nor my brother in the glass pane. I was amazed as well as frightened. I told my brother about what I just found out.

“This means we are invisible to the people of the past and therefore, we were unable to communicate with those people!” said Prakash in no time.

“So, coming here was nothing but a waste of time! We are back in time but we cannot do anything...”

Out of anger, Prakash threw a rock at the people cutting trees and we came back where the time machine was kept. I could not understand why it happened but my intelligent brother carefully re-read the manual and found that the time machine was designed not to alter anything but to alert people. The only way to communicate with them was to send a container to the past with the message that we wanted to share.

With this crucial information, we went back home, took a metal container, and kept photos of our present and most importantly my diary in it. We went back in time and buried the container in such a place that we thought that it could easily attract the attention of the passers-by.

At last, when we were sure that the people would easily find our message, we returned to our own time, hoping our plan would work...

It was unbelievable, the plan worked! Our city was nearly the same but built on the surface! We could see greenery around us, feel the sunshine, and breathe fresh air. There were playgrounds, parks, and open spaces. My desire was finally fulfilled. We were looking outside for a long time, through the window of the building which had the time machine....



Then, I found a piece of paper on the table, which probably was a newspaper cutting. I read it aloud to my brother and found:

The message that we sent was received by everybody. It made everyone panic. Everyone realised their mistake and tried their best to undo the damage they had been doing to the planet for centuries. And their hard work finally paid off, as the extreme global warming that was supposed to sterilize most life forms from Earth never took place.

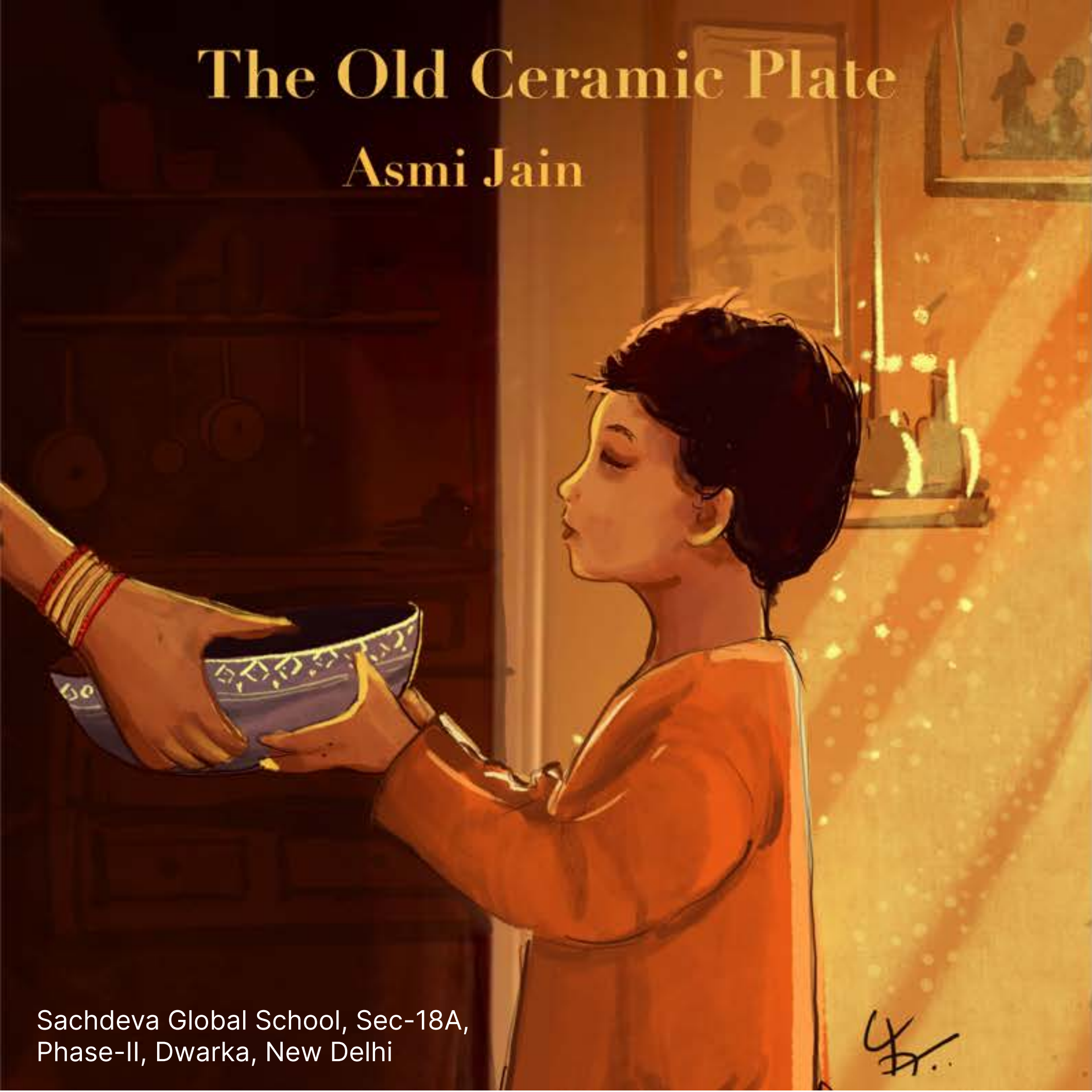
All this happened due to the impact of our very small message, which changed our present and our future. It also turns out that the book being read by you is my diary.

Yes, it is a little hard to understand but remember,
'It is never too late. Try hard, as very small steps can make huge differences and sometimes, even change the future.....!!'



The Old Ceramic Plate

Asmi Jain



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Once in a village in India, three young children were adopted by an old lady, Urmila, from an orphanage. The kids called Urmila, 'Amma'. She sent two of them, Shruti and Deepak, to school and dressed them in good clothes. However, the third little boy, Shantanu, was blind, and she treated him as a servant. She thought he was of no good and kept him out of pity. She dressed him in old, ragged clothes and fed him the leftover food. Shantanu wasn't sent to school and ran errands for Amma.

One day, Amma sent Shantanu to bring some vegetables. On his way back, he met an old man, who tried to help him.

The old man asked Shantanu "How can your mother let you come alone?" Shantanu replied "Don't worry, I'm used to it. Moreover, I only do most of the household chores."

The old man was astonished to hear such an answer. He said "Oh! It must be very difficult. Don't you have a problem with doing hard labour all day?"

Shantanu smiled and said, "It is sometimes troublesome but I am sure that one day my mother will realize that I am not worthless and I too can be very useful like my siblings."

The old man smiled and walked away after helping Shantanu on his way back home.

One night, when a deadly fire broke out in the room where they stored food, Shruti and Deepak ran out of the house to escape the fire. Shantanu risked his life and went inside to help Amma escape the fire. He carried her on his back and saved her. Seeing how brave and selfless Shantanu was despite his blindness and ill-treatment, Amma gave him an old ceramic plate that could grant wishes before her last breath. She told him that the ceramic plate could grant one wish a year, two wishes every two, and three wishes every three years. She also said that all the wishes would be revoked if the ceramic plate broke. So, she told him to wish wisely.

When Shantanu wished for his vision to see Amma one last time before burying her, the plate granted him the same. Shruti and Deepak soon got to know about the ceramic plate. The two children wished for a house, food, and good grades in school without studying. After three years, it was time to make wishes again. While Shruti and Deepak wished for houses and gold, Shantanu wished for a library loaded with books. Every three years, they continued to want mansions, gold, spouses, sons, and high-rank offices in the village, without working for any of it. On the contrary, Shantanu wished for more books to replace his old ones and went on to read them. He gathered a lot of knowledge over nine years.

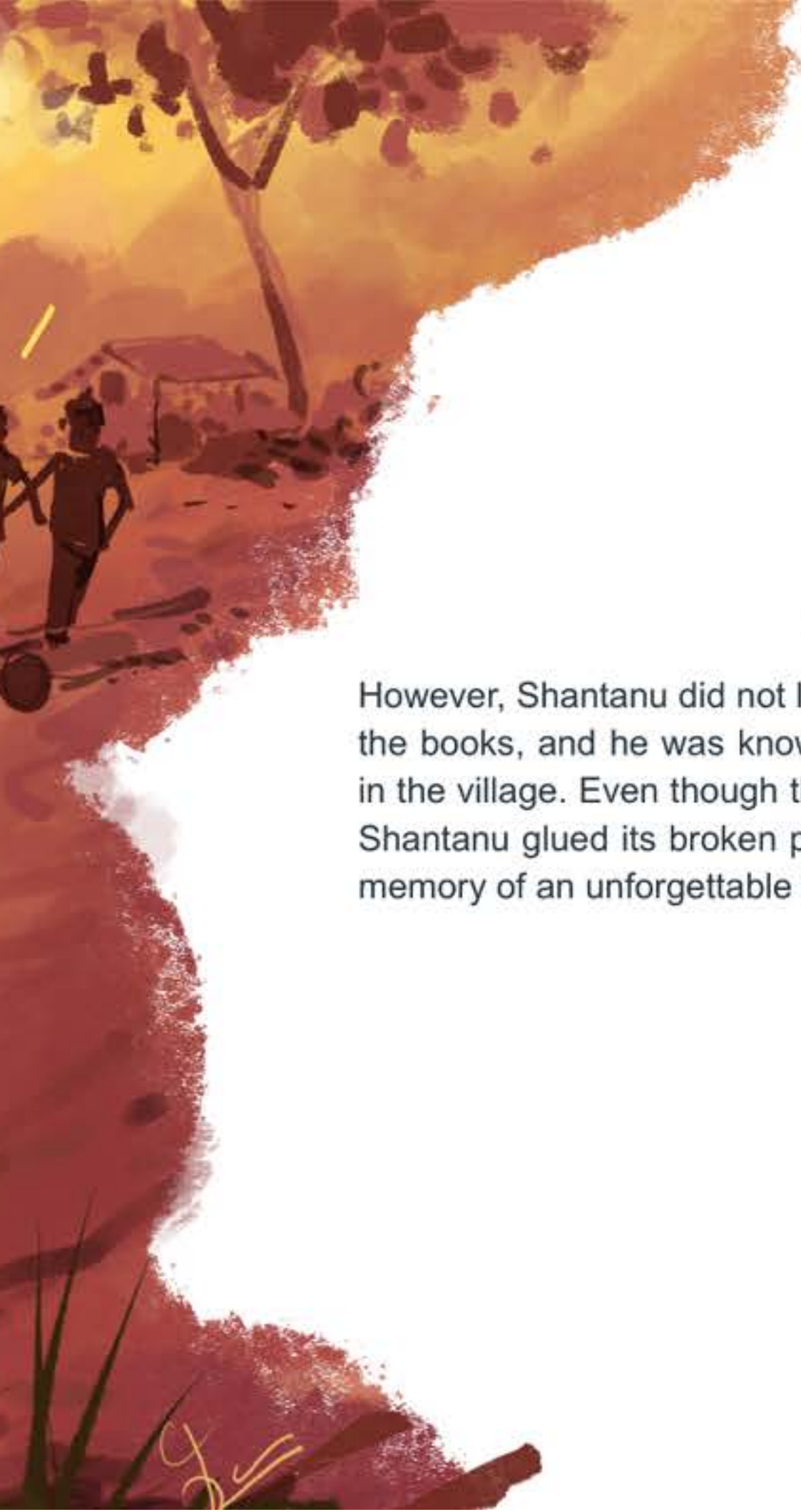
Year later, when all the three siblings came together to make wishes yet again, Shruti and Deepak asked Shantanu “Why do you keep wishing for more and more books? What good are these books? Why don't you wish for wealth like us? We're so successful without even working hard and you, on the other hand, are still stuck in the same situation reading books as if they will help you to get rich!”

Shantanu replied, “You think that these things will help you but in the long run knowledge and development is much more important than materialistic wealth.”

They started laughing at such a silly thought and said, “Well, then see for yourself who will be better off 10 years from now.” And went on to ask for more money from the ceramic plate.

After nine years, when they came together again to make wishes from the ceramic plate, Shruti and Deepak wanted to keep the plate to themselves. They did not want to share their wishes with anyone else and wanted to grow richer as soon as possible. During their fight, they tried to grab the plate and accidentally dropped it. Immediately, Shantanu lost his vision, and the other two lost all their possessions. Shruti and Deepak learned the lesson of their stupidity and greed and their wealth was gone as none of them worked for it and asked the plate for everything.





However, Shantanu did not lose the knowledge he gained from the books, and he was known to be among the wisest people in the village. Even though the old ceramic plate lost its magic, Shantanu glued its broken pieces and kept it on his desk as a memory of an unforgettable life lesson.

The Mystery of the Hidden Stream

Anjali Menon



Blooming Buds Bethania, Thrissur, Kerala

It was 6 a.m. on a fine Sunday morning in the quiet, hilly town of Bareilly. Meera, Sonu, and Manu were seated in their usual hideout – the garden near the guesthouse - planning their Sunday routine.

“Hey!” said Meera, pointing to the hilltop in front. “Did you hear any rumors about that place?”

Tara jumped in, “Oh yes! I heard my mother discussing a weird sound coming from the hilltop during the night.”

Sonu said, “Why not try and find out what this is all about? Are you both game for this?”

“Of course. Let’s go. Maybe we will get to meet a ghost,” retorted Meera. “Interesting. But maybe, it is a wild hyena lost from its pack (just like in fairy tales!),” said Manu.

Sonu jumped up saying, “Let’s get moving folks! We don’t have any time to waste. We must use our Sunday to investigate.”

After readying their supplies, the three musketeers set out to the hills to unravel the source of the mysterious sound.

Within a few hours of their fruitless search, Manu started losing interest.

He said, "Meera, now this is getting boring. We have been trekking and searching for some probable source, but no clue yet... Don't you think we better run home?"

His suggestion was immediately rejected by his two siblings who were adamant.

"No way, Meera. I am sure we will find something interesting," said Sonu. So, they continued...

It was nearing noon. With no luck in sight, exhaustion started creeping in. They decided to break for lunch. Manu and Sonu seized this opportunity to doze off.

Suddenly a loud shout shook them up from their sweet slumber. It was Meera calling out to them. "Manu, Sonu, come near the hedge fast! Hey, be quick!!"

They sensed the excitement in her tone and immediately ran in the direction of her sound. The hedge was surrounded by beautiful flowers, tiny shrubs, and lush green grass. Meera was seen lying with her ears pressed toward the ground.

Surprised, Manu said, "Meera, what in the world are you trying to do there?"

She replied in a hushed voice, "Shhh... Look! I think I have found the cause of that mysterious sound. Press your ears here and listen silently."

Sonu and Manu followed her instructions. They could not believe their ears. They were thrilled to hear a faint gurgling sound coming from the shrubs. They pushed the shrubs aside and found a lovely, little stream flowing down the slope, singing its sweet tune!

Sonu yelled, "Meera, we found it. Yayy!"
They looked in wonder at each other.

Meera proudly exclaimed, "It is a hidden stream! And guess what, we, the three musketeers, are probably the first to discover it!"

The three tasted the water. It was sweet! Fresh and pure water! They stayed for a while near the hedge, relishing the surroundings and splashing their legs in the running stream, watching the last rays of the sun disappear behind the hills.

"Let's get back home now before someone comes looking for us," quipped Manu.

"Yes Manu, you're right. We will reveal the source of the sound to the whole world tomorrow morning. Just imagine, what a discovery we have made," said Sonu.





“But why did no one find it till now?” wondered Meera.

“I remember mother saying about someone having tried investigating but the fear of the ghost had taken the better of him. Since then, no one, I think, dared a repeat attempt,” said Meera.

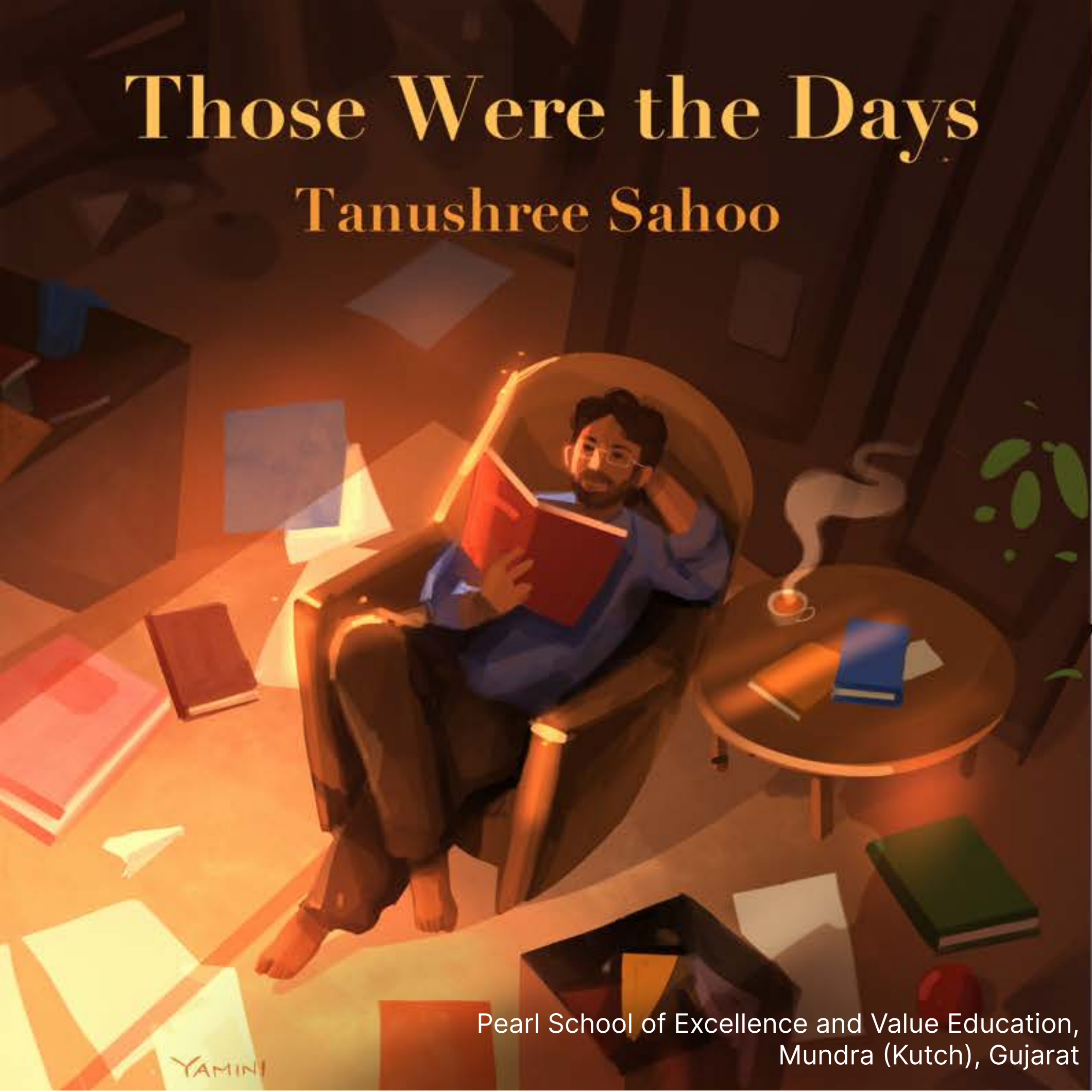
Sonu immediately chipped in, “The reason why the stream was not heard by the nearby villagers, all these years, remains a mystery... Probably, it was waiting to be found by us THE THREE MUSKETEERS!”

Manu proudly corrected him “We – the three brave musketeers... Yahoo!”
Guys, when’s our next mission coming up?”

Meera and Sonu burst into laughter...

Those Were the Days

Tanushree Sahoo



Pearl School of Excellence and Value Education,
Mundra (Kutch), Gujarat

YAMINI

24 March 2015

Dear Diary,

Today, I have completed 16 years of adventures, 16 years of blissful and joyous moments and 16 amazing revolutions around the bright sun! I wanted to share with you an experience that has been strange yet fun.

.....

The school near the outskirts of the town looked so scary in the evening, na? When I saw it for the first time, I was with Appa, walking to explore the beautiful scenes of that place. But the school was the thorn of the rose. The place is a dense jungle, and in the middle of the jungle, lies the way to go to the abandoned school. It has been abandoned for years and now the school is a spot for ghostly spirits to live. And, if it wasn't so difficult to guess, it is actually haunted. Yesterday I heard Appa and uncle talking about the same. Appa said that the school is haunted by a ghostly spirit of the History teacher of that school.

It is a very popular tale that one morning the people of our locality, including Appa, found the body of that old fogey lying halfway across the library. Some say it was a heart attack, but no one really knows what had happened the night before. Anyway, Appa said that his last wish was not fulfilled and hence his atript atma (dissatisfied spirit) is still roaming inside the school. By the way, his last wish was something next to impossible, it was building a Taj Mahal similar to the one far in Agra, here in Kazhakkootam.

I mean, what an old fogey he was! He was probably the most hated teacher in history, as he used to live in the subject he used to teach, HISTORY! Now this conversation was all what I heard from the window of our house, when Amma was cooking delicious Rasam for me on the occasion of my birthday.

I had a brilliant plan going on in my mind, the time to execute it was in the evening.

The evening was full of celebration and glamour, it was the birthday of the only son of the tehsildar of Kazhakkootam. All my friends had come, in new and beautiful clothes.

Gopi and Bhola were also cordially invited, as they are my best friends. After having food, we decided to have some fun.

Gopi is the most talkative girl of our class, but today she was talking at a different pace. She was explaining her relation with the most popular subject of our school, HISTORY!

She said, "Oh my Goodness! How I wonder can there be any subject as boring as history? What's really the point of learning something which is of no use in the present?"

I argued, as a part of the plan, "But, Gopi, we learn from our roots, our past..."

"I am not opposing that buddy, but what do you learn from that boring master. He teaches history as if he has to rush somewhere by the train in the morning, I mean it doesn't feel like learning. History should be taught like a story, like drama, like an emotion, like a tale, like a..."

"Ok, ok I got your point."

Though she said so, everyone knows how badly she hated history. But today her being talkative was a big advantage for me. It was time for the execution of the plan. I narrated the whole story in front of them and Gopi started laughing, but Bhola was very serious, as he was expected to be.

He said, "Gopi, are you laughing? Seriously?" As he said this, Gopi turned silent.

She then said, "You tell me what to do? The people of the village are scared of the dead history master, I am scared of the one who is still alive and teaching me daily!"

Bhola continued, "Don't you think that this village needs a change? We are the future of our nation and we should be the ones to open the eyes of our people. We should bust this myth, what do you say Robin?"


"But who will go?"

He quickly replied, "I will go!"





YAMINI



And that was what I wanted. I warned him, actually just acting like I was warning him, "But Bhola, Appa was saying that whoever goes inside, never comes back. Please don't leave us alone!"

Bhola, as he was expected to be, neglected the warning, and, acting like a hero, spoke a very heavy dialogue, "Why to fear, when Bholaram Rao is here!" And he jumped and dashed towards the school. I gave a loud clap to Gopi and both of us went to our homes.





Well, I am so excited about tomorrow. What will happen next is so much awaited. Bhola is the most innocent child of my age. He is the only person who acts as he is expected to. I am way too excited to see how brave he is.

Robin

25 March 2015

Dear Diary,

Do you know what happened today?



As soon as I came out in the morning, Appa called me with an angry voice, "Purushottam!" After hearing 'Purushottam' (my full name), instead of 'Robin', my excitedness dropped suddenly from its peak to as deep as the Mariana Trench. I went out and the only thing I thought of was, no matter what Appa asked me, I just have to answer with a simple no. But, for me it was a true adventure, and adventures are not that easy.

"Tell me where is Bhola?" Appa asked, in a super angry mood.

And before I heard it, I started crying, "Appa, I have not done anything. Trust me, I am your only child. It was he himself who went to that haunted school!"

The moment I said HAUNTED SCHOOL, Appa immediately shouted, "Purushottam, do you even know what you have done? You didn't even think of the prestige of your father. Are you no more scared of my rage? Your mother has always shielded you from me and my rage, that is the only reason for your mischiefs increasing consistently. Do you know what happened last night? All of us heard Bhola's scream. His father has come to me begging to help him find Bhola."

And then Appa and Rao uncle ran towards the school. Gopi and I also decided to follow them.

What we found was even more hilarious than the gossips of Amma and the neighbours. Bhola was lying on ground, in the backyard of the school, with his pant tucked at the branch of the tree. He was snoring and sleeping!



We took him and came back to my house. When Amma made him drink some water, he woke up, screaming, "Please don't eat me, not me. I am a small child. I love history. Please leave me."

Then, after a little while, he calmed and narrated the whole story.

Last night, when he reached the school, he lit a lamp and proceeded further. He didn't find anything except dry leaves and old stuff. When he was returning from the backyard, he felt as if someone held his pant and he screamed as loud as he could. Then the lamp fell from his hands, his legs jumped out of his pants, and he lay on the ground, unconscious.

Then all of us laughed louder than ever before. Appa said, "You see Mr. Rao, this was the ghost of our history teacher, the tree in the backyard!"

So once again, Gopi, I, and our innocent buddy Bhola, busted this myth and were praised for our bravery. Now, maybe I will visit the school again and this time, flee with my friends to nature's masterpiece.

That was how my adventure ended, this time, after solving the age-old mystery of the ghost of the history teacher. Let's see what tomorrow unfolds for me!

Robin



Rajnandini

Sohana Roy Barman



Delhi Public School, Sec-20, Bidhannagar, Durgapur,
West Bengal

"Maa, why is that bird sitting on a blade of grass?" Rajnandini called out. She had seen birds sitting only on trees and on the ground then how could this one 'bird' be sitting there? Her mother, Suhasini, had been trying to concentrate on a book since the last hour when they had come out to sit in the soft spring sun but was repeatedly cut short after every two lines by the sweetly persistent voice of her three year old daughter.

"It is not a bird, my dear, it is a 'butterfly'," said Suhasini, "Butterflies are beautiful creatures who sit on grass and flowers, collect nectar and make the world a lovely place with their presence."

Rajnandini sat wondering about this creature who was new to her world while her mother gazed at her innocent and fresh face and reflected on how the small girl lived in her own small world where elephants threw water using their trunks to make it rain, where the gods quarrelled to make it thunder, where barbets, macaws and finches spilt their colours in the sky to make the rainbow and the sun made the mountains sweat into rivers.

Three years ago, amidst the stolid silence of a hot night, the helpless cry of a newborn girl had broken out. The fairy-like bundle lay on the soft carpet of grass with not kith nor a kin in the world.

Her parents had died of a contagious disease at an isolated hut in the village and her people forsook her by the superstitious reason of sacrosanct customs which

stated that any relatives of people who died in an epidemic were cursed. But, the head of their village, the middle-aged Suhasini was a woman of a very affectionate disposition. Her kindness and generosity gave her courage to break the stereotyped practice and the devoted respect of her followers gave her authority. She had, thus, adopted the little orphan and named her Rajnandini.

They lived in the village of Sagavnagari, a province of the prosperous Veda kingdom. The Saraswati river twirled down the gentle slopes of this hilly land and furnished it with golden fields of wheat and paddy. Also, the neighbouring forests were embellished with a plethora of medicinal plants and fruit trees besides the abundant fauna.

Fifteen years had passed since then. The monsoon had arrived again and so had the Mahamilanotsav. This was a month-long fair, festival, and worship which took place every twenty-five years. It brought together all the people of the fifty-six villages of the kingdom who attached a lot of emotions to it. It was a gathering to enjoy and to be enriched. Rich or poor, all spent a lovely time there; they smiled through all the limitations and difficulties of their lives. It was the first time that Rajnandini was going to witness this wellspring of love, harmony and amusement. The ambience all around was positive and energetic.

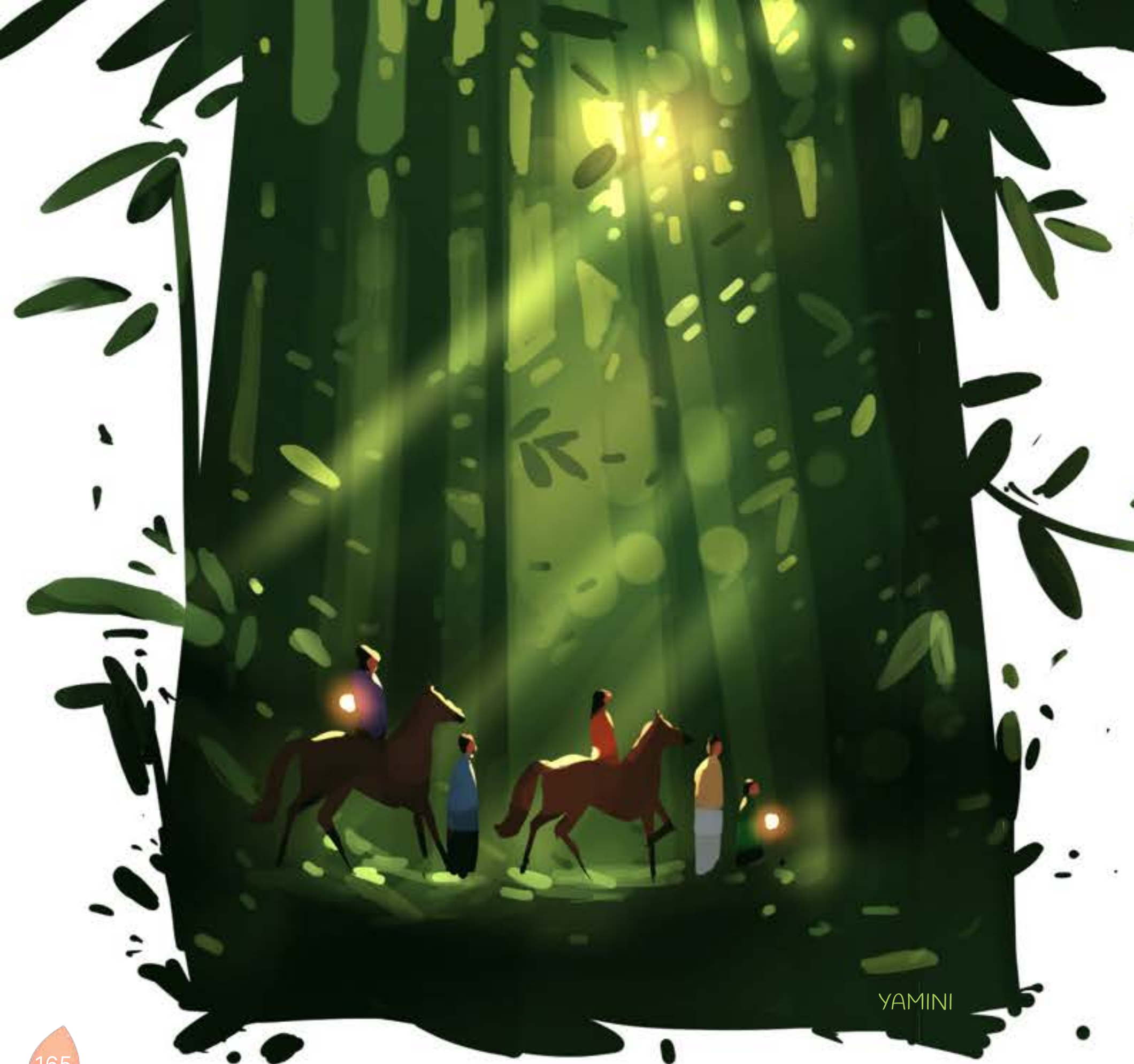
Everybody was busy packing food and tents for their fortnight long journey to the venue. It was a tradition to wear new clothes during the joyous event. Some had bought clothes while some had stitched and woven them. She was delighted to see

a merry glow on each face that she met and was excited for the utsav.

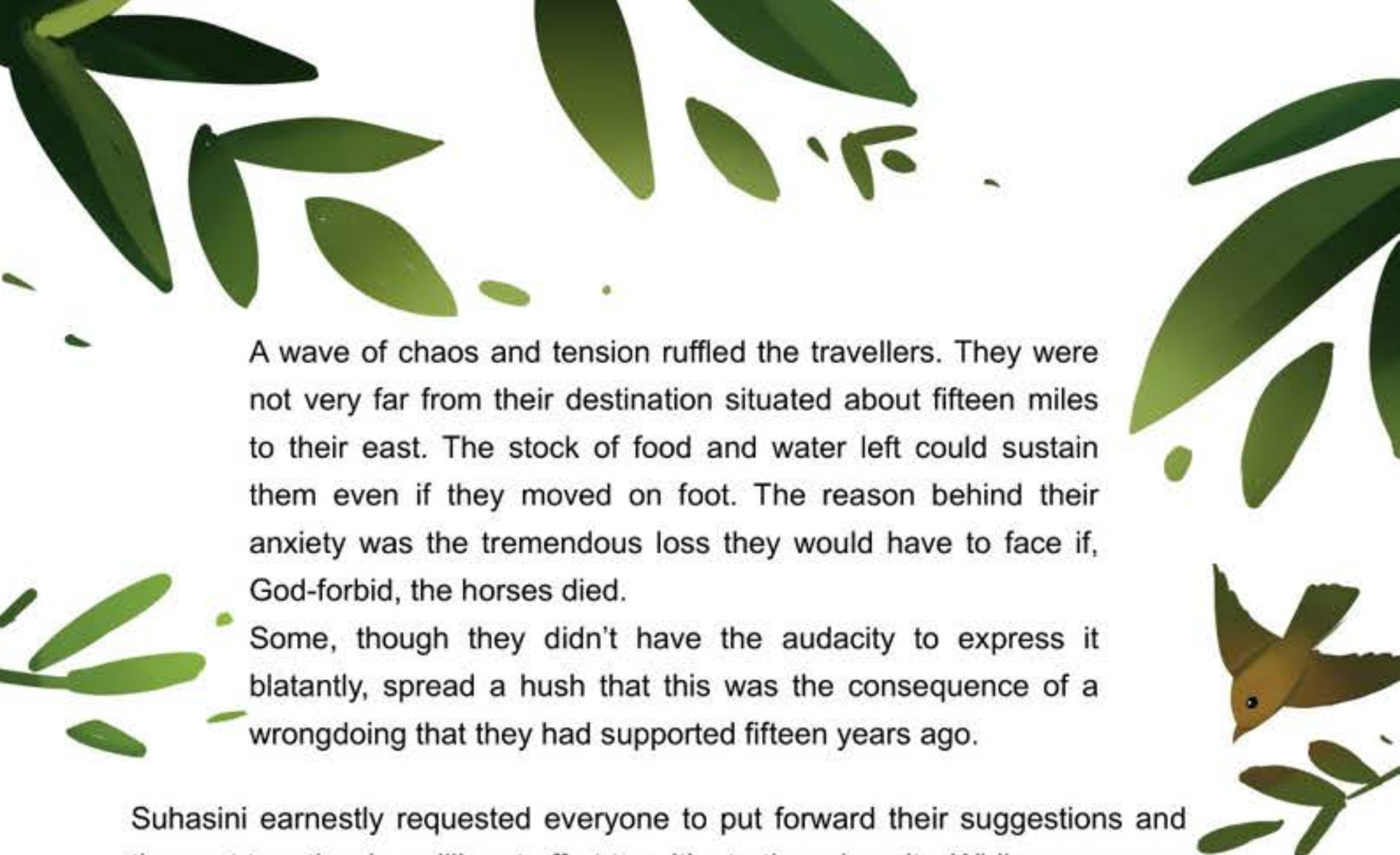
In about sixty horse carriages, the Sadiks, the villagers of Sagavnagari set off on their journey to the venue - Virendra Udyan. The caravan proceeded smoothly and cheerfully past villages, plains and streams and over a few bridges. They travelled from dawn to dusk and rested at night. Finally, before them lay the Shunya Prastha - a vast expanse of barren land stretching over several hundreds of acres. It took almost five days to cross it. It was a void from one end of which to another, there was no sign of life. Many rains drizzled upon the kingdom and rendered it fertile, but this tract lay on the leeward side of the mountains and received very little rain. Thus, dry soil, gravel and thorny bushes were the only inhabitants. But once they left it behind, they would reach a blooming land.

On the fourth day across the Shunya Prastha, a cool wind blew. It had been quite sunny that day and thus, the wind was much welcome to many but some surprisingly disapproved of it.

The next day, early in the morning, when the sun had just risen to emanate a soft glow, Rajnandini was out on her usual duty of checking on the horses. She was very worried and shocked when she found that several of them had caught a cold. They were lying down, had difficulty breathing and most had a fever. This catastrophe was not new to the older and experienced members of the party who were well aware of this rare phenomenon. The untimely cool winds which sometimes blew there didn't suit the horses and was the reason behind their illness. It had all chances of turning lethal.



YAMINI



A wave of chaos and tension ruffled the travellers. They were not very far from their destination situated about fifteen miles to their east. The stock of food and water left could sustain them even if they moved on foot. The reason behind their anxiety was the tremendous loss they would have to face if, God-forbid, the horses died.

Some, though they didn't have the audacity to express it blatantly, spread a hush that this was the consequence of a wrongdoing that they had supported fifteen years ago.

Suhasini earnestly requested everyone to put forward their suggestions and they sat together in a diligent effort to mitigate the adversity. While many were occupied with their superstitious beliefs, a young village school teacher put forward a course of action whose success or failure was subject to contingency and would determine the fate of the horses and of the Sadiks. He said, "To the south are the Sadru hills where a waterfall cascades down in vivacious effervescence. The azure blue water has unique medicinal values against most diseases and only a small amount of it is all that we need to cure the horses. The only problem is that the time it would take for one to reach the Sadrus and return back might be too long for –".

"No!" Rajnandini cut him short.

"We have no choice but to take this chance for it is the only one. I shall leave immediately with Maa's permission," said she.

In willing approval of her words, Suhasini said, "May your venture be fruitful, dear! We all are and shall remain engaged in our prayers to the Lord to save us from this calamity."

"I shall leave no stone unturned," said Rajnandini.

But, her strength and resolution had turned into a translucent veil which Maa's eyes could easily penetrate. She had heard those low voices which spoke of the fifteen year old wrongdoing and berated herself for causing her beloved horses such pain. She had seen and helped them grow. She had spent hours roaming about with them in the fields.

Suhasini patted her on the shoulder as she mounted one of the few horses who had escaped the unfortunate bout and said, "My dear, let me assure you that you are in no way responsible for this ill fate of ours. Your parents may have left you in the unfortunate way they did, but they didn't leave you cursed, they left you blessed in Mother Nature's lap. I am sure that you shall succeed in your mission. Believe in goodness and be optimistic."

Restraining tears, she galloped away pledging to invest all possible efforts and restore health to her dear stallions and mares. They went on without any rest till it was quite late in the night when she felt that they must stop for a while or else



Simran, the horse she had been riding, would get fatigued. When she sat nervously, looking up at the few stars Simran nudged her as if in an effort to comfort her. As she looked into her eyes, Rajnandini saw a positive assurance which brightened her face into a smile. They set out soon again and reached the waterfall. She collected the necessary amount of water in a metal container and successfully returned back on time. Then, she hurriedly stumbled to the vaidyas who did the needful.

It is okay if you call this a fairytale but the horses did recover and they reached the fair to enjoy themselves after that tough time.

Many more years have passed since then - they have been long for some and short for many. A lot of grass has been worn out by the stampede of the galloping horses of the Sadiks. New grass has grown again as the inhabitants have progressed and impressively improved their prospects amidst the many storms that have raged over the land and the many rains which have washed it.

Braving the trials of life, the little girl has grown stronger with the nature around her. She lay on a bed of blossoms every spring while the mountains overlooking her home aged with her. The herbs tended to her, the trees nursed her; the pleasant mountain wind was her muse. She saw the pines, oaks, maples, junipers bending with the strong gales but persevering through all odds. She saw the waterfalls roaring forward with their enormous volume of water, babbling and chattering over the rocks and boulders. She saw the world around her wake to the vibrant call of the cuckoo; she took a special fancy to this bird for it heralded the farewell of winter

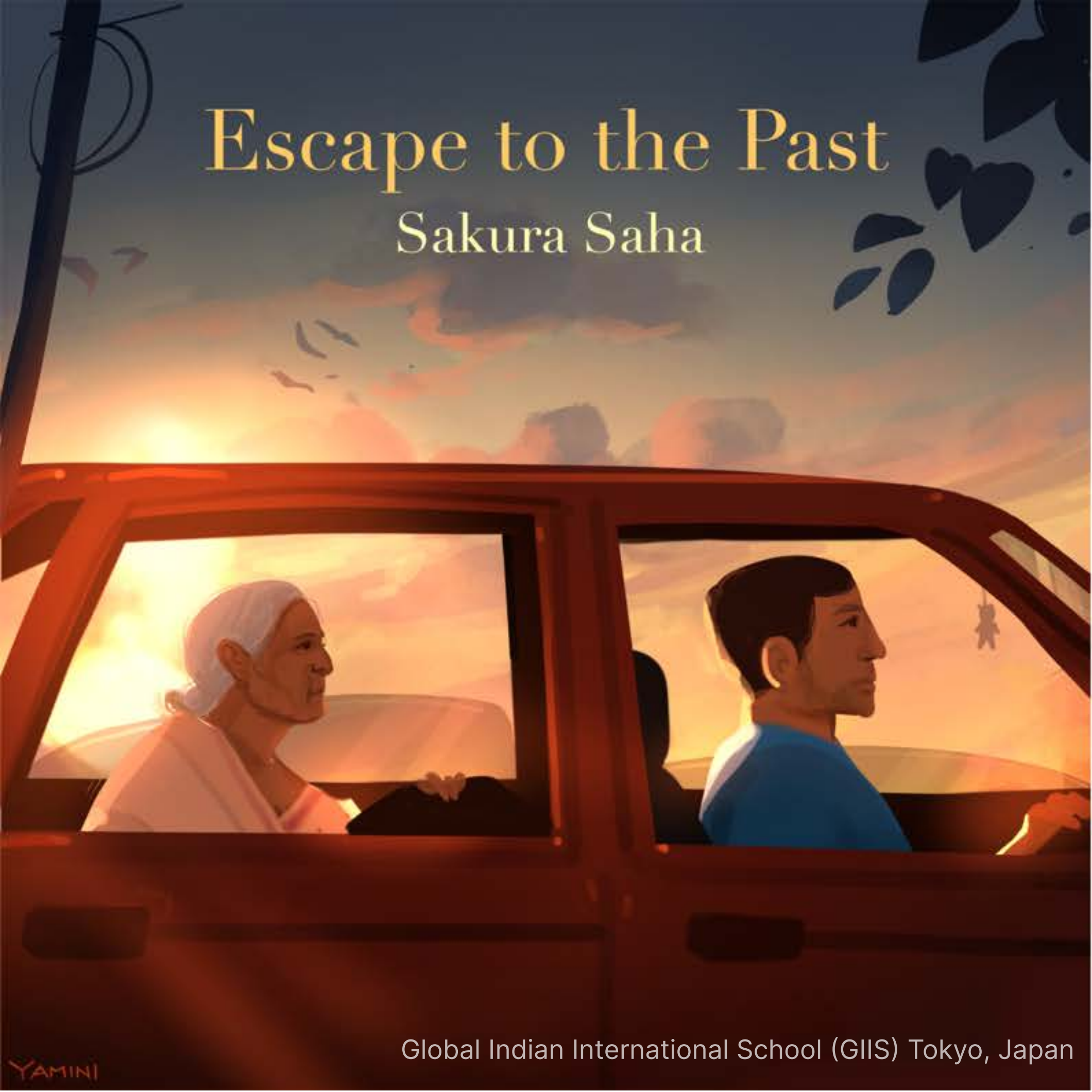
and the arrival of spring. She loved this season for it was lively, colourful, joyful and jubilant, like her.

She who had once been renounced as an ill omen flourished into a shining sunbeam in whose pleasing aura basked and rejoiced the people who had once abandoned and blamed her blinded by superstition and prejudice. She grew up to be a brave and headstrong woman who contributed immensely to her village's welfare which along with its benefactress came to be known far and wide across the many other villages of the valley.



Escape to the Past

Sakura Saha



Global Indian International School (GIIS) Tokyo, Japan

John has taken a heart-wrenching decision that will shake the foundations of not only his, but also his mother's life.

He is leaving his mother, Linda, in an old age home. He had been planning this for a very long time, and now he has finally plucked up the courage to do so. John was financially struggling and his mother had started growing old. She was getting sick very often and had to be taken care of constantly. Not only that, John had plenty of other worries at work. At last, John felt it was best if he left his mother in a safe place where she would get the care she needed.

Ever since John's father passed away, Linda had started feeling the shadow of solitude, but now that her own son was leaving her, she couldn't feel lonelier. Not wanting to pick up fights with her son, she agreed to go to the old age home without a single complaint. Linda waved her son a final goodbye before he drove off into the distance. She could see the car vanishing into the narrow road and that made her feel like her only source of happiness was vanishing too.

Shortly after, she headed to her assigned room and sat down on the bed. She looked at the family photo she had taken with her, and started to ponder over how far life had taken her. She had imagined spending the last few moments of her life with her loved ones, but now she had been left to spend it all alone. All those simple wishes, of her going to a beach with her family or eating dinner together after John had come home from a long day of work, shattered into a thousand pieces in front of her teary eyes.

As days passed, Linda grew tired of living at the retirement home. She didn't want to spend the little time she had left in this life here, in this place, thinking of all the things that could have been. She wanted to make those wishful moments come true. So, she came up with a plan. She would escape this place.

She reminisced about going to the beach with John when he was little. John loved the sea and loved to swim. He would build sandcastles and catch crabs with his bare hands only to stare at them in awe while she would take pictures of him doing all his usual antics on the seashore. This beach truly held a lot of special memories and Linda wanted nothing but to relive them all.

However, escaping this place wasn't going to be an easy task and moreover, she would definitely need some money. She started to devise an old-age-home escape plan, as well as ways to execute it flawlessly. This plan would start with a lie. She would tell the caretakers that she was going out for a short walk. Simple yet a believable and reasonable explanation. After that, she would withdraw some money, which she had saved a long time ago, and take a train to the town where the beach was. This was the town where John had spent most of his childhood. Finally, her wish would be fulfilled.

The following day came and Linda was ready to put her plan into action and everything went as she had envisioned. Although the caretakers were a bit hesitant at first, they let her go thinking it would bring her a bit of joy. Linda took her belongings and escaped the place. Feeling the air outside hit her face, she felt



free. Free of all her burden and worries. All her sadness turned into the hope for a better end.

She withdrew some money from a nearby ATM machine and bought a train ticket. The conductor was a bit shocked seeing an old lady like her traveling alone, but this didn't matter to Linda. At that moment, she learned to live without a care for the world. It felt good and refreshing. She was lost in her imagination where she was already enjoying and reliving the best moments of her life at the beach.


However, back at the retirement home, Linda's disappearance worried all the caretakers. They recollected Linda going out for a short walk outside to see the area. She had assured them that she would be back in a few minutes, but now hours had passed and she was nowhere to be found. They called the police and they immediately started looking for her.

John became furious seeing the negligence of the caretakers. He could not believe how they would simply let a woman of her age go out into the streets without sending someone to look after her. He went to the retirement home and confronted them about their actions.

They explained how all her belongings were missing, so they all suspected, including the police, that this had been carefully planned by Linda. They continued explaining how it was actually common for people in old age homes to escape due to the extreme loneliness and helplessness they experience after staying away from their loved ones.



YAMINI



By now, John had started to miss his mother's presence. He recollected how all the times he had been in some or the other trouble at school, his mother would be there for him, helping him and rescuing him no matter what. But now when it came to his mother needing help, he couldn't help her in the slightest. John had started to feel guilty. He loved his mother immensely, there was no doubt in his heart about that.

The thought of never being able to meet his mother again terrified him. He couldn't think of any good reason as to why his mother would decide to suddenly leave everything to go somewhere all by herself, and if she did go somewhere, where could that place be?

At that moment, the memories of his mother persuading him to go to the beach took over his thoughts. The beach where they used to go when John was little. He had refused to take her there, as it was quite far from where he currently lived and he didn't have enough time to go for any kind of vacation. John who previously thought of his mother to be a burden, regretted every single one of his actions.

He wanted to correct his mistake and the only way he felt he could do so was by finding his mother and bringing her back home, their true home. That's when something told him to go to that beach.

The train finally halted at her destination. Linda got off the train and looked around. Nostalgia engulfed her and thousands of old memories flooded her mind. This town held a special place in her heart, as this was the town where her family once lived together, happily. She wanted to experience again the moments she had once spent with her loved ones, even though at present nobody was there by her side.

With a heavy heart, she walked towards the bus stop.

On the bus, looking outside the window, she couldn't help but think about how she was all alone in this world and how time had changed everything around her. It was a strange feeling. She was feeling helpless but also calm and peaceful. The bus stopped at the beach which she had longed to see for so long.

She slowly got off the bus. She was tired from the long journey.

As soon as she saw the beach from a distance, all her tiredness faded away. The light ocean breeze hit her face bringing her back to the past.

The bright blue sky and the emerald ocean left her feeling relaxed and calm. She felt free and elated as she walked near the shoreline. Feeling the cold ocean water with her hands, she couldn't have felt more alive. Emotions of awe invoked a feeling of connection with the beauty of nature and with her precious past. She felt blessed to have lived such a joyful life.

She thought how stars couldn't shine without darkness. Although the feelings of

loneliness and helplessness managed to bring darkness to Linda's life, her old memories of spending time with her family and doing the things she loved the most would always be there in her heart. Memories had the power to light this haunting darkness.

She was reliving her past and enjoying the present moment. Hours had passed when she decided to go back to the old age home.

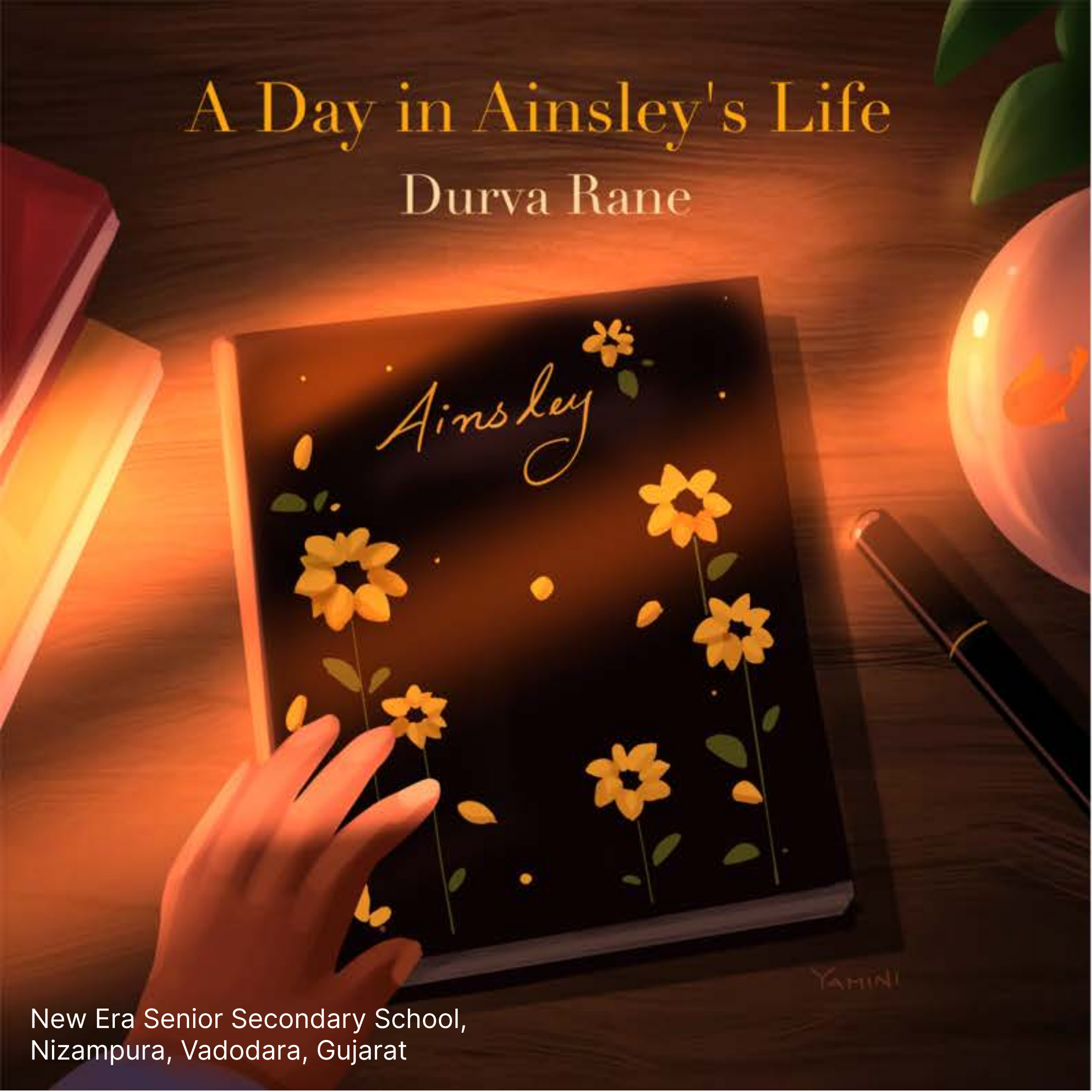
Her wish was fulfilled and she felt much lighter than before. She had accepted her present and was finally happy to go back when she saw a young man running towards her. Linda stared in shock as she recognized the man to be her son. John stopped and stared at his mother. They locked eyes and silence set in.

"Mom, let's go back to our true home, where we truly belong," said John.



A Day in Ainsley's Life

Durva Rane



New Era Senior Secondary School,
Nizampura, Vadodara, Gujarat

"If you can't find a book you want to read, write that book."

And so, I decided to write an autobiography of a diary. The event in the book is inspired by the daily events happening in my circle. This book is for everyone who thinks they just have a book in their life as a support. Like, it is said 'books are our best friends.' Consider this book written by me as a gift from me to you, if you feel the same as a fifteen-year-old teenager like me. I'm grateful for the appreciation I got from everyone and the love that they showed towards my writing. Without them, I would have not thought of story writing.

I am her mood swinger, healer, controller, companion, her guardian, and everything that makes her feel better each day. I'm neither her godmother nor her boyfriend, I am her diary.

I was quite a simple diary before. I was manufactured in an enormous paper factory, like every book. After several processes I was ready; a nice single-lined black diary with sunflowers and tiny green leaves on it. I have my own tag, cost, and a bar-code (which she never scanned so I suppose it is of no use). Workers categorised us - spiral books, subject books, journals, composition notebooks, diaries, and filler books. I used to think I was just an ordinary one. I was bought from an online shopping portal. I was packaged in plastic wrap and then in a cardboard box. The sender marked all the particulars on the brown box.

It took me three days to meet my mate.

“I’ll get it mom!”

I could hear her rushing down the stairs to pick me up from the front doorstep. I was excited to meet her. In this world of growing desires for materialistic things, every ordered article is always eager to reach its buyer and blend-in with the users. The warranty and guarantee cards don’t really bless the product with a long, safe and smooth working life. The user decides it in fact. I have overheard the talks of the workers and the various stereotypes of the human world. I wished to be bought by an expensive family so that I could lull on their sofa and be passed as their hierarchal. Then I decided to change the state of my mind; I would be happy to be in a family who appreciates my worth.

Numerous questions appeared before me.

“How will she react?”

“What will she do with me?”

“Will I be dumped after my life’s over?”

“Will I be safe with her?”

“What if she ever lost me?” and lastly, “What is her name?”



My curiosity was bubbling!

She is Dacey Rojas.

A beautiful teenage girl with her own instincts and rules that she broke whenever she wanted to. Long wavy hairs tucked perfectly behind her ears, eyes look like black pearls and her glasses give her a smart look. She has everything - a nice family with her grandma, her sister, and her parents; her own bedroom, cycle, laptop, friends, and freedom too.

I wondered why Dacey bought me.

What would trouble her when she has so many choices to look forward to!

But I was wrong, the whole time. Real girls are never perfect and perfect girls are never real. Dacey is imperfectly perfect- she is different. She is everything real in a world of make-believe. She is neither attracted to diamonds nor does she bother for brands and rich tags. Dacey makes choices that define her- black colour is her favourite, she doesn't prefer pink or red. Her most worn attire is a simple tee and a pair of blue jeans with a crème belt, a watch, and her grey shoes. Dacey was to be sincere and responsible, if she wanted to be. Dacey is 'a good girl with a bad attitude.'

'Ainsley' is the name she has given me which means 'solace'. And I love it!





Dacey used to keep me in her school bag the whole day. If she felt something was bothering her, she would share it with me that very instant. And her sigh would confirm to me that she was now in a calm state. Dacey is always calm and quiet; but nobody notices it; and when they do, they aren't ready to believe that Dacey loves to talk less.

Her affection towards her belongings is incredible. Pens, pencils, crayons, water colours, and novels are arranged on her shelves with small potted plants and blue fairy lights. Dacey takes great care of me too! She has decorated me with doodles, stickers, and calligraphies. She has painted each page with her happiness and I've soaked her every sorrow and tears. Well, that is my job!

Trouble came when Dacey misplaced me.

It was in the ongoing fifth lecture when he stole me from Dacey's bench.

A timid boy with circular specs. An unfamiliar creature. He put me in his school bag. What I witnessed in his school bag was like excavating an old treasury. All the stationary was lying hopelessly and were getting pushed and crushed and banged with those heavy books. They were all fighting to make some space and get some air. May god have mercy on them!

My pages began to get wet because of the water dripping from the creature's bottle; the scenario there was not good. Dacey organizes her bag like she is going to spend her life in it! It was one of the roller coaster moments of my life. My worst fear had come alive. I was stolen from my writer.

But why? Why would someone steal a personal diary?

After some time, the unfamiliar creature took me out of the chaos and handed me to Dacey. It was the relief I had never felt. For me, it was a journey from hell to heaven. Angels were singing hymns and God had granted my only wish. I was back in safe hands. Dacey looked lost, delusional, and quite satisfied to see me again. Slowly she smiled, yet she was still nervous.

That day she wrote, "Things do get lost but losing my diary would be the end of my world; the one I live in, the one I lived in the past and the one I wish for. Talking again with Ainsley has always untangled the threads."

There was a wave of emotions, which was strange for a man-made thing like me!

The waves crashed at the shore and so did my lines. I was helpless; I had no choice but let her weep while she filled my papers with the breathings of her heart.

It could have been worse if he, the unfamiliar creature, had read everything. This was just a chapter and not the story. And it made me believe that she cares for me! She never in her life would get attached to people who just pretend to care for her. At least that's what she has told me! The death of her grandpa was her deepest grief that she will hold forever. She made me believe that there are humans who crave emotions and attachments over materialistic fantasies. Since then, we have celebrated, suffered, cherished, and wept together. It is fate that I will have no page left one day, except till then I'm here for her anytime she needs me.

I'm now placed in a brown box which she has decorated with blue sheets. No, I have no regrets! She has named the box as 'Memories. Do not open' because she too has now learnt that nothing lasts forever and that my last page is now filled with her dreams. No, I'm not alone. There are toys that she used to play with when she was a kid, paintings from her childhood, photo albums of her friends, a 365-days quote jar, and a fancy dream catcher. Everything organized to perfection; like she is going to live in it. People might think a thing doesn't have life; but here I am! I wish I could tell Dacey how I feel, for I believe, "Books are proof: humans can do magic."

.

An artistic illustration of a classroom scene. Two students, a girl with dark hair in a ponytail and a boy with long blonde hair, are seen from behind, sitting at a desk and looking towards a chalkboard. The chalkboard is filled with mathematical formulas. The scene is lit with a warm, golden light from the left, creating a soft glow on the students' hair and the desk. The background shows bookshelves filled with books and laboratory glassware on the right.

Embedded Emotions

Aditi Karthick

$$\frac{R(x)}{Q(x)} = \sum_{i=1}^n \frac{A_i}{(x-a_i)} = \sum_{i=1}^n \frac{B_i(x-a_i)}{[x-a_i]^2}$$

$$\frac{\int (A+bx) dx}{[b^2+(x-a)^2]^{\frac{p}{2}}} = \frac{A}{2(1-p)} \frac{1}{[b^2+(x-a)^2]^{\frac{p-1}{2}}}$$

“Rock, paper, scissors shoot!” Emma stared at her best friend’s smirking face.

“Is it impossible to beat you?”

Sarah smiled and softly said to her face. “Maybe it is.”

Emma rolled her eyes and looked away.

She was thirteen, and had smooth brown hair. It was always in a high, slick ponytail. She relocated from New York to California two years ago, and now lived in a huge mansion. Her parents were rich business people, but she wouldn’t show it off. She had no friends except Sarah. She had known Sarah for almost a year, since they met in January, 2035. All the kids at her school avoided her completely. Emma had been all alone - until one fine day when she met Sarah and their friendship voyage began. It was instant – they were best friends in a week or two. Sarah went to a different school, but they were neighbours and they spent their evenings together.

Sarah was a great friend to her. She had greasy blonde hair, which she always let loose. Her parents were both busy computer science engineers who worked at a company called ALIAS. Sarah was very friendly to everyone - especially Emma. One could say that they were two peas in a pod.

It was one optimistic Saturday afternoon. The pair of confidantes were hanging out at Emma’s.

“Okay, come on, let’s go munch on something,” she offered.

Sarah politely refused, saying that she was too full. Emma wouldn't take no for an answer.

"I don't care how full you are. You are definitely trying one of my cinnamon bread rolls. I baked them myself."

Sarah looked around and tried to explain. "See, Emma, I just had a good lunch back at my house – I think my stomach is about to explode. So REALLY, I can't eat any more or I'll throw up. I am so sorry."

Emma was disappointed but she managed to hide it. "Fine. Let's watch some TV then." They both flopped down on the \$8000 sofa and turned on the home theatre TV. The first thing that popped up was a video about the upcoming robot launch. ALIAS, the leading robot manufacturing company, was going to launch about one million humanoid robots with AI into the world to live along with humans. This was big news. Until now, robots were just tiny devices that helped humans do daily tasks.

The whole world was brainwashed that robots were saviours and were God in another form - except Emma. She wasn't convinced. She believed that robots were horrible and the only reason they existed was because of some majestic capitalistic idea. Even Sarah, who was usually very conservative about her opinions, was a geek.

When Emma skipped the video, Sarah blurted out, "Wait, wait, go back! They released the date of the launch! The big day's coming!" Emma stared.

"Yay. Fun," she said sarcastically.

Sarah looked away uncomfortably. She had been thinking of asking her for a long time, but had kept it in. Now, she finally mustered up the courage to do it.

"Emma, why do you not like robots?"

It might seem like a simple question, but it was extremely controversial for Emma.

It was kind of like asking an atheist why they didn't believe in God.

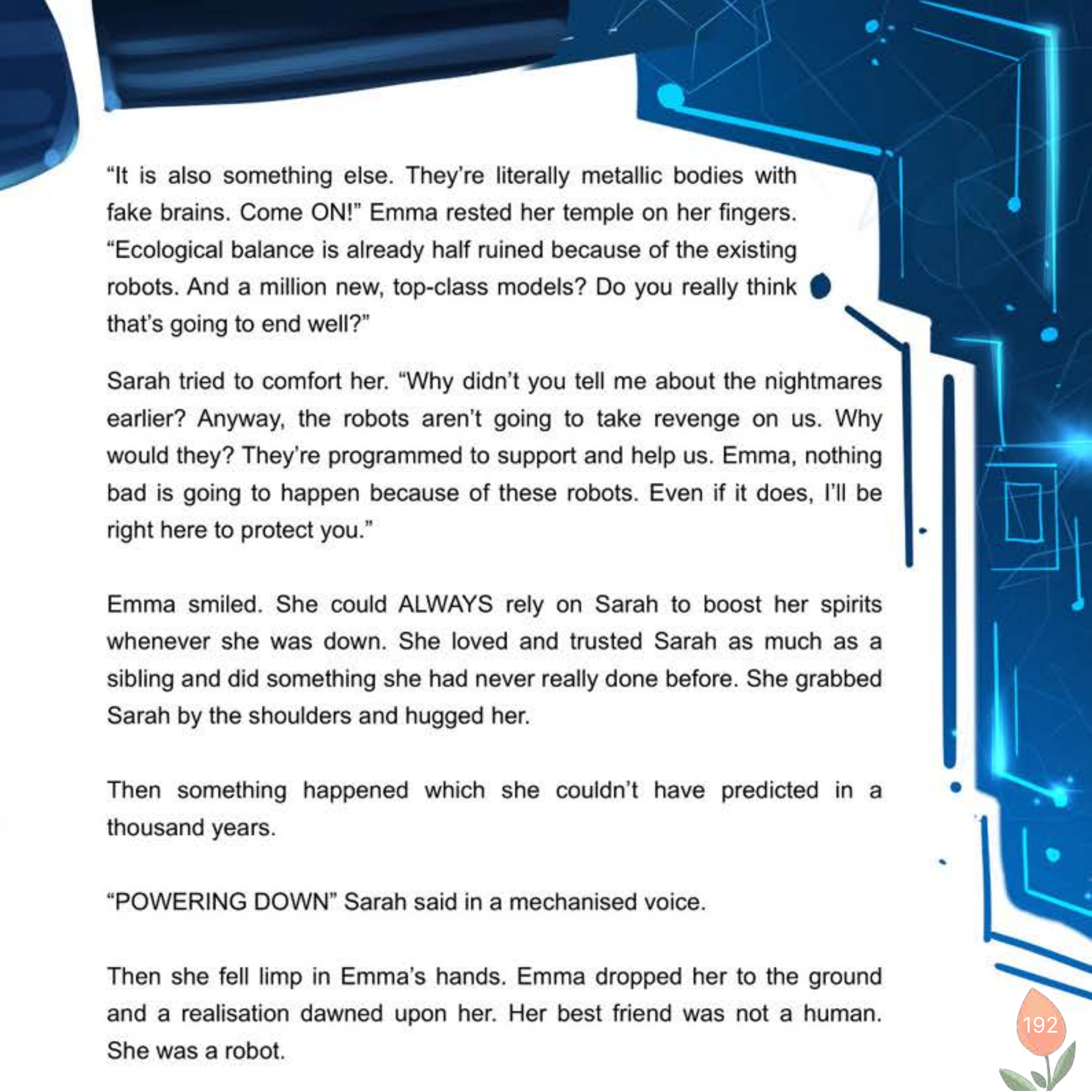
Emma sighed and asked, "Do you really want to know? Because I'm sure that you won't like it."

Sarah looked at her straight in the eye and nodded.

Emma started, "I get nightmares every single night. The robots trying to control humanity, humans left without jobs – defenceless on the streets. I know it sounds like a horrible sci-fi movie, but I'm helpless! I honestly think that robots, with all the intelligence that we humans gave them, will take revenge on us."

Sarah sighed and put her hand on Emma's shoulder. "Just nightmares? I thought it was something else."





"It is also something else. They're literally metallic bodies with fake brains. Come ON!" Emma rested her temple on her fingers. "Ecological balance is already half ruined because of the existing robots. And a million new, top-class models? Do you really think that's going to end well?"

Sarah tried to comfort her. "Why didn't you tell me about the nightmares earlier? Anyway, the robots aren't going to take revenge on us. Why would they? They're programmed to support and help us. Emma, nothing bad is going to happen because of these robots. Even if it does, I'll be right here to protect you."

Emma smiled. She could ALWAYS rely on Sarah to boost her spirits whenever she was down. She loved and trusted Sarah as much as a sibling and did something she had never really done before. She grabbed Sarah by the shoulders and hugged her.

Then something happened which she couldn't have predicted in a thousand years.

"POWERING DOWN" Sarah said in a mechanised voice.

Then she fell limp in Emma's hands. Emma dropped her to the ground and a realisation dawned upon her. Her best friend was not a human. She was a robot.

Emma's mind couldn't handle the overload. Emma didn't know what was happening – but whatever it was, she didn't want to lose her friend. Heartbreak, pain, and misery – all at once.

"Sarah? Sarah? SARAH! Wake up! Or should I say TURN ON!"

Anger was starting to cloud Emma's vision. She needed Sarah to tell her what was going on. She needed Sarah to tell her that this was all a prank. She needed Sarah because...she just did. She wanted to kick Sarah's 'metal body', but her heart wouldn't let her.

Luckily, her brain started to work and she tried searching for buttons. Obviously, they wouldn't be in plain sight. An idea clicked. Sarah 'turned off' when they had hugged. What if the button was somewhere on her back? Emma turned Sarah around and started searching.

Then she saw it.

A small blue spot on the back of her neck with minute writing on it. When Emma squinted, she could see it spelled ALIAS. Then it all made sense to her.

Emma knew Sarah's strange habits from the past year– but those had never really bothered her. Now, it was all coming together like puzzle pieces put in their right spots. Sarah ALWAYS rejected offer of food – but never in a thousand years would Emma have guessed it was because she couldn't actually EAT. She was extremely intelligent – she almost knew everything about everything. She never let anyone touch her hair. Most strange of all, she never hugged - ever.

She pushed the 'button' and got as far away as she could from Sarah to the corner of the room. Sarah started to stir. She blinked thrice and got up mechanically. "POWERING ON" she said.

Slowly, but cautiously, Emma asked with fear, "Sarah? What is this?"

Sarah looked down at her feet, "I guess I have a lot to explain."

Sarah tried to get Emma to sit with her on the sofa, but Emma wouldn't budge

.
"Why? So that you can transform me into a machine too? No way. EXPLAIN FROM WHERE YOU ARE."

Sarah sighed and started, "You know the launch that's coming up? From ALIAS?" Emma cringed at the name.

"Actually, I'm the first prototype from ALIAS. My team of creators were given the opportunity to test-run me."

Emma thought this through and asked, "Why me? Why be a fake friend? What have I done to you?"

"Emma, first of all, nothing about us was fake. You're still my best friend. And secondly, it's not about what you've done – it's about what your parents have. My mission in this world is not to serve humans intellectually, but to serve them emotionally," Sarah said politely.

Emma interrupted, "Yeah, mission succeeded. I think you've traumatised me for life. And what was that about my parents?"

Sarah continued, "As I was saying, your parents noticed that you didn't have any friends. They were worried and so made a deal with ALIAS to receive the very first ESP – Emotional Support Pal. Yup, that's me!"

Emma rolled her eyes.

"Look Emma, I'm still the same Sarah you saw ten minutes ago. Just that now you know I'm not human. I had to lie to you because it was part of my mission. I'm not like the other robots. Emotions are embedded in my little silicon heart. I'm sorry, but sooner or later, this had to happen," she finished.

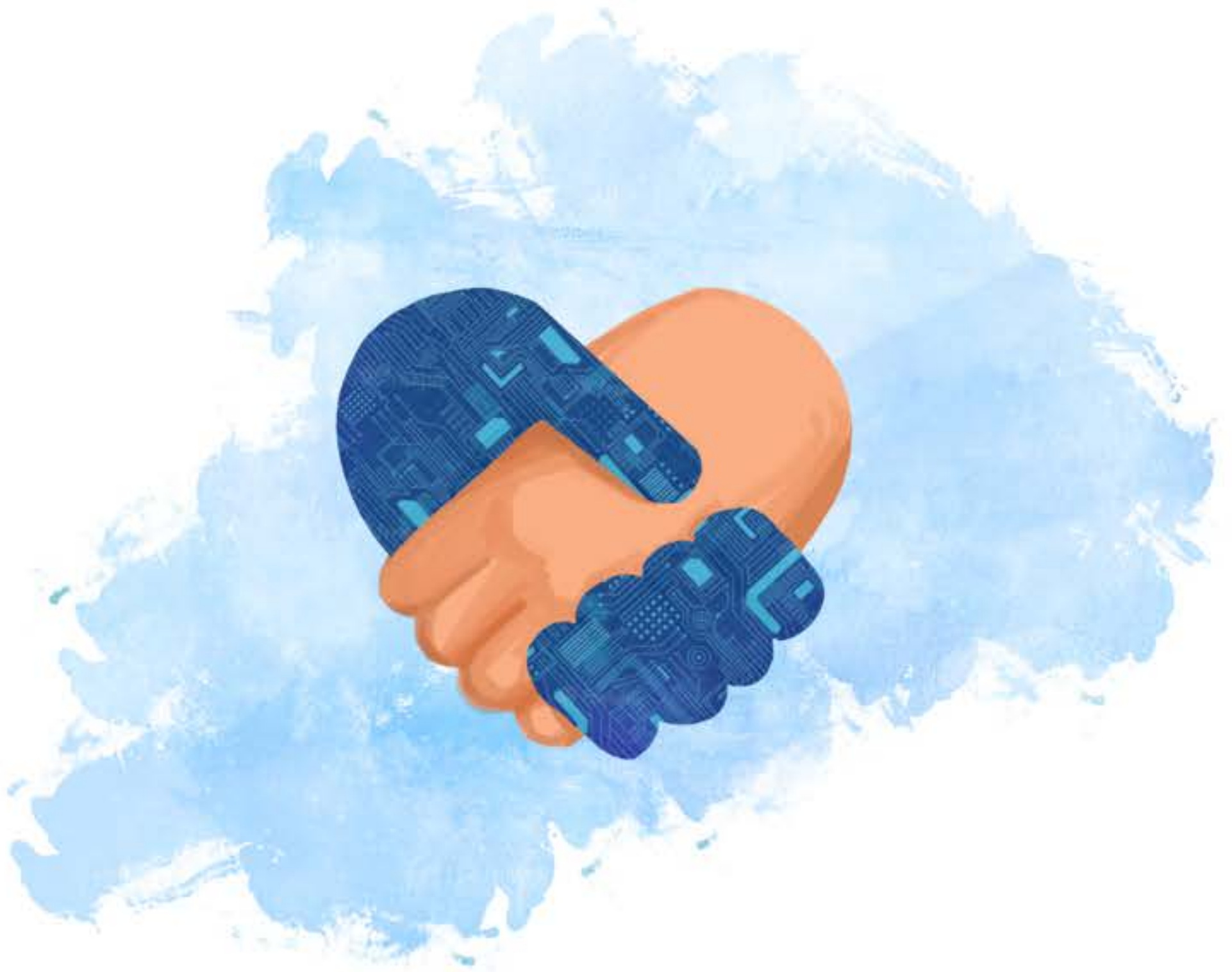
Emma closed her eyes. She thought everything over for a few minutes. Human or no human, Sarah did and always would hold a special position in Emma's heart. Although this newly found revelation would change some things, their friendship was much deeper than a few surprises – no matter how big.

Emma finally opened her eyes. Sarah was holding out her arms open for a hug.

"Just don't accidentally press the button this time."

Emma smiled and embedded herself and her emotions into Sarah's caress.

----- Friends Forever -----





Nurturville's Magic Breakout

Eshita Singh

Delhi Public School, Shahpur, Danapur Cantonment, Patna, Bihar

On a silent night, sitting by the window, watching the snowfall and enjoying the chocolaty essence of hot cocoa, Kyra was brainstorming ideas for the upcoming town festival, "Nurtureville's Day!"

"I wonder if we ever had the privilege of waking up on a usual morning and sleeping under an ordinary night sky," said Kyra to herself.

Being a mayor is hard, but holding outdoor events in Nurtureville is worse than that. The citizens of the town wonder if there is another place where the weather changes every hour, because in Nurtureville, it does. When people go out, they carry an umbrella for rain, wear boots for snow and even wear summer clothes under a coat.

Kyra was lost in her thoughts, when suddenly the doorbell started ringing continuously.

"Huh! It's 1 a.m. Who could it be at this hour?" said Kyra in a scared voice. She tiptoed to the door and took a sneak peek. Surprisingly, there was no one.

But then suddenly, "Ouch! Ah!" screamed Kyra. A paper aeroplane hit her head and gently landed in her hand. Out of curiosity, she unfolded the paper aeroplane. Her heart started beating loudly after reading the note.

It said, "Warm greetings to the mayor of Nurtureville. Who is this stranger? This thought must be hovering in your mind. Well, you know me. This note is a warning for you. There will be an outbreak in seven days leading everyone to their death. If you ignore this threat, be ready to see the whole world end before your eyes. The countdown starts now. See you soon."

Since that moment, the letters kept scaring her in every way. "Ah! I have to solve this mystery," said Kyra.

One day, while walking around the park, she accidentally overheard two women talking about Nurtureville's Day curse. Just when she was about to ask, her phone rang, and she had to run to her office.

She returned home in the evening, exhausted, and noticed a parcel in front of her door. She thought it was a gift for her, but the sender was unknown. She was stunned to find an old key inside with a note that said, "If your day is going bad, this key will break the curse."

"Argh! It's killing me inside," exclaimed Kyra.

She sat down with a cup of coffee to refresh her mind. While observing the key, she noticed something familiar. The name and logo of the town's library were on it. She looked at the birdie clock to check the time and decided to go to the library to find something about this key.

Suddenly, she got a call from the police that there had been an accident outside the library. She hurriedly wore her coat and ran to reach the library on time. She reached the library, however, there was no sign of any accident. That was very unusual.

Despite all this, she decided to investigate about the key. She asked the librarian. The librarian exclaimed, confused, that he had never seen a key like that before.

Kyra went to the history section to find a book about the key. While searching through the shelves, her sight fell on a golden book. It had the same design as the key. She picked it up from the shelf and saw a secret door behind it.

The book said, "OPEN THE DOOR WITH THE KEY THAT YOU HAVE AND SEE THE MAGIC HAPPEN THAT YOU NEVER THOUGHT WAS POSSIBLE."

On the door, there was a lifeless butterfly with rainbow wings.

"I've never seen a butterfly with rainbow wings!" said Kyra.

"That's because it is the only one in the world", the librarian said.

"How did he come here so fast?" thought Kyra.

"Let me tell you a secret. I've been living on this planet for millions of years. I'm under a spell because of which I can't die", said the librarian and disappeared.

Kyra was shocked.

She curiously went inside the room. There were beautiful paintings on the wall all around the room.

"Wait! Are these pictures telling a story?" Kyra asked.





"Yes, they are."

As she heard this, she quickly turned around. "Aaaaaa!" she shouted upon seeing a ghost.

She tried to run, but then the ghost spoke, "Please don't run. I am your mother's soul. I'm not trying to harm you."

The thought of her mother's soul left her shocked.

Then the soul spoke, "I was the guardian of this town, Nurtureville, and you are also the saviour of this town. But-Umm..."

"But what?" Kyra asked.

Immediately, it was all dark. When Kyra closed her eyes, the pictures on the wall started flashing in front of her eyes like a movie.

The soul spoke, "Years ago, this town was called the land of natural powers. Every pupil on this land had nature's power. Two sisters, Marineia and Icia, ruled this land together although they were the exact opposite. One had the power of peace while the other had the power of destruction. They both had kids with powers. Marineia's kids had the power of water, fire, earth, and wind, while Icia's kids had the power of bringing thunder, hail, and earthquake. However, Marineia had one more daughter, Aelia. She had a magical heart that contained the magic of all the elements of nature. The kids of Marineia and Icia hated each other. However, they all loved their sister, Aelia.

One day Aelia created a bush of flowers of unity called "Unight". But since she was restricted from practising her powers from a young age, her magic went upside down. Unight was created but a flower of destruction called Troublerene also started growing from the same twig. But Aelia didn't know.

Once the kids of Marineia and Icia had a terrible fight. Aelia went to resolve their fight with the help of Unight without knowing anything about Troublerene. As Aelia tried to use the magic of Unight, Troublerene's power backfired and led to an outbreak of nature. There was heavy rain, fireballs, and what not.

The magic outbreak engulfed the whole planet. When the planet was on the verge of collapsing, Aelia and her cousins created a magic ball called Nurtura and stored all the magic in it. But nobody survived that day except Aelia. In her grief, she converted herself into a rainbow butterfly and decided to protect the ball forever. And that was the day Kyra, you were born. Aelia gave you a new life. But because of Troublerene, Unight died which led to a curse upon this town. In 20 years, there would be an outbreak."

"And this is the 20th year", Kyra said.

She asked, "How can I break the curse?"

"By retrieving Unight!" the soul said and disappeared.



Kyra opened her eyes. She was back in the library's secret room. She looked at the date and gasped. It was the day of the outbreak. When Kyra stepped outside, she noticed the weather was unusual. It was sunny, there was heavy rain, there was snowfall and suddenly there was a rainbow, all at the same time.

"Oh My! It is happening!" said Kyra.

Despite the weather, she searched the whole park and found Unight's bush hidden in the middle of the park, but it was dead. Then all of a sudden, she had an idea. She called all the townspeople to the park. She asked them to join hands around the bush and repeat the chant,

"O Mother Nature, the greatest of all,
Retrieve this bush for the good of all."

There was a golden beam of light from the sky. It hit the bush and Unight's flowers bloomed.

However, the joy lasted only for a few minutes. The weather again became unusual.

"Uh! Oh! Do I have to start again from the beginning?" said Kyra in a tense voice.

And yes, indeed, her instincts were right. Unight's bush, again started dying. As flowers of Unight were withering, side by side, black poisonous flowers started growing swiftly.

The black flowers were growing up like a beast. The more they grew, the more vicious poison they spread. The poison was filled inside the tiny bubbles. Anyone who encountered the bubbles would freeze. The whole planet started breaking down in pieces; a part of it started decaying, while the other part started melting. The moon, the sun, and the clouds slowly started coming down.

"I never imagined I would walk on the clouds," said Kyra.

The situation worsened when a vanishment hole opened.

Kyra started panicking.

"I have to find Nurtura ball! But how?" said Kyra.

"Oh! What are these?" exclaimed Kyra. Countless paper birds were flying around her. She unfolded one and read it.

It said, "Dear Mayor, did you really think that the problem was this easy to solve? Head to the town's lake to know more."



Kyra was in deep shock, yet she went to the town's lake. There, she found the librarian with Aelia's butterfly flying in the sky.

However, there was an evil glare in the librarian's eyes. He attacked Kyra with countless duplicate Aelia's butterflies and notorious paper bats and disappeared into the clouds.

"I can't believe that he was the unknown sender," said Kyra.

Kyra was searching for the librarian when she saw something shiny. As she moved closer, her eyes caught sight of Aelia's butterfly. Its rainbow wings were shining in the clouds. She saw the librarian destroying the Nurtura ball. She yelled, "Stop! What are you doing?"

The librarian said, "I will destroy this whole planet. My curse will only break when I destroy this planet. I've been living for decades, suffering the pain."



He turned the Nurtura ball into a rock. The only hope to save the planet got destroyed and Kyra couldn't do anything. She was about to give up when she saw something promising. She noticed huge dark clouds coming towards them. The vanishment hole was also growing bigger.

Kyra pushed the librarian into the dark clouds and he fell into the vanishment hole. He was gone. Kyra ran with the Nurtura ball. She slowly began fainting when all of a sudden, she heard a melodious song. She started humming the song helplessly. It was then that the magic happened. She started flying and the Nurtura ball came to life. However, the magic was shortly wearing off. Only after a few seconds, the Nurtura ball started melting. "Oh! No! Please don't melt," said Kyra fearfully.

Suddenly, Aelia's butterfly started showing her the way. Kyra flew towards the top of the black flower. There she found a cloud that was about to burst into rain. She melted the Nurtura ball and poured it on the cloud. At last, there was a beautiful rainfall of Magic. The black flower withered and Unight bloomed again due to the magic rain.

Then Kyra heard a beautiful voice, "The curse has broken."

She turned to see who it was. She frowned because the girl had rainbow wings. Kyra curiously asked, "Are you Aelia?"

She smiled and disappeared.

All the kids in the story-time room clapped and were amazed.

Kyra said, "So, this was Nurturville's tale..."

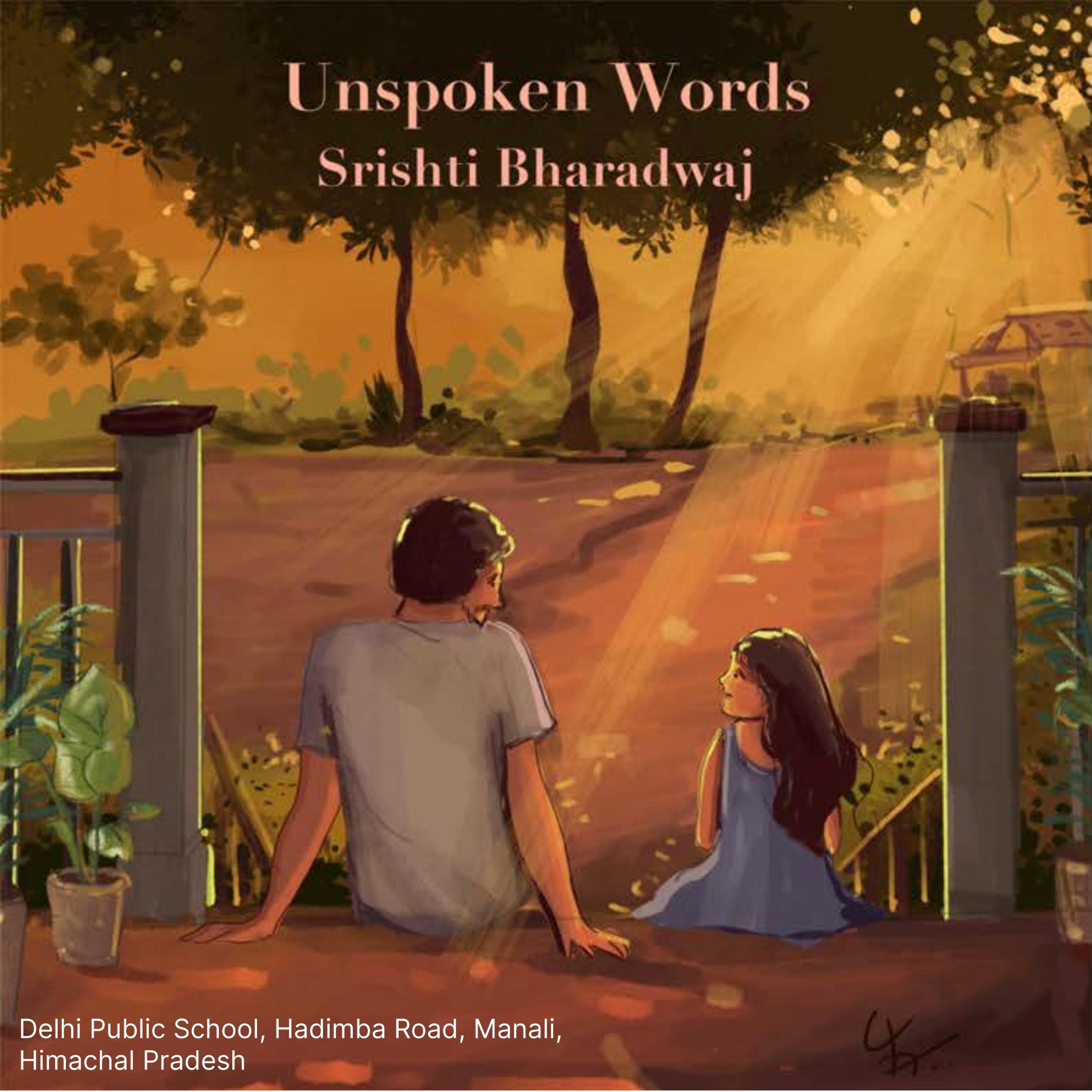
One little girl asked, "Is magic real?"

Kyra said with a delightful smile, "Yes, after all magic is present in everybody's heart and soul. Isn't it?"



Unspoken Words

Srishti Bharadwaj



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Himachal Pradesh

U.S.

I sit in the dining room of my dimly lit apartment, the wooden chair starting to hurt my back as my head falls back and the pounding starts. I look down at the table to find Microsoft Word opened on my laptop and a blank screen staring back at me. I haven't written anything in ages and my draft is due soon. My eyes drift to the crumpled piece of paper next to my laptop, without further thought I snatch it off the table, walk out towards the front door, pausing to get my jacket as I walk out of the house, key and paper in hand that I shove into my coat pocket.

I start my walk, my boots crushing the snow with every step that I take. It takes me good 13 minutes to get there and when I do, I realise my feet took me in an entirely different direction from where I had originally wanted to go. I put my hand in my pocket to pull out the wrinkled piece of yellow paper and stare down at it. The letter I had written, but never got to send stares back at me.

Dear Dad,

I don't even know how to start this letter; the idea was pure impulse honestly. And I know it's too late now, but these unspoken words have been weighing on me for far too long. I still remember that day in our apartment, when you saw me crying in my room as I was being bullied by a girl, I once deemed a friend. How you stayed with me for hours straight and just listened. I remember, how you stayed up late with me to make a card that was bigger than me in size, quite literally, even though it was a mere friendship day card.

I remember that one day when both of us forgot the keys to the house and



fetches them from mamma's workplace, we sat in the car in the 35 degrees heat and ate noodles with our hands for we didn't have any forks. I remember the drives you used to take me on, whenever we wanted to celebrate my newest victory. All those fancy dress parties you drove me to. All those late nights spent playing badminton in the local court. All those times we skipped tuition so that we could go play in the little park hidden behind the tall buildings.

All those days dancing mindlessly under that colour changing chandelier in the middle of the room. The memories of my childhood are forever cherished, and I have you to thank for every single one of them. I am so sorry to have judged you for the times you lost your temper though the times were rare. It baffled me that a man who I knew to be so kind and gentle, could turn into a raging flame. It scared me.

Scared me to the point that I pushed you away. I pushed away the memories of our once cherished life, moments that you tried oh so hard to create, and a future, one filled with love. But for my young heart, every game night that was cancelled, for you were too tired, every movie that was forgotten, for you were too busy, every small detail that slipped your mind, for you had too much on your plate, was a dagger to my heart. I know I am no longer the little girl that admired the only man in her life and looked up to him. I took the first chance I got to run away, far away, in the name of college. I was a coward. I had had enough of negativity of our house. How everyone behaved as though they hated each other, I couldn't



bear to see our beautiful family being torn apart by nothing but simple misunderstandings that could have been solved by a little communication. Not that I hadn't tried telling you so, but who would listen to a thirteen-year-old girl who knew nothing of adult affairs. I don't want to be rash, forgive me, it was a mere opinion. Silly me for talking as though you were to write a letter in response. I have many things to say that I wished I had said, but not as many as I have questions to ask, questions that will never be answered.

*Love Always,
Your Daughter*

A single tear slips from my eye and drops onto the paper leaving its mark. I look down at the letter in my hands, the paper almost crumbling from the grip of my hand. I was never very good at communicating my feelings to my dad. I could weave them into the most beautiful poems and stories but could never say them face-to-face to a person. The same words that I am known for get me tongue tied in such situations. My eyes drift down until a concrete slab comes into view.

“John Smith

5 Dec 1983 – 7 July 203

A loving husband and father who will be remembered forever”

It's astonishing how the greatest of empires, and the mightiest of beings fell because of the smallest of things. Kind of like how an elephant with all its strength and greatness is frightened by a mere mouse, although I heard



somewhere that that was actually a myth, but my point still stands. My father was a great man. He was loved and respected by all. But for me, he was this amazing father “the 1% in the world”, I used to call him. But as time began to run its course, we drifted apart. His lack of time for my endeavours and my lack of empathy for his growing troubles split us apart. Neither of us were brave enough to take the first step to mend our broken bond.

That tether remained unfixed as the emotional distance between us grew into the physical world and we were driven apart by miles. Still, the two of us were too stubborn to see our mistakes. Now I wish how if I had gotten a single chance, I would have gathered up the courage to come clean. To lay my wounds, that I’ve garnered over the years, on the table, hoping he would do the same. Hoping to heal together, if possible. But now it’s too late.

I hate my subconscious mind for now flashing memories of that night, the night everything changed. I know he didn’t believe in the afterlife but right now I am using every ounce of my will power and faith into it being a reality, hoping I would see you one last time. Gosh, how silly I must sound.

The screech of the crow’s shrill caw breaks my chain of thoughts as I take one last moment in front of the grave. I look around, there is a thick blanket of snow covering the cemetery. A flake falls on the tip of my nose and melts on contact. I start walking back, the crunch of the snow under my boots filling the silence. It’s a quiet day, not a soul in sight, just plain white blanket on tall trees as far as the eye can see. Before I can make out, my sleeve gets

caught in one of the twigs on the tree nearby. But the more I struggle, the harder it is to untangle it. "Use your brain, not brute force", my father's voice finds its way to me. I calm down and try again, this time slipping the rogue thread from the sharp twigs. Guilt takes over me, I can't go back, go back with this letter in my hand, impulse or not, I deserve to give him the letter, he deserves it. And so, I run back to where he lay. I am not sure what it is that I'm doing, it's closure perhaps, but I'm not entirely sure. Truth be told, I never quite understood the word. I look down at where he lay, to say my final words, the last of my unspoken words.

"You know, I once heard that when the people you love are gone, it's not the memories that are hard to remember, but how you can barely make out what their voice used to sound like, or the way their smile looked or the sound of their laugh... I don't want that dad, I really don't and I am, petrified, as to when that moment will come".

I felt tears brimming in my eyes. I let them fall for I believed that crying is the best way to erase the hint of sadness. "I thought that it was all a prank. I thought it was a well-planned prank and the next day, you'll step inside the house saying "How was the prank, pumpkin?" But you never returned. Even while sitting in front of your grave, I feel that one day you'll return to us and live with us. I don't want to forget you dad. I hope you know, now at least that I know how much you loved us, all the sacrifices that you made for us. I am sorry dad, for being the terrible daughter that I was, I was ungrateful and disrespectful and cruel. I'm sorry." I finally said what I

wanted to. I sighed and searched for a stone chip. When I finally found one, I set the paper on the concrete floor and placed the stone on it.

"I'm letting faith take this one, when I say that I hope you read this letter and forgive me for all that I have done and for all that I didn't do. Goodbye dad, I love you, I always will." I got up and glanced at the grave for the last time before turning away.

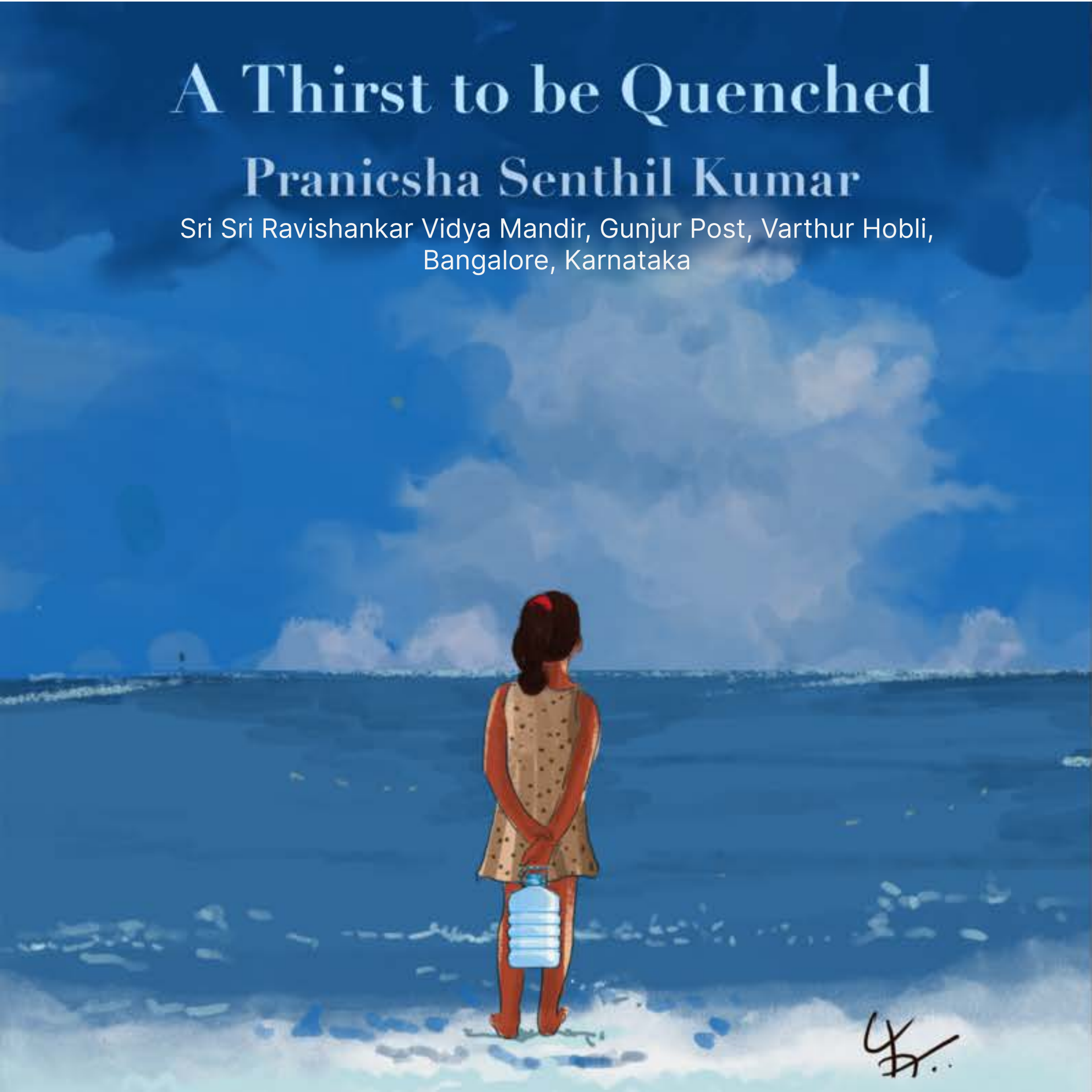
That day when I returned to my silent and dark apartment, dropping the keys in the bowl next to the door, I still felt unsettled as if the letter wasn't enough of a closure. I walk further into my dining room, only to find my laptop with the same blank screen sitting on it. All at once an overwhelming sense of knowing rushes to me as I take my seat in front of the blank document. I get to work and start typing the words...



A Thirst to be Quenched

Pranicsha Senthil Kumar

Sri Sri Ravishankar Vidya Mandir, Gunjur Post, Varthur Hobli,
Bangalore, Karnataka



Betty woke up instantly, hearing Tea meow fiercely.

Numbness in her legs and a dryness in the throat overcame her, but she pushed past the feeling of defeat and rose from the soil drenched in poisonous bay water. Remorsefully, she packed up the tent, regretting not staying up the night as planned. Perhaps she could have found water or bread if luck was on her side, but it seemed luck had abandoned her.

As Betty was moving away from the Bureau, Tea was right beside her, like always. She heard the 6 AM announcement from the loudspeakers in each street, which played daily for the past eight months since the floods had gotten worse.

She mouthed along mockingly, "Attention to all the residents of the Island of Hawaii. Due to the rise in water levels and extreme acidity of water, the island is cordoned off. Request all residents to stay at home and follow the guidelines. Food and water are available for all in your nearest bureau. If your property lies near the harbour and is facing flooding, report to your nearest bureau for accommodation on higher altitudes. Thank you and hope you all have a good morning ahead."

Betty was not having the best morning, devoid of water to quench her parched throat. She urgently needed a plan. Hunting in the woods might yield a mutated animal or two, but little water. Returning to the Bureau to search for overlooked bottles seemed futile. Overwhelmed, she collapsed to the ground, drained of her remaining energy. Tea settled on her lap, offering solace.

Tea, her only family, fended for himself in the chaos. When she looked into Tea's hazel eyes, everything felt alright, driving her to continue onward. The metallic smell of blood wafted near her. She took cover. It was the Drought bloods, the gang who killed anyone in their way ruthlessly to hoard water and sell it in the black market at unreasonable prices.

This was the only way. Following the deadly gang to snatch a bottle of water from them.

Patiently, she listened to their conversations, boasting about their crimes. Clutching her bronze dagger, she hoped to avoid using it. The voices faded, footsteps moving away. Betty cautiously entered the alley, trailing behind the gang. She crept like a thief in the night through the narrow paths, maintaining her distance. Her legs trembled, feeling as though she had followed them for hours. Deeper into the perilous woods, filled with poisonous trees and mutated animals, they ventured.

Betty stumbled on a branch, snapping it loudly. The gang halted, searching for the source of the noise. She swiftly hid behind a tree, hoping they hadn't detected her. One man dismissed it as a raccoon causing trouble, relieving Betty. They resumed walking, leading her towards the water, or perhaps a more dangerous location. Finally, she spotted a large container bearing the gang's symbol in the heart of the forest. She was so pleased that she lost track of her conscience and started walking recklessly towards the water. She felt the guard's gaze fix on her. The

guard hadn't spoken yet, but Betty realized that she wouldn't be able to escape, if caught. She pivoted and ran away.

Tea started pacing in front of her. She kept running, not looking back for a second. Tea was way ahead of her now. This was unusual. He was a follower, not quite a leader. He started sprinting at top speed with his short limbs. Betty wasn't able to keep up with him. She tripped over a tree root. She felt a sharp pain in her ankle. She had fallen down many times before to know well enough to keep her arm over her head to avoid a concussion, but the pain from her leg was ringing in her head. She was lying motionless on the swampy mud about to die of dehydration, and Tea was nowhere to be seen. Betty knew better than to close her eyes, but she gave in. She just wanted to rest forever. Soon everything went black.

Betty opened her eyes to a dimly lit room. She was covered in sheets, lying on a comfortable bed. The strangest was the fact that she was not thirsty. After experiencing momentary peace, she came back to her senses.

Where was she?

How did she get here from the woods?

Why was she not thirsty anymore?

Had she drunk the poisonous water? In which case she had to be hospitalised immediately.



Where was Tea?

She felt overwhelmed by all those questions, but as soon as she got up and started looking around, she found the answer to one question. Tea was sleeping on a chair peacefully. She had never seen him so calm with his guard down, and that eased Betty's mind.

She cautiously unlocked the door to see what was outside. The bright light blinded her for a few seconds. What she saw made her jaw drop. It was a beautifully built house and the centre of attraction was a fountain with crystal clear water gushing out of it. The sight angered her.

"Oh, dear! You're finally awake. It's been days," a voice said.



Startled, Betty asked, "Who are you? Why have you brought me here?"

The voice belonged to an old lady in her sixties, holding a tray with a bowl of hot porridge. Betty regarded her with confusion.

The lady kindly replied, "How long has it been since you had a proper meal? You worry me, looking so sickly."

Betty had no intention of eating food from a stranger, but her hungry stomach betrayed her. She sat down at the table, reluctantly accepting the bowl before questioning the lady further.

"Why are you being kind to me? How did I end up here?"

The lady interrupted, saying, "A young mind with a million questions. I'll gladly answer them all, but first, eat."

Clumsily holding the spoon, Betty ate the porridge messily, while the old woman wore a sad smile. Betty finished, urging the woman to explain how she had arrived there.

"It was Kit. He behaved strangely, urging me to leave the house, which is unlike him. Curiosity got the better of me, and I followed him, finding you unconscious," the lady explained.

Betty interjected, "I'm sorry, Kit. Who is that?"



The lady replied, "Oh, that's my cat, Kit. Come here, darling."

"Do you mean Tea?"

The lady seemed puzzled, asking, "How do you know my cat?"

A revelation struck Betty—Tea's mysterious disappearances and survival instincts confirmed her suspicion.

Betty smiled, looking at Tea. "Kit?" simultaneously, the lady said, "Tea?" They laughed together.

The old lady remarked, "From now on, you shall be called Kitty."

For a second Betty let that moment sink in. It was first time in years that she had laughed, but her curiosity was back.

"What's your name? How do you have so much water?" Betty asked.

The lady replied calmly, "I am Marjorie. In my youth, I was a scientist. I witnessed the world collapse before my eyes. We developed a method to purify contaminated water, but it was never approved for public use."

It intrigued Betty. Before she could speak, Marjorie asked with a caring voice, "Where do you live? I'm sure it's terrible out there."



"I live in a tent near the government building," Betty replied.

Without a second of hesitation, with eyes gleaming with hope, the old lady asked, "Do you want to live with me? I have plenty of water. I need a companion to spend my last years with."

The sudden question took Betty aback, but her heart was overflowing with hope.

She said, "I need some time to think about it." Marjorie smiled in reply.

Later, Betty excused herself and went back to the room where she had woken up, but this time with a sigh of relief and fell straight asleep with a full stomach and hydrated body.

Betty woke up instantly as she made a decision. She felt comfortable under the blanket with Kitty near her arm. She had a thirst for altruism. She wanted to learn about Marjorie's discovery to help everyone in need and quench their thirst.

For the Dreams Left Undone

Soumya Srivastava



"How much time till the desired destination?" asked Alexander, his deep voice quiet but stern.

"Just a few hours, Captain," answered Luka, Alexander's second in command and closest friend.

"It's getting cloudy in this area. The night is also awaiting us. There is a storm coming and it's not the one we have survived before. This one has the power to crush mountains,"

Alexander sighed.

"You seem to be correct, Captain. Another piece of information we just received is that the 'Red Pythons' are also arriving at the destination we will be reaching soon enough." Alexander frowned at that.

It was a cloudy but pleasant day in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, alarmingly near the Mariana Trench, the deepest area in the largest ocean worldwide. It is rumoured to be the place where the bravest and mightiest of the pirates fail to survive. Any sane band of pirates would refuse to enter the said area, but that was not Alexander Stiles.

Who was 'Alexander Stiles' you may ask?

People consider Oceans one of the most dangerous places in the world, and they are. They suffers thunderstorms, cyclones and many unknown occurrences that we may have neither heard of nor seen in our lifespan and those who sail in the threatening waves of the ocean and challenge it to show who the king is, are the most feared. They are menacing. They are savage. They are vile. They are Pirates and that is who Alexander Stiles was.

He did not let fear and cowardice stand in his way to success. He always laughed in the face of this so-called disaster, "death". One could not even imagine how many times he had visited the thin veil between life and death which is why he was called 'The Emperor'. The Emperor of death, of life, and the deadliest band of pirates called the "Black Panthers". It was not a title given to them, but a title earned. Wherever they set foot, chaos came along like a shadow that never left your side. After years of thefts of houses, cities, and islands they became a vicious group of pirates feared by all. However, they did not kill in vain.

Any person could recognise the Black Panthers from a distance. They presented themselves in full-black outfits. A satin black shirt, khaki pants, and a bandana on either their foreheads or around their necks. They were always adorned in silver jewels, around their hands, on their ears, and even on their big bushy beards. This exterior added to their tall muscular form. However, their leader stood out of the crowd, wearing the same piece of clothing but in all white.




At first sight, many didn't believe that the perfectly groomed gentleman with stormy grey eyes and muscular build was a pirate, no less the leader. Alexander was a strict disciplinarian. Unlike other pirate groups, which portrayed the cliched lifestyle that most pirates have, his rule was different. He demanded unity, courage, and a sense of responsibility. He did not always do bad, he believed in good too.

Alexander always had a goal and that goal at the current moment was to find the "Locket of Gods". Many believed it was a myth and many didn't agree with that. Alexander did. His father, a great man, and a pirate had died in search of this locket, always told him stories about it. Little Alexander would keep his head on his father's lap and listen to him, who told him the story behind the locket. He still remembered the words of his father.

He would always start with,

"Little Alex, recognising something as true and false depends upon the person's belief and your old man believes that many many years ago, when only Goddess and her angels walked the Earth, an angel was constantly disregarded by many. After years of listening to comments disgracing him, he decided to forge a locket which would steal the thing precious to everyone. Light. And open a portal to hell. He was able to forge this locket which was shaped like a skull and two crosses beneath it but at the right time, the goddess unleashed a part of her power, killing the evil angel and burying him and the locket in a place where no one could find it. It could be only destroyed by one thing and that is a blade, which has the power of the goddess herself."




The top of the page features a light blue sky with two dark blue birds in flight. On the right side, a large, dark blue, stylized shape representing the bow of a ship points towards the center.

It was his father's many years of research that led to the discovery of the weapon which was in his possession, but unknown to everyone. Also the locket was buried in the depths of the Mariana Trench, which was the reason Alexander was standing at the bow of the ship, hands crossed above his chest, chin held high with nothing but determination in his eyes.

But he couldn't deny that he wasn't worried about the Red Pythons arriving at the location they were headed to.

Red Pythons was a rival pirate group which Alexander hated with every fibre of his being. The leader of the group was the killer of his father. He was the reason his father died and left without achieving his dream to find the locket. They intended to find the locket and unleash its power upon the world which was exactly what Alexander was against. He wanted to get rid of this locket just like his father did. If the wrong hands get a hold of it, then the future of the world is doomed.

The bottom of the page shows the dark blue hull of a ship, with a rope hanging from the bow. The background transitions from a light blue sky to a dark blue sea.

Alexander said with deadly calm, “I assume that The Red Pythons are also in search of the locket as well.”

“Yes, Captain. What I don't understand is how they interpreted that the locket is at the location only your father and yourself knew about?”

“Please, don't worry about that Luka. Go ahead and tell our fellow mates that our destination is not far along, they should get ready,” said Alexander.

“Aye Aye, Captain,” replied Luka and wandered off inside the large ship.

It was a moment of pin-drop silence. Alexander could only hear the speeding waves and the whirling of his mind. A whirlpool of questions created itself in his mind. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. A bad feeling settling in its place in the bottom of his heart. The sound of incoming footsteps made him come out of his trance. He turned to see his pirates, all ready to achieve the biggest quest they had ever undertaken.

“My friends, it seems like we have arrived at the Mariana Trench, a place not many have reached and I congratulate you for that. Now comes the harder part of our mission, obtaining the locket. As you know it lies in the depths of this ocean, therefore it's a deep journey to the end. I am not risking any more lives, I have decided that I, myself, would go down to retrieve what we all came here for. I can



hold my breath underwater longer than any man can. It's all I have practised. In any case, if I do not manage to come back, Luka would be the one to take charge and you must listen to him. Is that understood?" thundered Alexander's voice, matching the roar of the waves hitting the black wood of the ship. A chorus of 'yes captain' echoed through the crowd.

Just as Alexander was about to get ready to swim down, he heard the trumpet of a ship. It seemed that The Red Pythons had indeed arrived. The thundering laugh of the leader of Red Pythons could be heard from miles.

"Long time no see brother!" exclaimed the leader of Red Pythons, Cain. Pirates from both sides gasped and exchanged confused glances towards each other.

"You lost the right to call me that a long time ago Cain." said Alexander with a scary calm which could make anyone's bones rattle in fear.

"Come on, still hung up on the little incident?" mocked Cain, finding pleasure in angering Alexander more and more. Alexander took a step forward, his eyes blazing with years of hidden rage.

"You're the reason our father is dead, Cain. Because of your treacherous and greedy mind." sneered Alexander.

Cain's mood surprisingly changed at the accusation.

"I have no time for this Alexander. I have a locket to obtain and the gates of hell to open." Cain said, with no emotion in his voice.

"No Cain, you will not succeed in this preposterous whims. That locket will bring no good to you. It will only cause destruction and pain and suffering. Is that what you want? For little children to live without their parents, in a world with no light..."

Alexander's speech was cut short by a bright green light coming from the ocean. Both Alexander's and Cain's eyes widened. It seemed like the locket was pulling itself upwards. With a speed unimaginable, the locket was pulled out of the water with an invisible force. Cain looked at Alexander, a grin on his face while his eyes were clouded with greed.

"Well brother, it looks like the locket is calling out to me," he said and jumped out of his ship to reach for the locket shining in the sky. Before Alexander could jump as well to stop Cain from doing what he will regret later, it was too late. The pirates of both ships were now fighting and even though only Cain's fingertips touched the locket, it opened the tiniest portal which was enough to take the light of their surroundings.

Alexander's eyes widened as he saw a bony and fleshy hand come through the

portal. It seemed like all his nightmares came true but he collected himself and charged towards the locket before the portal widened any further.

Alexander let out a huge cry, silver lightning blazing from the goddess's blade which now rested in his hands rather than in the holster on his forearm. He struck the weapon straight through the locket and then came a powerful wind which knocked everyone off their feet.

Everything was silent.

When Alexander opened his eyes, the locket was gone, so was the portal and so were his brother and his crew. He was still confused about his brother but when he looked up, he saw the daylight return and he could've sworn he saw his father smiling down at him, telling him he did it. He made his father proud. He saved the world. Alexander sighed, closing his eyes. Utilising this peaceful moment for a much-needed rest.



Caged

Jiah Motiani



Bonnie and I had dozed off in our apartment in New York City. She woke up at 3 am and screamed my name out loud multiple times.

"Claire, Claire, Claire help me out of this cage! Please Claire I am unable to breathe. The oxygen is depleting, and we don't have much time!"

She stopped screaming and woke up with a jerk. She was almost breathless and scared to death.

I got up and filled a glass of water for her. She drank it and calmed down as she realized she was having a nightmare. Now that she was back to reality, she came back to her senses and covered her face with her hands. She let out a huge sigh of relief and said, "The nightmare, the cage, the ocean and those deadly monsters, it was all so scary."

All those words struck me and all the disastrous memories flashed before my eyes. Our lives completely changed after we "hung out with the sharks". Recalling those memories was itself a huge task, but nevertheless I guess I survived to tell the tale.

I am Claire Willows, 25 years old and I work as a stylist in NYC. Bonnie and I are childhood friends and have known each other since kindergarten. Bonnie has always been the confident one and I am the complete opposite of what is called confident. She hates being dominated and loves to do what she pleases. We are like sisters to each other. We did our college together and work in the fashion industry. The fashion industry had its own pros and cons and we took it as a challenge for ourselves.

Our work lives had been extremely tiring. I had been planning for the trip for almost a year. It was on her birthday that I booked two tickets to Fiji as a surprise for her and also because we needed a break from our tumultuous work lives. She was so ecstatic that she hugged me tight and that was the indication that our vacation was going to be fabulous, or so I thought.

Day 1

Once we landed in Fiji, we were in awe of the beautiful beaches and of course our hotel which was as good as a five star hotel. As soon as we checked in, we couldn't wait to take a dip in the clear blue sea. Our hotel was surrounded by numerous beaches which were so crowded that we couldn't get the chance to sit by the benches and sunbathe.

"Let's go to one of those local seafood restaurants near our hotel. I really want to try crabs and shrimp. I've heard they are mouthwatering and seriously to die for."

Bonnie agreed and we headed back to our hotel to freshen up.

Day 2

"Not again!" Bonnie exclaimed dejectedly.



I was astounded to see the other beaches overcrowded and with a depressed feeling told her to head back to the hotel.

As we entered our room, she immediately contacted the travel desk and enquired, "Hi, this is Bonnie Henderson calling from room 1008. Can you provide us with information about secluded beaches around Suva where my friend and I can get some privacy and relaxation?"

The travel consultant provided us with addresses of some secluded beaches which wouldn't be as crowded as the ones we visited. We packed our bathing suits in our backpacks and headed to the beach.

Day 3

We arrived at the beach and were elated to see that the secluded beach was less crowded but at the same time there were various water activities available as well. As we passed by all those sports, we came across a hoarding which said, 'BEWARE OF THE SHARKS! TRY AT YOUR OWN RISK' in bold capitals. 'Swimming with the sharks in a cage', the hoarding said further. Bonnie's face lit up with enthusiasm. I knew what her expressions were implying.

"Let's do it. Yeah. Let's do it!"

Her exhilarating words troubled me.

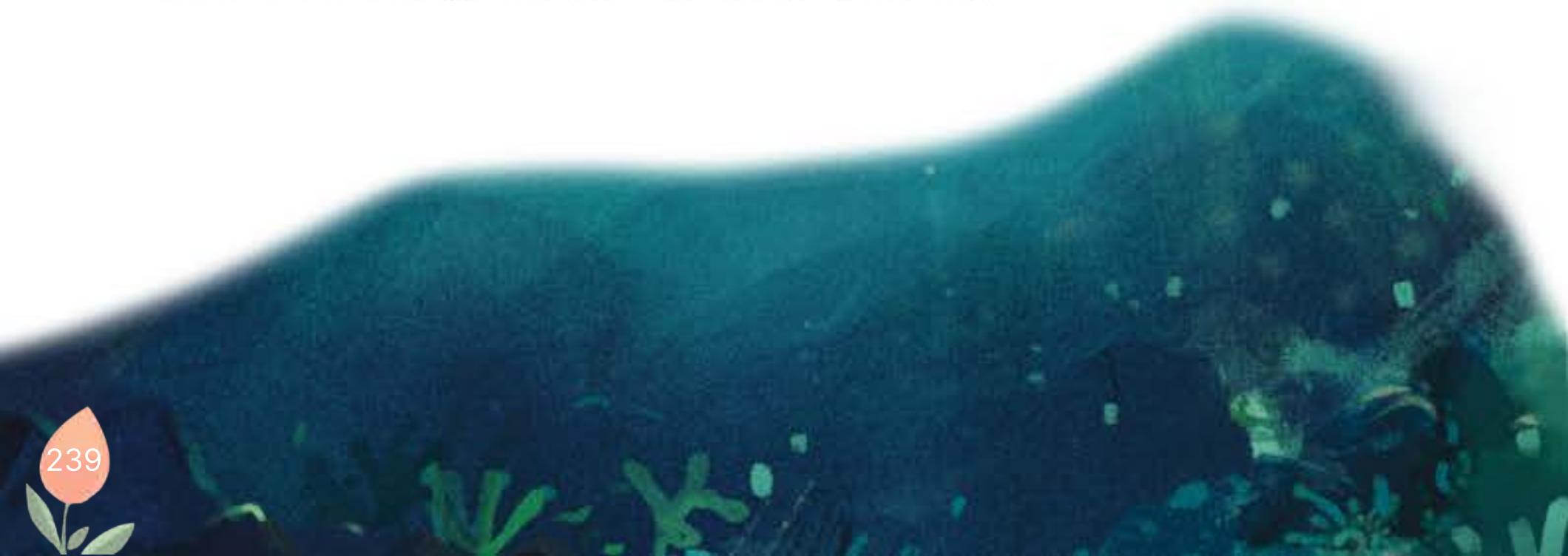


"No means no, seriously no! We can't do this, it's deadly. Sharks are deadly."

"Oh come on you scaredy cat, it's a once in a lifetime experience. Don't let it pass, Claire."

I was quite uncertain about her decision, and it was only because of one reason.

"Bonnie, I guess you are forgetting that you suffer from bronchial asthma. I am sure the management won't permit you anyway."



But she wasn't ready to listen to me. She dragged me towards the registration counter of the activity. The consultant provided us with a non-waiver form which had a set of protocols. I cautiously went through it and pointed out one of the protocols which read, 'Do you suffer from any breathing ailments?' Bonnie snatched the form from my hands and at lightning speed filled in all the details required. To my utter surprise, she ticked 'No' as her answer to the question regarding if she had any breathing ailments. I cautioned her but she was so determined to 'swim with the sharks' that she didn't bother even hearing me out. In fact she forcibly dragged me into it when I wasn't readily prepared for it. I was afraid what her decision would lead us into and what the consequences would be. I was tangled in a web of thoughts and I knew that there was no escape.

Day 3, 6:15 PM

"Come on now, don't be such a dopey. Just hop in!" said Bonnie.

She wasn't afraid at all but I was.

I was afraid because of her health and hoped that nothing happened to her while we were in the cage. She assured me that everything will be just fine. Somewhere in my mind, I thought that there shouldn't be any problem because of the safety gear and precautionary facilities ensured by the activity management. The management was so trustworthy that I was eventually compelled to join Bonnie.

Day 3, 7 PM

"Woah! Look at them, they are just circling around the cage waiting to eat us," she giggled. "Shut up, don't talk nonsense and just enjoy the view," I said.

"Anyways, how long have we been in this cage?"

Bonnie checked her smartwatch that was given to just one of us as a part of the safety gear.

"It's been thirty minutes since we were dropped underwater and we have exactly another thirty minutes to enjoy ourselves while we are here."

I nodded.

Day 3, 7:25 PM

"Are you okay? I don't think you are. Let me contact the management through the watch to pull us up."

She disagreed as she wanted to enjoy the last five minutes which were available to us.

I did not argue further as we were going to be pulled back in the next five minutes. The sharks were deadly, certainly looking hungrily and ready for their next meal. I was praying and hoping to be pulled back to the deck as soon as possible. Suddenly I heard a jingle and a thud that followed. I looked up outside the cage and was dumbstruck to witness the broken hook that linked it to the deck.

Day 3, 7:35 PM

"We are drowning," she screamed.

I was speechless and stupefied.

"We are going to die, we are going to die."

She repeated multiple times and stopped when I said, "Yes, it's all your fault. I cautioned you, warned you, but you didn't listen. You didn't bother to hear me out. I even stated reasons concerning your health and still you didn't bother to hear me." I exclaimed with anger in my eyes while she froze. At that point, I should have consoled her but I didn't and instead lost my cool. I tried communicating with the crew, "Hello, management crew. My friend and I are stuck in this cage. The hook has broken and we are sinking. Help us please."

I kept talking and shrieking at the top of my voice waiting for a response but all I could hear was a static noise indicating that we had sunk so low that there was no network. She panicked and lost her senses. She banged her head so hard in an attempt to get out of the cage. Her hand started bleeding and all the blood flowed in and out of the cage.

Just when I thought it couldn't get worse, a catastrophe awaited us.

Day 3, 8:15 PM

"How did they get here?" Bonnie questioned in a panic state.

I was astonished to see sharks around the cage waiting for us to come out of it and then eat us. Bonnie's blood reached them, and they sensed our existence. They kept circling around the cage.

"We are going to die, yes we are. Oh my lord please save us! Please forgive me for the sins I have committed." She kept weeping.

I tried consoling her but looking at her state, I couldn't help but stick with her. We had to stick together through these tough times.

Day 3, 9 PM

"Claire do something, I am dying. I can....t.....breath..e."

Since Bonnie had asthma, she couldn't take it. Her voice started fading away and I couldn't hear her breathing strongly.

"Bonnie keep breathing, I am sure someone will come and rescue us."

"What if no one does? We will definitely die here."

I thought for a second and said, "We have to try and get out of this cage."

"But how?" she questioned my idea.

I had the plan but didn't know how to execute it. Even if we tried leaving the cage, there were sharks all around. While I thought of a perfect execution, Bonnie looked out of the cage. She saw that the sharks were moving away from the cage at a fast pace as if they were running away from some other aquatic creature much bigger in size. She tapped my shoulder and pointed outside the cage. I was flabbergasted as to why the sharks suddenly disappeared. What I wasn't aware of was a tragedy waiting to greet us.



Day 3, 9:35 PM

"Ah! Oh my lord, what is that! Holy mother of God!" She was distraught.

I was perturbed to witness nature's creation. It was a great white shark, larger than the ones we were "swimming" with. It circled around the cage and banged at us countless times. Bonnie and I were badly injured. It was very difficult for us to breathe because of a minimal amount of oxygen and the coldness in the surroundings. We were hurt and our blood froze. I was concerned for her as she was struggling to breathe.

The great white shark kept coming for us and crashed with our cage. I was waiting for it to move away from the cage so that I could execute my plan.

"Bonnie, don't give up, we will be out of the cage just in time. Look, it moved away from the cage. Now is the time to execute my plan."

"Buuuutttttt whhhattttt is the pppplllaaann?" she questioned while she froze.

"Just do as I say. Remove the safety gear from my bag. I will shoot it in the eye when it comes back around the cage."

She did as I said and handed me the safety rifle which had just a single bullet. I had to take the risk of a perfect target. Just as it came back to bang the cage again, I prepared myself to shoot it in the eye. I shot it right



in the eye and wounded it harshly. Once its body stopped moving, I pushed open the cage door and swam out. I held Bonnie's hand and pulled her back to the shore. I had thought that both of us had survived the game of life, but maybe not.

Day 4, 12 AM

"Bonnie please get up, this is no time for a joke. I am freezing here and so are you. Stop your nonsensical drama. I beg you, please wake up," I sobbed. I wasn't aware that while pulling her back to the shore, she passed out. After examining her breath and pulse levels, I fainted.

Day 4, 9 AM

"Miss wake up, should I take you to the hospital? Should I call for help? Hello? Miss?" the stranger sprinkled water on my face in order to wake me up. I woke up with a jerk and saw my best friend's corpse lying next to me. As soon as I saw it, I wept and sobbed at the sight of my best friend's blood soiling the ground all around me.

The stranger took me to the hospital himself as I had lost a lot of blood and was unable to walk with my leg injured. He kept consoling me, but nothing could've helped me other than my best friend Bonnie around me. The doctor, after operating on me, told the stranger that I was suffering from massive trauma and it would take me a couple of weeks to overcome Bonnie's death.



Present day

"Bonnie, I am so sorry. I should have stopped you. You died because of your best friend. Please forgive me," I mumbled in my sleep.

My roommate Elena was sleeping beside me. She woke up hearing me mumble and poured a glass of water for me while I woke up from another horrific nightmare." Another one of those nightmares?" she enquired. I nodded and went back to sleep.

Every night at around 4 AM, it had become a routine for me to wake up or to have been woken up by Elena because of me mumbling in my sleep. The trauma wasn't over. I missed my best friend dearly and always will blame myself for her death, that I didn't stop her.

The next morning, I headed to my therapist who was helping me overcome my trauma. It was a scheduled appointment every morning at 12 PM. As I entered the room distressed, she asked me, "Did you have the nightmare again?"

"Yes."

The same one with the cage, you and Bonnie?" she enquired.

I nodded.

"Look Claire, you need to stop blaming yourself for her death. It wasn't your fault," she said.

I was tired of listening to the same words every day. But what she said after was astounding to my ears.

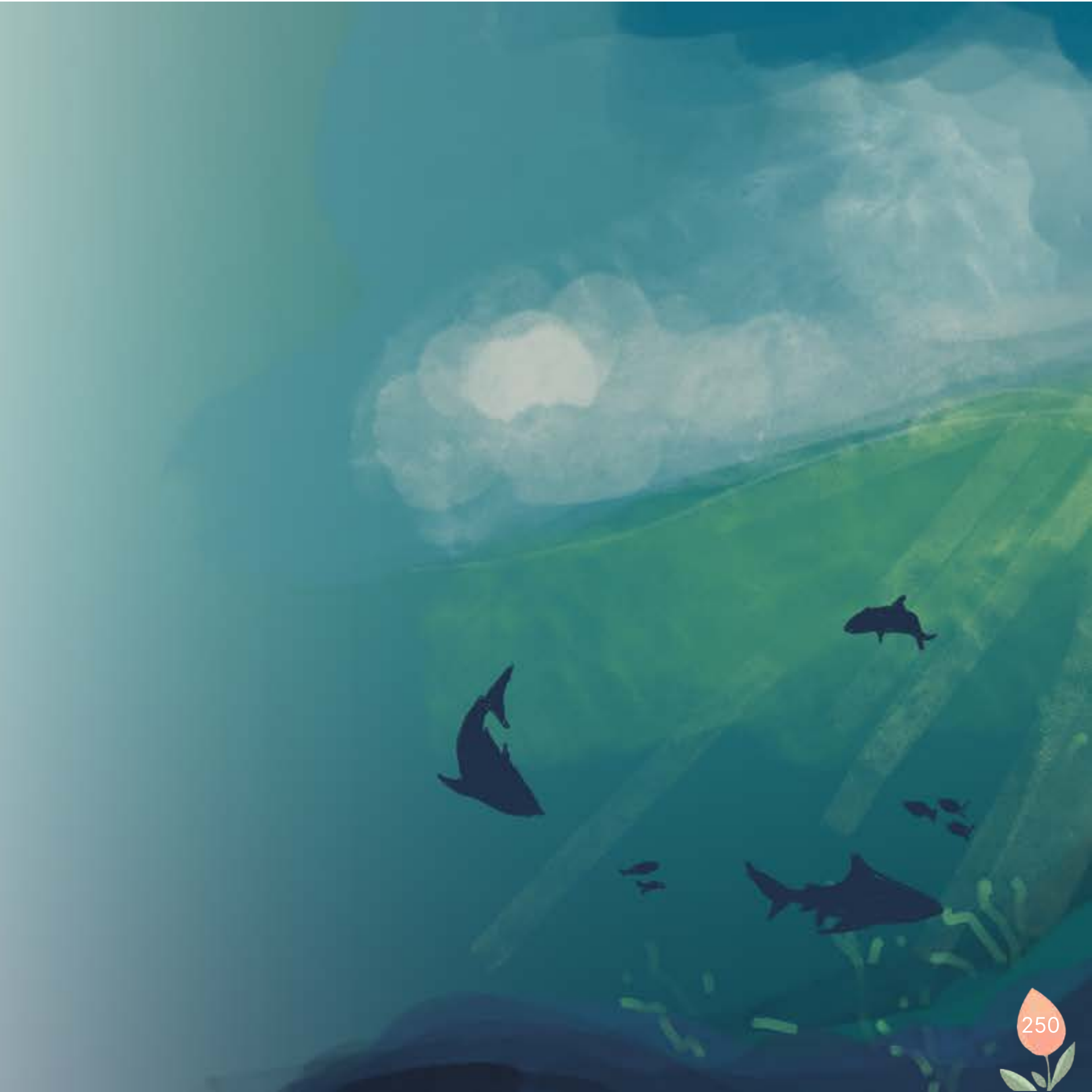
"It was hers. Yes, you heard me right. It was absolutely her fault."


She made me realize that it was Bonnie who forcibly pushed me to join her even though I refused. She was the one who lied about her breathing problems in the non-waiver form. She further said, "I know she was your lifeline but please don't spoil the rest of your life living in this trauma. You are not to be punished and you do not need to banish yourself from living your life. Trust me when I say this, Bonnie would've wanted the same because she loved you as much as you did her. Now you don't need to come to me every day because you have to let go. Forgive and forget. Just call me when you need me. See you."

I bid her goodbye and left.

That incident changed our lives. Bonnie is no more, but I have a life which I am grateful for. Yes, I survived to tell the tale, but also to live my life with grace. I still miss Bonnie and will always, eternally. The shark cage will always remain in my mind as a daunting and dreadful experience but also as a lesson of survival and to live life with confidence.







In the enchanting realm where Budding Authors' stories come to life, digital art dances hand in hand with the whimsical tales penned by young students. The canvas of their imagination finds vivid expression through the illustrations by Yamini K and Gaya K K.

Digital art has emerged as a versatile and dynamic medium that bridges imagination with technology. It enables artists to create intricate and vivid visuals, transcending the boundaries of traditional art forms. In storybooks, digital art adds a new dimension, enriching narratives with vibrant characters and captivating landscapes. These illustrations in digital art, create an engaging environment, inviting readers to explore, discover, and connect with the story on a whole new level, fostering a sense of wonder, imagination, and interactivity.

Yamini believes that in every tale spun by children, illustrations can be intricately woven together to magnify the realm of creativity. Gaya is of the view that digital art is like a doorway to create exciting visuals that match stories and take readers on imaginative journeys.

Artworks serve as a window to the beautiful world created by the young minds. This turns each page into an invitation to explore without limits.

