The Witches of Waitiki

...and other tales of murder, mystery and adventure

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Contents

The Witches of Waitiki ........................................ 5
The Third Connection ........................................ 29
A Dog's Day Out .............................................. 71
The Cabin at Nizams .......................................... 100
Brahm's Symphony ........................................... 142
Waitiki is a small village, 65 kilometres south of Pudukkottai, in Tamil Nadu. There are no motorable roads to this village. In fact, there are no roads, period. A *kuchcha* pathway, an offshoot from the road to Devakottai, is all that connects the village to the rest of civilisation. It is a bumpy track, no wider than six feet, maybe just enough for a bullock cart to pass. And if it has to be used in the dark, it is advisable to carry a first-aid kit along, as accidents are inevitable. Preferably, the road is used in broad daylight only. It was precisely for this reason that Mr Manu Subramanium urged his family to move fast, as darkness was setting in.

"Oof! I just cannot walk on this road," cried 10-year-old Rakhi, as she tripped and fell for the third time.

"Why don't you look where you put your big foot?" suggested her 12-year-old brother, Rishi.
"Yes, he is right," confirmed their grandfather empathetically, himself gingerly selecting the spots to place his foot on. "These are wild areas, and it is a fact that in places like this, a lot of evil practices and black magic goes on. You step on a charmed article, and you are under an evil spell for the rest of your life."

"Stop it, father!" said Manu, irritably. He was more than just irritable right now. He had reached boiling point. There he was this Saturday morning, happily sipping his coffee and reading the newspaper. He had planned a relaxed weekend, after the hectic and frustrating week he had had at his Pudukkottai office. And then his wife spoilt it all by saying, "I want to visit my mother at Devakottai, today."

He was hoping to go by bus, but the kids and his own father also wanted to tag along. So, by popular demand, the car was brought out. He was basically not a 'car-man', and used it only when necessary, so having to drive increased his irritation. Finally, on the way, the car conked out, right in the middle of nowhere.

He had tried setting it right. He had stopped other cars to get their drivers to try and have it started. But the car had refused to oblige. He finally got his mechanic on the mobile phone, but the man said, "It's already evening, Sir. I'll come in the morning."

Left with no choice, they had decided to spend the night at any nearby hotel. But there were no hotels in the vicinity. In fact, there wasn't even a house in sight. A passing farmer, riding a bull, informed them of a nearby village called Waitiki. He pointed out the narrow pathway and left them on their own. A short while later, they
heard him laughing hysterically. 'Quite unnerving,' thought
Rishi. And so, that was how the family had found
themselves on that lonely pathway.

"I told you to sell that car ages ago," complained
Mrs Subramaniam. God, thought Manu miserably, why
do you make such days? In the first place, he fumed, it
was her fault suggesting this last-minute trip, and now she
blamed him.

"Watch out everybody!" grandfather warned
suddenly. "That string with lime and chilli is lethal. It is
bound to be full of curses. So don't go even an inch near
it."

"Father, I told you to stop it!" Manu gave vent to
his pent-up emotions. "Such talk is foolish, especially in
this age of space travel. Black magic, curses, spells... Bah!
And the children are listening to your nonsense too."

"It's not nonsense! Remember, I have grown up in
a village. I know these things exist."

"I only hope that village exists. I am sick and tired
of the misfortunes we have faced today. Hopefully, there
may be some kind of a hotel there for us to spend the
night."

They had been walking for over 30 minutes on that
lonely stretch and not a soul had passed them. Soon the
sun dipped over the horizon, leaving them lonelier.

"We have just 15 minutes more to find that elusive
village or it will be dark and we will be stranded, with
snakes and scorpions crawling all over the place." Mrs
Subramanium always thought of the brightest things to say.

"Any more pleasant thoughts from you two, and I am turning back. You make the kids think we are on our way to hell, instead of a quaint village. What was the name of the village, the farmer on the bull had mentioned?"

"Waitiki," replied Rakhi, a little apprehensive after hearing her mother and grandfather. "Oh look, a hut. Maybe they'll tell us how far the village is."

They crossed a small patch of arable land and reached the hut. An old man was resting on a low cot, smoking a hookah on a veranda made of mud. He didn't as much as raise an eyebrow upon seeing them. He went on puffing his pipe.

"Er... hello!" Manu tried hard to sound chirpy. "Which way to Waitiki?"

A few more thoughtful puffs before the old man replied, "This is Waitiki."

They all took a few quick gulps. Thinking they had missed something, they looked around for other huts. But this was the only one.

"But... where are the other houses?"

Two full minutes of puffing and then he studied the family. Finally, he said, "There are two houses behind those trees, and a little further, three more."

"And...?" prompted Manu.
"That's it!" The old man now looked stern.

"No hotels?"

The old man turned aside and continued with his passion. Obviously, the interview was over.

"Can we stay the night at your house?" Manu asked in spite of his family glaring at him. "We'll pay you..."

"NO!"

So the family continued to walk towards the trees, now quite worried with darkness minutes away. But there was a full moon to help guide them on the way. They found the two houses and moved cautiously towards it. Mrs Subramanium was relieved to see three women in front of one of the houses, tending a small fire. Walking ahead of the rest, she approached them.

"Sisters, can you help us out? We are stranded and we..."

One of the women looked up at her and Mrs Subramanium almost fainted. As there was little natural light left, the flickering fire she was tending to highlighted the woman's hideous features. The first feature that drew Mrs Subramanium's riveted attention was the woman's eyes. They were all white with no pupils... like a blind person's. But it was obvious the woman could see. There was no nose, just the two holes of the nostrils, and a thin stern mouth. Almost half of her ears had been eaten away. She was wearing a black sari that covered half her head. But from the visible half, stark white hair shot out in all directions. Seeing a stranger before her, the woman quickly pulled her sari down and covered her face completely.
The effect of seeing the eerie face in the flickering flame was something Mrs Subramaniam was sure would be embedded in her memory forever. She gasped, stumbled a few steps backwards and slumped into the comforting arms of her husband.

"What happened? Are you all right?" asked Manu.

"Er... yes... must be exhausted," Mrs Subramanium quickly tried regaining her composure. The other two women had not looked up as yet, keeping their faces hidden in the folds of their saris... all black.

"Is there a place here for us to sleep?" asked Manu, ignoring Mrs Subramanium's urgent nudges.

No answer.

"L... Let us try the... other place... the old man told us about," said Mrs Subramanium, pulling her husband by his sleeve.

"But it's already dark. How will we find the place? We are not even carrying a torch."

"I can see some light over there," said Rishi, pointing further away. "Maybe it's from the other houses."

In total bewilderment, they left the three women. Indians are known for their hospitality, but the people of this village seemed to be unaware of it.

After five minutes of walking in semi-darkness, thanks to the full moon in the east, they reached the last section of the village. Here the reception they received was equally baffling. The minute the householders saw
them approaching, they all went indoors and banged the doors shut.

The Subramaniam family stood outside, aghast, and now, a little afraid. There seemed to be little warmth in this village, except for the solitary lantern burning on one of the verandas of the three houses that faced them.

"Let's go home, Daddy. I am frightened," said Rakhi in a low voice.

"Don't worry, dear. There is nothing to fear," her father comforted her. This time he went forward alone, and knocked on the door of the house with the lantern.

No reply. He knocked again. Still no reply. He knocked harder and called out angrily, "We only need a place to sleep in! We'll leave in the morning."

A small wooden window opened and a man looked out. He studied the five of them suspiciously and finally asked, "Who are you?"

Manu related their predicament, this time with an air of impatience. The man came out slowly, as though with the first "boo" he would charge back into the safety of the house. He made sure the people before him were genuine before he gave the 'all clear' shout, and the rest of the residents of the three houses started trickling out. The Subramanium family instinctively moved towards each other.

"We thought you came from there!" the first man said, pointing towards the house of the three women.
"We did," confirmed Manu. "What's wrong with that?"

Quick and frightened glances were exchanged amongst the residents. Then a young man came forward and asked, "You don't know them?"

The blank looks from the five people before him made him whisper, "They are the witches of Waitiki!"

Rakhi instantly buried herself in her mother's sari. Rishi decided it was time to hold his grandfather's hand, and the three senior members of the family thought it safer to draw even closer to each other.

"Wh... what do you... mean?" Manu tried to look composed. "Th... there is no such thing as... witches."

"You city folks have no idea what goes on in remote villages. But enough of that. Where should we put you up?"

The residents discussed amongst themselves and agreed to take Mrs Subramanium and Rakhi into one of their houses. But Manu, his father and Rishi would have to sleep on the veranda. Feeling somewhat relieved, Manu thanked the villagers.

Soon it was dinnertime and food was served. Rakhi took one look at it and declared, "I am not hungry." Rishi was hungry and took a large helping. One mouthful of it and he set it aside. "I forgot, I had an acute tummy ache," he excused himself. Manu and his wife managed to finish half of what was served. But Manu's father relished it. After eating his portion, he finished Rishi's too.
Later, the menfolk relaxed in the large compound the three houses shared.

"What makes you think those three are witches?" Manu's father opened the topic.

The men exchanged glances, fear apparent in their eyes.

"Ever since they came to these parts, strange things have been happening," the young man explained. "In fact, they've bewitched the area around their house to such an extent that we don't go anywhere near them anymore."

"I told you such things exist." Manu's father sounded happy to have been proved right. He turned to the villagers and continued, "I've been telling them all along to be careful of cursed items on the road. But he just wouldn't believe me. Tells me such things don't happen. Now here's proof for him."

"Do these things happen all the time?" asked Manu.

"Most of the time... particularly on full moon nights, like tonight." Rishi looked up at the sky automatically for confirmation, and a lump swelled up in his throat, as he saw the full moon. Boy, they really selected a fine day for travelling.

"Frankly, I still don't believe such things exist," Manu stuck stubbornly to his own beliefs.

"Of course, such things exist, Sir," a middle-aged but totally weather-beaten man intervened. His dark skin, bony structure and premature white hair told the story of
The Witches of Waitiki • 15

The man who had spent his entire life working his field all day long, had to care what we touch, where we walk and how our women keep their hair.

"Else what happens?" asked Manu.

"Else a curse befalls us. A curse that lasts for years or even kills us. Look at Pandu, if you don't believe us. Ask him what happened to him that night."

"Who's Pandu?"

"You must have passed his house on the way here. His house is the first one."

"The old man?"

"That's right. Ever since he made that mistake three years ago, he's been bedridden."

Manu remembered seeing the old man in bed all through their short discussion. "And what was his mistake?"

"He tried entering the witches' house in the night, when they first made their appearance three years ago. The witches screamed their lungs out and chanted some mantras. Poor Pandu ran all the way back to his own house, and collapsed, never to stand on his own feet again."

There was respectful silence as all the men recollected that night.

"Whose house is it, anyway?" asked Rishi, finally.
"It was an abandoned house. The three witches came in uninvited and nobody had the guts to throw them out. Forget throwing them out, we don't even go near their house."

"Then how do you reach the main road?"

"We use another route, much longer, but safer. That's why we were all taken aback when we saw you coming from that direction. Are you sure they haven't harmed you?"

Manu shrugged his shoulders to show they were all fine. But what he had heard that night was really beginning to bother him. First thing tomorrow morning, he promised himself, he would take his family away from here.

Later that night, as Manu, his father and Rishi lay on the wooden benches of the veranda, none of the three could sleep. And it was not due to the uncomfortable benches. Things were constantly going on in their minds, and they were subconsciously alert to the slightest sound. Usually night sounds in the villages are aplenty. After the umpteenth time when the three had sprung up at the sound of a particularly loud cricket, Manu finally suggested, "We must try and relax, or no sleep will come. Try counting sheep."

"You count sheep. I am counting the seconds left for daylight," grumbled his father, eyes still wide open. "It's only 11.30 p.m. Still six and a half hours to go."

Ten minutes later, Rishi heard the steady breathing of his father, which said he was asleep. A few minutes
later his grandfather followed suit. Rishi himself tried
turning and changing positions, but sleep was a thousand
iles away. He couldn’t see the moon from where he
slept so he stepped outside and looked up. It was almost
directly overhead and looked huge. But more than the
moon, it was the stars that took his breath away - millions,
literally millions of them, all shining ever so brightly. Their
silvery light flooded the common courtyard of the three
houses, and the surrounding trees. Rishi enjoyed the dance
between the silver light on the ground and the dark
shadows of the tree leaves, as they rustled in the cool
breeze. It was just past midnight.

Suddenly his gaze froze. There was one shadow
that did not move. With the gaze, his heart froze too as
he saw the still shadow of a person, standing by a tree.
And with the gaze and his heart, his mind froze next, as
he recognised the shadow.

It was one of the witches, standing still in one spot
just 50 yards away and steadily looking at him.

He thought of running back to the veranda, but his
feet wouldn’t move. Had she already put a spell on him
too, like old Pandu? He checked his hands and feet. They
moved normally. Then why wasn’t he beating a hasty
retreat? It was then that he realised he didn’t want to! He
actually preferred standing there, watching the witch staring
at him.

Slowly the witch detached herself from the shadows
and stepped out into the soft light of the moon and the
stars. Now they stood just 30 yards apart, and he could
see her more clearly. She was still in her black sari, and her head was half covered. Once more she stood still, just staring at Rishi. What was she up to? Was she in the process of casting a spell on him?

But he still didn't move. His knees had gone wobbly and he was half expecting some hideous creature to suddenly zoom in on him and devour him. But he still wouldn't break eye contact.

She wasn't as old as the woman they had seen earlier. In fact, the moonlight showed her to be much younger. But the face was more or less the same... ugly and loathsome, in spite of it being half covered. Then her hand moved. Rishi immediately stiffened, expecting an attack of some kind. Her hand too was gnawed and knotted, and a finger or two were missing. Were all witches this grotesque, he wondered.

And then, she beckoned him. Curling her long index finger towards herself, she motioned him to come to her. Now his mind went into turmoil. He had flirted enough with danger already. Should he run back to the veranda and safety, or should he step towards her?

He was never known for his bravery, but tonight he did step forward. As he walked towards her, every nerve and sinew in his body turned ice cold inside him. He wondered, "God! What am I doing? Has she hypnotised me? Has she already taken control over my body?"

He went and stood five feet away from her. Where are the other two witches, he asked himself as he suddenly remembered them. Were they waiting in the dark to
pounce upon him? Had he walked into a trap? As he furtively looked around him, he saw her smile. It was the saddest, saddest smile he had ever seen.

Totally taken aback, he found himself asking, "Who are you?"

He could see she was making an attempt to answer, but no sound came out. In frustration, instead, she decided to simply reveal herself. She let the fold of her sari covering her head, fall. And Rishi went half mad with raw terror and fear.

Her right eye was the same white as the first witch. And her left eye? There was no left eye. Instead, there was a gaping hole. But for the two large openings in the centre of her face, her nose too didn't exist. Even more ugly was the missing skin and flesh around her mouth, where the teeth came out straight from the skull. A major portion of both her ears had disappeared, leaving the ugly openings on the sides of her head in full view.

A face straight from the bowels of hell...

But Rishi still stood before her, transfixed. In fact, his fear and terror had ebbed away, and what remained was pity and sadness. He was about to reach out and touch her when someone raised the alarm.

"THE WITCHES! THE WITCHES! THETHERE!"

Manu, his father and two of the men came running out of the veranda. They saw Rishi and the woman facing each other, and pure pandemonium broke loose. "THEY'VE GOT THE BOY!"
"RISHI!" cried out Manu loudly, as he saw his worst fear before him. "Run back here, Rishi."

But Rishi stood his ground.

A minute later, five men with large sticks ran towards them amidst loud battle cries. At that instant, from behind the trees came the other two witches, shrieking and cursing. The men stopped in their tracks.

"Come back to me, Rishi," screamed his mother, threatening to tackle the witches on her own. In the chaos, Rishi turned around and walked back to his mother, who snatched him up and rushed him indoors.

Outside, the witches and the men with sticks exchanged more verbal attacks, but five minutes later everyone returned to their own side of the fence.

"Is he safe? Is he all right?" Manu asked his wife, who was wiping Rishi's face with cold water.

"I don't know. He has high fever running through his body, otherwise there are no signs of harm."

All the inhabitants of the three houses had surrounded the mother and son and advice poured in from every direction. "Give him a cold water bath!" "Place him before Lord Ganesh's idol!" "Beat him with sticks, in case he is possessed by some evil spirit!"

"ENOUGH!" barked Manu, taking Rishi in his arms. "My son is okay, so all of you go back to sleep. I'll take care of him." Saying so, he marched out of the room with Rishi in his arms, and returned to the veranda they had occupied earlier.
Everyone had quietened down inside, till an old lady said, "The signs will show tomorrow. Then you must take him to a special temple." Others agreed and finally retired to their beds. Mrs Subramanium and Rakhi were left alone, holding on to each other and shedding silent tears.

The residents of the three houses and most of the Subramanium family had re-entered the dream world they had so rudely been awakened from an hour ago.

But Rishi was far from asleep. His father had tried to make him reveal what had happened there on the open grounds. But all he said was, "Nothing." His grandfather had checked him physically a dozen times, but he too came up with "Nothing." And when he was finally left alone, Rishi tried to recall what had caused the chaos. He went through every second of it, trying to pinpoint the moment when he was not himself, but under the influence of the witch, as everyone believed. But he could find no moment when he had felt threatened, or under her control. To make sure, he went through the incident a couple of times more, but was convinced everyone had got it wrong. The woman at no time had tried to 'use her powers' on him. She was just trying to be friendly.

He sat up with the thought. That's it! She was just trying to befriend him and the other witches were nowhere around at that point of time. She was alone, and just wanted him nearby. He was convinced this was the real situation.

But if she was evil, why should she try to befriend him?
Suddenly, Rishi heard a faraway sound. He stood up, alert. It was the sound of someone crying - a long, wailing and mournful cry. Piteous, yet creepy enough to make one's hair stand on end. It continued for a few minutes. Slowly and unbelievably, Rishi began walking towards the sound, drawn to it like a moth to light. He got off the veranda and headed for the house of the witches.

On the veranda, Manu too got up. Half expecting something like this to occur, he had not slept a wink, but had only pretended to be asleep. Quickly and quietly, he picked up a stout stick and followed Rishi at a discreet distance. Rishi did not falter or look back even once. His concentration seemed to be totally engulfed by the wailing sound, now getting louder. Keeping himself out of sight by hiding behind trees and bushes, Manu was eaten up by the dilemma he faced. Should he confront his son and bring him back to safety, or allow him to continue and see through to the end of this... this bizarre situation? He decided on the latter.

Rishi reached the two houses where the witches lived. Outside, the fire they were tending to in the evening still burned dully through the ashes. He stood there for a minute. Why was he doing this? Rishi asked himself. He realised he was neither scared nor were his brains scrambled. He was certainly apprehensive, but he had a conviction and this was the only way to prove it.

"Hello there!" he called out. "My name is Rishi, and I want to see you all."
Manu, hiding behind a tree 20 yards away, bit his lips when he heard his son. 'I've made a mistake. I am sure I've made a mistake in not stopping him.' Before he could step forward and stop this deadly game, the door flung open and one of the witches stepped out.

Rishi stood his ground, squinting his eyes to get a better view of the witch. It was the same one he had confronted earlier. Another door opened and the other two witches came out. With a sharp yelp they were about to run towards Rishi, when the first witch put up her hand and stopped them. Rishi hadn't moved an inch.

"Go boy! Go back to your own people," the first witch said, waving her hand. Her words were barely audible.

The other two witches raised their hands, palms down and cried, "OOOOOOOHHHHH..." They rendered a sight for a brave heart to pass out, and Manu behind the trees almost did.

But Rishi, though quivering like a leaf, still stood his ground. "They're trying to scare me away... I'm sure," he tried to convince himself. "I'm not going till you tell me who you are."

This caught them totally unawares. In answer, the other two witches came forward, half limping, arms outstretched, wicked grins on their faces.

"DON'T!" cried the first witch in alarm. "Don't touch him!"
That convinced Rishi. He stepped forward to the first witch and raised his arm to touch her.

"No! Please don't," she pleaded and ran back into her house.

Rishi followed her without hesitation, pushing aside the door and stepping in.

"NO!" cried Manu, leaping out from behind the tree, not caring about the two witches who stepped back in alarm. "COME OUT RISHI!!" He continued shouting as he rushed up to the doorway and charged in, the stick raised above his head ready to bring it down.

He was not ready for what met his eye. Slowly, he put his stick down and gaped in wonder. The witch was on the floor, her head covered by the arm, sobbing inconsolably. And Rishi was crouching above her, his hand caressing her head affectionately.

Rishi jerked around on hearing his father's entry. "Daddy? Look Daddy, they are not witches!" He pointed to an altar in the corner of the room. On the altar were pictures of Ram and Sita, Hanumanji, Sai Baba, a statue of Lord Shiva and an ink drawing of Ganeshji.

As his acute excitement vanished, Manu's feet could support him no longer. He too slumped down on the floor. He just couldn't believe what he saw before him. He was ready to see the wickedest unholy things under this roof, but what he saw was just short of a temple.

"I... I... don't understand... who are they?"
"They are lepers, Daddy," said Rishi softly, still stroking the woman's head.

Suddenly, it all fitted in, as though a veil had been lifted and the truth revealed. He should have guessed it earlier when he first saw them. But then, when an imaginative mind wants to lead you astray, there is very little the practical mind can do about it.

"But what about all those stories the villagers related?"

"We made them happen," the voice came from behind Manu as the other two lepers walked in and quietly sat down.

"I... I... still don't understand..."

"We are three women with the same problem. We've been chased out of every city, town and village we tried to settle down in. We've been abused and physically assaulted, all in the name of 'cleanliness'. We just couldn't find a place where we could live peacefully... until we came to Waitiki. Seeing the situation here, we decided to take matters into our hands. So instead of lepers, we presented ourselves as witches. People shunned us, but feared us too, with the result that we were finally left in peace."

"You mean... you've never put a curse on... What about the old man, Pandu? How did he become bedridden?"

"When we chased him out of our house, the poor man ran so fast and got so excited that he suffered a
stroke. He is paralysed waist down. "We haven't done anything to him. But his plight helped us completely establish our identity."

"That was the first incident that frightened the villagers out of their wits," continued the other witch. "Thereafter, we would do simple things... like hang a dead rat on a tree, or poke pins into a doll, or even chop its head off and leave it somewhere for it to be 'discovered'. The villagers themselves did the rest. They used their imaginations and drew up their own conclusions. They drew up the right conclusions, as far as we were concerned, and we were left in peace."

Manu half smiled at the ruse the lepers had adopted, but suddenly stood up in fright as a frightening thought crept into his mind. "Is... isn't... your disease contagious?" He pulled Rishi up and quickly made his way towards the door.

"That's what the common man doesn't understand. Most lepers in our country are not contagious. It's only a very small percentage of the afflicted people who are contagious, and the doctors confine them all to a solitary place. Ours is not a malignant disease and we all have a doctor's certificate stating just that. But nobody believes us and nobody cares to see the certificate either."

"We have achieved our aim here as nobody bothers us. But every now and then, we crave for normal company. That's what happened to Seema here, and your son."
"Yes, I wanted to ask about that. Why is she taken up by him so much?"

"She has a son of his age, and she has not seen him in years." That explained the sad look on her face, thought Rishi.

"What about your food? How did you manage that?" he asked.

"Late at night we would steal some vegetables from the fields."

Their pathetic story heard, Manu made a decision. He would help them somehow.

Early next morning, Manu held a meeting with all the residents of the village. He explained the entire story and ended with, "...And to show you they are harmless, I want you all to follow me." Saying so, he led them to the lepers' house.

At the first sight of the villagers, the lepers panicked and were about to run away, but Manu ran ahead and held them by his hands. He circled his arms around all the three women, much to the surprise of all, more so, Mrs Subramanium. The lepers cringed, not comfortable with such a show of affection.

"There! This should convince you all that these women are harmless."

The villagers were convinced, and greatly thankful that the women were not witches after all. They could once again live without fear.
But the biggest satisfaction Manu got was when he cornered his father, and gloated, "See! There is no such thing as witches and ghosts and what have you. Such things don't exist!" It was sweet revenge for him.

Later, the villagers and lepers accompanied them to their car and awaited the mechanic who had promised to come in the morning.

"Tell me Manubhai," asked the young man from the village, "how did you know of our village? It can't be seen from here."

"Oh, an old man on a bull guided us."

"Old man on a bull?" asked the young man, startled. "Did he laugh as he left you?"

"Yes... as a matter of fact he did. Why? Is he crazy?"

"No. That is old Shankar from our village, who died on this stretch of road in an accident 20 years ago. Ever since, he keeps sending people to our village."

Even as the Subramanium family gaped in disbelief, unable to come to terms with what was said, grandfather grabbed the opportunity. He turned to his son with a knowing look and said, "See? Such things do exist!"
Murder!

That dreaded word. The word that chills the spine of adults and leaves them numb with fear. The word that conjures images of dark and misty nights, of hooded figures lurking in the shadows, of terrifying screams... and sudden silence. The word that brings unabated excitement to the bored detective, but despair to the overworked policeman.

But to 15-year-old Krishna, it brought just pure and undiluted terror. If there was one thing in life that this young man couldn't fathom, it was the need of one human being to kill another. The thought of someone taking a life, and that too with so much pain to the victim, always gave him nightmares. There was little escaping the word either, as it was there in the newspaper almost every day, in its full gruesome form... with vivid photographs. It was
Also undeniably the first thing that caught people's attention, as it did now, when Krishna sat with his breakfast and the morning newspaper.

"Must be another murder," butted in his younger sister, Karishma, as she sauntered into the dining room.

"What? How did you...?"

"The look on your face, silly. Anyone can tell you are reading about some murder."

This was another riddle of life that Krishna couldn't figure out. How could his sister, at the tender age of 14, deal with a subject like murder so casually and callously? It never seemed to bother her that someone's precious life had just been terminated under unnatural circumstances. In fact, she would derive great pleasure finding out details like exactly how the murder was committed, how long the victim took to die and what murder weapon was used. Krishna was convinced his sister was not normal. Indeed, she was so, so... different, so impulsive, so impetuous, so fidgety, so downright open with her opinions, and so difficult to understand, that her friends (and these could be counted on the fingers of one hand), affectionately called her Crazy Krish. Crazy, because... you know why. And Krish because she shared many similarities with famous ex-cricketer, Krishnamachari Srikkant, whom, incidentally, she idolised.

"Uh huh," she murmured close to Krishna's ear, as she peered over his shoulder and read the news item. "Again a strangulation," she said knowingly, and proceeded towards her own chair.
"'Again'? What do you mean, 'again'?

"Don't you keep track of the murders? That's the third case of strangulation in a month's time and, like the others, there are no clues, no witnesses and no motives."

Krishna stared at his sister with a quizzical look, which said both, how could you be so insensitive and, how do you know so much? He knew she was smart, though at times he found her oversmart. And he also knew she was real quick in everything she did. That was another sore point he had to learn to deal with as he often found himself struggling far behind her in everything they did together.

'And a show-off,' he mentally concluded as he resumed his reading.

"OMIGOSH!" Krishna suddenly exclaimed. He looked quite shaken as he stood up and pointed at the newspaper. "Did... did... you read wh... wh... where the murder took pi... place?"

"Venus Apartments, the building next to ours," answered Karishma, as she calmly bit into her toast and marmalade.

Krishna looked around him in desperation as though he had suddenly collapsed into the middle of a vast desert, with no hope of survival from any side.

"But... but..."

"Yes, I know. The killer is still at large."

"How... how can you sit there and..."
"What's going on? Why are you shouting?" Vijay Uncle had just walked into the dining room and asked the question to his agitated nephew.

"Will you look at her?" protested Krishna hotly. "Here we have a murder next door, the killer is still at large, and all she can think of doing is munching her toast and marmalade."

"Actually, I can think of many other things... like punching the nose of a frightened boy and..."

"Frightened? You think I am frightened? Why you...

"Peace! Peace!" Vijay Uncle tried restoring normalcy. "At the dining table there should be no fighting amongst children." Then under his breath, "It's a domain reserved for adults, I believe."

Vijay Uncle was their mother's brother. A bachelor who changed more jobs in a year than he changed shirts. Not that he didn't like to work - it was just that he was less tolerant of others' behaviour. There were very few places where his job lasted for more than two months. Presently, of course, his record was zero days, as he had got into an argument with his boss in the elevator, on his way to the office on the very first day.

He had come to their house on a weekend visit two years ago and had somewhat overstayed his visit. Not that anybody was complaining, as he was welcome company and loads of fun. The only problem was he was immensely forgetful. He would forget days and dates. He
would forget appointments and names and no one dared even ask him to bring something home on his way back. If there was nothing to remember, he would still worry himself sick trying to remember what he thought he was forgetting. Krishna always maintained that he had even forgotten tjaat he had come over just for the weekend.

"Now, what's all this about murder? Not a pleasant subject so early in the morning."

"You know that short, fat man who lives on the second floor of Venus Apartments?" Karishma asked sweetly.

"The one with the Ambassador car?"

"That's right. His name was Mr Das."

"Well, what about him?"

"Nothing much," Karishma continued to eat her toast. "Somebody just made his collar size smaller."

Krishna smacked his forehead loudly. "At least speak respectfully of the dead!" Really, what kind of a sister he had, he wondered. It would have been more pleasant dealing with any of Al Capone's relatives.

Vijay Uncle cleared his throat and looked inquiringly at his niece, almost dreading to ask the next question.

"Collar size smaller?"

"Strangled, throttled, choked, garrotted..."

"I get the point," Vijay Uncle said quickly, holding his head in his hands in despair, as though asking where
his sister and her husband had gone wrong in bringing up this girl.

"Ask her for another word for 'happiness', and you'll find her stumped," remarked Krishna angrily as he got off his chair.

"No breakfast?" asked his sister.

Krishna just grunted something under his breath that sounded like 'hard nut', and walked out of the room.

Karishma indeed was a hard nut. As already mentioned, she had very few friends, if any at all. The boys shied away from her, as they feared she would beat them... in anything, from games to studies. The girls avoided her, as there was very little in common between them and her. She didn’t care about dressing up, or shopping, or even parties. Though she was quite attractive and had an athletic figure, she was comfortable only in her faded jeans and loose tops. And it was only on special occasions that one caught her in a more feminine salwar kameez.

She read a lot, mostly PG Wodehouse and murder mysteries, and seemed most happy when left alone with her books. She cared a lot about her family but would refrain from displaying her emotions. And she was often caught gazing at something intently for hours at a time, deep in thought, or just daydreaming.

"And what is it this time?" asked her uncle, bringing her back to the dining table. "Daydreaming or thinking of something?"
"Uncle, what is the common factor between a stockbroker, a businessman and a retired army officer?" she asked, the faraway look back on her face.

Vijay Uncle was used to these sudden bouts of questions that generally came out of nowhere. He politely gave the riddle two minutes of thought. "I give up. What is the common factor?"

"I don't know. That's why I asked you."

At times, Vijay Uncle thoroughly supported Krishna's views on this girl. There were only two ways to handle her questions... disappear before she put them forward, or bang your head against a stonewall in regret, after she had completed. He was in the process of looking around for a stonewall when he decided to change his method. 'Patience! That's what's needed in tackling this girl,' he decided.

"So, what brought up the question?"

"Oh, I was just wondering..."

Vijay Uncle waited patiently for her to continue, but the blank look had once again taken possession of her face.

"Ahem... you said you were just wondering...?" he prompted.

"Yeah."

Silence.
The coffee Vijay Uncle was sipping was not all that hot, but his neck was reddening. Patience, he reminded himself. "You were thinking of something," he said gently, "before you put up that... that difficult question?"

"Huh?" Her gaze was still drilling a hole through the wall behind her uncle.

"What were you thinking of before you asked me the question?" Vijay Uncle asked testily.

"What question?" she asked innocently, still in her own dimension.

"OH MY GOD! I give up!" cried aloud Vijay Uncle. "Why is it so difficult for anyone to converse with you normally?!"

"Easy uncle. Easy. Remember, no shouting at the dining table?" Krishna had walked in with a plateful of steaming aloo parathas. "So what was all the excitement about?"

"Ask her," Vijay Uncle snapped, looking exasperated. "She asked me a question, then says she doesn't know the answer, and then doesn't remember the question. And I'm the forgetful person around here."

"What was the question?" asked Krishna turning to Karishma.

"Careful there, Krishna," warned his uncle. "She'll again start off on something like an army man and a salesman..."
"Oh, that? I asked what was the common factor between a retired army officer, a businessman and a stockbroker?"

"Don't answer it," warned their uncle. "For your own sanity, don't answer it."

"Leave it to me, uncle," answered Krishna. "I think I now have her pulse." He turned to Karishma. "Why do you want to know?"

"Know what?" she asked sweetly, slowly returning to her distant look.

"Why do you want to know the common factor between these three men?" Krishna took the stance of an interrogator.

"Oh that. Well the three men strangled this week were from those disciplines. I was wondering what was common to such different men that they were destined to die in exactly the same manner."

After breakfast, Krishna and Karishma hopped across the road. They could see a lot of activity around Venus Apartments. A small crowd had gathered on both sides of the road. The police looked frantic, and showed a lot of importance.

Venus Apartment was a dirty looking three-storeyed building. It looked in desperate need of a facelift as the paint had totally been washed out and at places even the plaster had crumbled. Mr Das, the victim, was its landlord for the past 20-odd years.
Soon the crowd parted at the entrance as a police inspector walked out, a notebook in his hand and a puzzled look on his face. The sub-inspector was excitedly talking to him, obviously sharing his opinion about what must have happened on the second floor. But the inspector kept shaking his head, obviously not agreeing with his deputy's point of view.

Karishma pushed her way through the crowd and tried to get closer to the inspector.

"No, Arun, no!" the inspector was telling his subordinate. "It can't be a case of theft, as nothing is missing. And like the other two cases, there seems to be no motive here either. Hard to believe, but we do seem to have a psychopath on our hands."

"A serial killer in Pune, Sir? Impossible! I'm sure there is a motive, some proper reason, behind these murders."

"So, find it," snapped the inspector. "Then you can take my place and I'll retire."

Karishma saw the two get into their car and leave the scene. So she had been thinking along the right lines. Even the police felt the murders were connected.

"Since you've come this far, why don't you also go upstairs and walk into the room where the man was murdered," came the sarcastic voice of Krishna, as he finally plucked his courage and stood alongside his sister, at the entrance of the building.
"Good idea. Coming?" said Karishma, proceeding towards the door.

"WHAT! Are you nuts?" began Krishna, but it was too late. She had already walked in, and he had to hurry behind her.

"Hold it! Where do you think you are going?"

There was a fat policeman stationed inside.

"My sister stays on the third floor," Krishna heard his sister say. The sight of a policeman to him was 'law', 'truth' and 'uprightness'. Since he was a kid, the mention of a policeman immediately brought out the best behaviour in him. And here was his own younger sister, blatantly lying through her teeth to one of these upholders of law and order.

"What flat number?" asked the fat policeman, suspiciously.

'Good,' thought Krishna. 'She needed to be put in her place. When he finds out she's been lying, he would probably send her packing in front of all these people.'

"3/B," came the confident reply.

The policeman looked hesitant but moved aside. "Okay, but hurry up. This is no place for children."

Without a backward glance Karishma glided in and started climbing the steps. Krishna faltered, but only for a moment, and in a flash was next to her.
"You have now crossed all limits, and to achieve what? Why do you want to see that room?" he admonished her. "Wait till I tell Mom."

The staircase was very steep and narrow and the first floor was particularly high. "Whew!" panted Krishna as they started off for the second floor. "Three floors of this? You'd think they'd want to install a lift..."

"Move aside, please!" The order came from an attendant who seemed to be carrying something behind him. Krishna looked up and was horrified to see two men coming down, carrying a stretcher between them.

"Don't worry," comforted Karishma, "it's only the body of the murdered man."

If Krishna knew how to perform the vanishing act of a magician, now was the time he would have loved to put it into practice. He knew the pallbearers would have to pass him on the narrow staircase and he couldn't think of a more frightening experience. Feeling a little dizzy, he stepped aside, trying his best to melt into the wall. Karishma, meanwhile helped them manoeuvre the stretcher around the tight corner.

"The... the... stretcher touched me," Krishna complained nervously.

"Good. That makes you next in line for the Heavenly Gates."

They reached the second floor to find it still in possession of the police. No other person was seen on the landing, but the start of the staircase for the third
The floor landing was full of people. Karishma recognised most of the people as residents of the building.

"Hello, Bina Aunty," she called out cheerfully to an elderly lady.

"What are you two doing here? Don't you know..."

"No, actually we didn't know there was trouble here. What happened?"

"Nothing that you children should worry about," the elderly lady replied.

"Mr Das was murdered last night," helped an inquisitive neighbour of Bina Aunty. Karishma knew her too.

"Murdered? How? Why?"

"Somebody suffocated him," piped another voice.

"God!" Karishma looked shocked. "How gruesome. But who could have committed such a ghastly act?"

"Exactly what the police want to know," answered a middle-aged man Karishma had never seen before. He was dressed in a white kurta pyjama, and his pencil-thin moustache was unevenly cut.

Till now Krishna was but a mute bystander, shifting his gaze from Karishma to one of the neighbours and back to Karishma.

"If you've finished with your tomfoolery, we can be on our way," he said in a stern whisper, pulling Karishma's arm.
"In a second," she said. Then turning to the small group she asked, "But why would anyone want to kill Mr Das. He was such a nice man."

"I don't know about that," said Bina Aunty, looking up towards the ceiling. "You should have been one of his tenants. He would expect his rent on the first of every month, and no excuses. But it's not right to criticise a dead man."

"Maybe he had lots of money."

"Nah, I don't think so. Poor man was always scrounging for money."

By now Krishna had almost pulled her arm out of its socket, so she quickly said goodbye and followed her fuming brother.

Vijay Uncle came in that afternoon in a huff.

"Can you believe it? A company with that good a reputation, and their Personnel Manager does not know the basics of public relations!" Vijay Uncle had been excited all week, having been called for an interview to this well-known company.

"They didn't select you?" inquired Karishma, looking up from her latest Harry Potter.

"Of course, they selected me! It was I who rejected them!"

"Oh ho! What happened?"
"During the interview the Personnel Manager was served tea. All along the interview he kept on slurping it, quite loudly at that, mind you, and he didn't even have the decency to offer me some. How could you expect me to work with such people."

"So...?"

"So when he told me I could start work from the first, I told him, 'Sorry, that's the day I... I...' I forgot what I said... but anyway, I walked out on them," he said, looking quite flustered and angry.

Karishma made a mental note of warning her mother to expect Vijay Uncle to be with them at least till his retirement years.

"Come on, let's get you out of this sour mood. Why don't we go out someplace? I haven't seen Shaniwarwada for quite sometime now, so let's go there," she said, marking her page with a fold of the corner and shutting the book.

Shaniwarwada was the ruins of the Peshwa Palace, built by Bajirao in the 18th century. It used to be the seat of political power in Maharashtra and lay in the heart of the city. Though in ruins, the fortress-like structure still communicated an impression of great beauty and strength.

"Shaniwarwada? Why do you want to visit that crowded place?"

"Just an outing, Vijay Uncle. And, I'm sure it will help you relax."
Half an hour later a perplexed Vijay Uncle and a bubbly Karishma reached the crowded area of Shaniwar peth where the old palace stood. A quick walk around it and Vijay Uncle suggested they explore the inside.

"Inside?" Karishma said, as though it was the weirdest suggestion. "Who wants to go inside?" She had led him all along and had now stopped beside an old building. "Ah, there's a small restaurant. Let's have some tea there."

"Why?" the perplexed uncle looked even more bewildered. First his ego was hurt thanks to a mannerless manager, then he was dragged miles away to an old palace he was not interested in, and when he did show some interest in it, he was being shuttled off to a dirty old restaurant.

"Because remember, you wanted tea and that awful manager didn't offer you a cup? Well, now I'm offering you one."

Well that made sense, but... "Why didn't you offer me some at home, instead of dragging me five miles away?"

There were very few people inside the restaurant with the fancy name of Piccadilly Cafe. Soon the owner-cum-waiter-cum-dishwasher brought them their tea in cracked cups, which appeared to have been in use since Bajirao himself.

"So, the murderer is still not caught," Karishma asked the owner-cum-waiter-cum-dishwasher, as he turned to go. Vijay Uncle almost choked as he took his first sip of
the lukewarm tea. Before he could say anything, the owner-cum-waiter-cum-dishwasher answered, "No. But who cares. There are many murders these days."

"What are you two talking about?" asked Vijay Uncle, convinced this was not his day.

"A businessman was murdered four days ago in this building," helped out Karishma.

"How... how did you know that?"

"It was in the papers, Sir. Everybody knows about it," the owner-cum-waiter-cum-dishwasher said lightly. "He was our landlord here, but then the poor man was going through tough times."

"Landlord?" asked Karishma, the keen interest obvious in her eyes.

"Yes. But since all his other businesses failed, he was not much of a landlord either... As you can probably see from the condition of the building."

"But his survivors will look after the building now, won't they?" Karishma asked casually.

"No. He was all alone in this world. But now his new partner will look after the building. Hopefully, he can put in some money and do up the building."

Karishma tried to pin together the information she had picked up and make some connection between the two buildings she had visited that day. But there just didn't seem to be anything in common, except that the murdered men were landlords, besides their own professions. And that, both were broke.
"Before you decide on what next should be done with me, let's go home," suggested Vijay Uncle, ensuring the reins of command were still in his hands.

Later that evening, Karishma (who had taken up position outside Venus Apartments) cornered Bina Aunty, as she returned from her grocery shopping. "Let me help you with these bags, Aunty," she offered, hurrying towards the elderly lady. "They look heavy."

"Thank you child, thank you. Yes, these old limbs are no longer what they once were."

They entered the building and started climbing the stairs. "It must be even more difficult for you to climb these steep steps," Karishma said sympathetically. "Why don't you all arrange for a lift to be installed?"

"You know Mr Das's financial condition. Poor man lost all his money in the stockmarket crash."

"So who will look after the building now?"

"His partner. Mr Das solved part of his financial problem by selling half of the building's rights to Mr Seth, just a couple of months ago. Thank God, we won't be left in the lurch, as Mr Seth seems to be financially strong."

Another connection! Karishma made a mental note of the fact that both the landlords had taken a partner. Was it the same person? She had to find out if the partner who took over the Piccadilly Cafe was also a Mr Seth. She quickly escorted Bina Aunty to her floor and rushed back home.
She picked up the telephone directory and prayed Piccadilly Cafe was listed in it. Common sense told her that would be impossible, but life was never governed by common sense, so she took the chance. It was! The reason why such a dilapidated place had a telephone was probably because the Cafe had seen better days, years ago.

"Hello? Er, yes," she said, trying her best to sound like an adult. "Am I talking to the owner of Piccadilly Cafe?"

"Yes?" came the anxious voice of a man who had not used the phone for sometime.

"Well, I've seen your Cafe, and like it very much."

There was a pause at the other end.

"And I would like to purchase it," she continued casually. "Are you open to the idea?"

The pause was longer this time. Am I dreaming, wondered the owner, or is it some joke? No one in his right mind would want to purchase his dump.

"What are you offering?" He came to the point.

"I'm sure we could reach a mutually acceptable price. But as I understand, you are a tenant. Therefore you will also have to involve the landlord of the building in the deal."

"Er... that's right."

"But, I also understand he was murdered recently."

"That's right, but there's his partner who has taken over."
"I see. And what's his name?"

"Sircar. Mr B] Sircar."

Karishma bit her lip in disappointment. She was hoping it would be a Mr Seth.

"Thank you," she said and disconnected. She could almost hear the desperate "Hello! Hello!" of the owner trying to continue with the deal. She may have failed in her investigations, but at least she would have put some hope into the life of the owner.

Next morning when Karishma opened her eyes, she didn't seem as bright and fresh as usual. In fact, she had spent half the night tossing and turning in bed, trying to figure out the connection between the three murders. Her gut feeling told her there must be a connection, and she had found a couple of them. But both had led her nowhere. She must give one more try. The third building, where the third man was murdered... the retired army officer.

"Good morning dear," her mother brought her back to the present. "You feeling okay?"

"Yes, Mom."

"Well, you don't look okay to me."

"Must be that horrible tea we had yesterday at that Cafe." Vijay Uncle joined them at the breakfast table. Has anybody seen my spectacles? I can't remember where I last left them."
"Try the area above your nose," helped out Karishma in exasperation. "You're wearing them, Uncle."

"Oh, good. Now I can look for the newspaper..."

"It's under your arm, Uncle," said Karishma, without looking up.

"Ahh, that's right. Very helpful, you bet. Thanks."

Breakfast was comparatively quiet, and Karishma just couldn't get the opening for her manoeuvring scheme. "How's your new bicycle getting along?" she finally asked Krishna.

"Fine!" Krishna was not taking chances elaborating further.

Two minutes' silence.

"You know you've never taken me for a ride," she said, trying to look offended.

"I know."

Five minutes of silence.

"If you want those tickets for next week's Test match, you'd better come up with more sociable replies."

Karishma's best friend's father was the Secretary of the Pune Cricket Association, and whenever there was an international match in the city there always was a complimentary ticket for Krishna. And the Aussies were coming over next week for a One Day International. Something Krishna was looking forward to. He looked distastefully at his sister's attempt at blackmail.
"Where do you want to go?"

"Oh, how sweet. Let's go to the open Cantonment area. Always a good place for a ride. I'm ready when you are," she said and got up from her chair.

Soon Krishna was pedalling heavily, quite unused to carrying a passenger. They moved aimlessly through the open roads, lined with old banyan trees and cute bungalows, and all the colours of bougainvillaea in full bloom. Army officers generally owned these bungalows.

Suddenly Karishma cried out, "Ah, Kahun Road. Now let's look for Number 44."

"I knew this was no casual ride," Krishna said bitterly. "You are always too methodical in your approach. But if there is a method to madness, then equally, there is madness to your methods."

Karishma didn't seem to mind being ticked off. At least she got to where she wanted to be. At number 42 she got off and inspected the structure at number 44 before her. It was too large to be termed a bungalow, and too small to be an apartment building. There were two floors to it, with a large courtyard in front. Neither the courtyard nor the building had seen any maintenance in at least a quarter of a century. At the gate was the nameplate, "Lt. Col. Sharma."

When Krishna raised his eyebrows, Karishma explained, "The first victim of the serial killer."

There were obviously people still residing there as Karishma could see some laundry hanging out from the...
floors above. She moved forward, and then saw him. For a split second she was rooted to the spot, and then quickly dived behind a large banyan tree. From there she saw a man angrily walking up the pathway. He stopped and looked directly at the tree she had taken refuge behind. With a puzzled look he continued up the path, jerked open the old picket fence gate and got into a blue Maruti Zen.

It was the same man she had seen on the stairs, leading to the third floor of Venus Apartment. The middle-aged man dressed in white kurta pyjama, sporting a pencil-thin moustache. "Great!" cried Karishma excitedly. "The third connection." But did he see and recognise her?

After the car sped away, she came out of her hiding place. She looked coyly towards her brother. "Want to come inside?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"No."

He followed her into the grounds of Number 44. Hands deep in his pockets, he grumbled, "Why are you poking your nose into these murders? Yesterday you almost got us arrested, and I suppose today is the day of court martial! But of course it's pointless asking you to back off."

The ground floor was locked, and what once must have been a grand veranda now looked broken down and dust-laden. Just as Krishna took stock of the situation, expecting to turn back and return to the safety of the
street, he heard his sister cry out to somebody upstairs, "Excuse me, Sir. Where is Colonel Uncle?"

"Who are you?" asked an old man looking down from his second floor window.

"Children of his friend, Brigadier Patil."

Krishna gulped hard. This spontaneous promotion given to his assistant bank manager father was bound to rebound on them, he was sure. If she ever allowed him to reach marriageable age, he promised himself, no daughters for him.

"Colonel Sharma was murdered last month, haven't you heard?" the old man explained.

"WHAT!?!" cried Karishma, cupping her hand to her mouth in disbelief. "How did it happen?" Another good career option for his sister, thought Krishna. Acting!

"Come on up, I'll explain," said the old man and disappeared inside.

As they reached the second floor, the door opened and a ferocious looking black Doberman charged out. Krishna hated dogs and the minute he saw one, he turned around and hurriedly started climbing down. Never retreat when facing a dog, they say. It is a cue for them to chase. And that's exactly what this dog did. Ignoring Karishma, who stood still, he took it upon himself to bring down Krishna. The old man tried to control his dog, "BRUTUS! Come back Brutus." But it was futile. He had got the scent of a hunt.
Once the chase began, it was exhilarating to see Krishna lose all his lethargy and take steps five at a time. In a split second, during which all one could see of Krishna was a blur (something like Superman when he reached super speed), he was out of the house and out of the grounds, with the picket fence gate securely closed behind him.

His task complete, Brutus returned to his master. "Sorry about that," apologised the old man to Karishma, "but the poor fellow needs these exercises, as there is no one to take him out."

"Not at all," assured Karishma, putting him at ease. "My brother too needs these exercises. How about getting back to Colonel Uncle?"

"Yes, I really liked him. Simple, straightforward fellow. The police are still not sure who did it, or even why. But how come your father didn't hear of it?"

"He is out on a posting these last six months," Karishma bluffed her way without hesitation. "But why is the ground floor flat in such a bad condition?"

"As you know, the Colonel Saab stayed there. Financially in ruins, he used to survive on his pension. No money for the upkeep of this big place. That's why he let out the top two floors on rent."

Familiar story, thought Karishma. "And his family?" she asked, sure what would be the answer.

"He was alone in this world. His wife died ten years ago, and they had no children."
"So what will happen to this place?" she asked, holding her breath.

"Luckily for us he had recently sold the rights of this house to somebody. Now it will be his duty to maintain it, I suppose. In fact, that man was here just five minutes ago."

Karishma shut her eyes in triumph. She knew she had her man. Now to put the pieces together, and form a complete picture. "His name couldn't be Seth, or Sircar?"

"No. His name is Salvi. Santosh Salvi."

Outside, Karishma found her brother astride his bicycle, looking very cross with the world. "Why did you run away? Brutus wouldn't have hurt you if he thought you were a friend."

"Then who did he think I was? Julius Caesar?"

As they rode back, they didn't notice a blue Maruti Zen parked a hundred metres down the road. In it was a middle-aged man dressed in a white kurta and pyjama, studying them with a worried look. "Can it be a coincidence?" he wondered.

"Why take a chance?" his evil half answered.

As if on cue, he started his car and went after the two. On a lonely stretch, he suddenly accelerated and went straight for the bicycle. There was a loud screech of tyres, the sickening bang of a collision, and the cycle went crashing over the sidewalk and into a fence. Krishna and Karishma did not know what hit them as they went
flying through the air and crashed down ten feet away from their cycle. As they lay stunned, Karishma caught a glimpse of the speeding blue Maruti. A while later they were helped up by a passer-by, and a car dropped them home.

Karishma had escaped with minor bruises, but Krishna suffered a fracture on his left leg. And the bicycle? Very little of it was left for repairs.

Seeing her brother with a plaster on his leg set Karishma boiling. 'That man will pay for this,' she promised herself. But since nobody believed her story of an intentional hit-and-run, she would have to go about it in her own way.

There were still two loose ends to be tied up before Karishma could get the police involved. Getting the police involved would not be a major problem, as her father's cousin was a senior officer in the department. Of the loose ends, she sorted one out comfortably. The confirmation that the man she had seen on the staircase, the one with the white kurta pyjama, had also gone into a partnership deed with Mr Das, the landlord of Venus Apartments. The confirmation came from one more trip of grocery delivery for Bina Aunty.

"The last missing piece," she was explaining to Vijay Uncle later, "is confirming whether the man who bought off the building with Piccadilly Cafe, the one whose name is Sircar, is the same kurta pyjama-clad man who was in partnership with the other two landlords."
Vijay Uncle had heard her out for the past 15 minutes without uttering a word. He just couldn't believe what he had heard, and kept staring at his niece in amazement. "And if it is the same man?" he asked, still unsure what the plot was all about.

"Come on Vijay Uncle, don't play dumb with me." Quite honestly, Vijay Uncle was not playing dumb. There he was 15 minutes ago in the middle of his afternoon nap, when he was suddenly rudely awakened md bludgeoned with details of three buildings, three landlords and three murders. "If it is the same man," explained his patient niece, "then the questions to ask him are, why is he using different names and how come the three partnerships he has entered into have all ended in the murder of the three landlords. Simple."

"But why would he do this? What's his motive?"

"That's what the police can find out from him, once we point him out to them."

"And how do you propose to find out if he is the same man who invested in the Piccadilly Cafe building?"

"That's the reason I told you the whole thing. We'll have to go back there and inquire with the Cafe owner. Wish I had a photograph of that man," she said glumly.

"Is that why we had gone there in the first place?" Vijay Uncle suddenly became alert, in disbelief, realising how he had been manipulated.

"Well, it did help getting you off that bad mood."
An hour later the two were back at Shaniwarwada and headed towards Piccadilly Cafe. "Whatever you do, don't order tea," warned Vijay Uncle. "There must be something palatable here. By the way, how do you propose to put forward your question to the owner? You don't have a photograph of that man, so how will you confirm if he is the same man?"

"I won't be asking him. You will!"

"Now wait a minute, wait a minute. I'm just an innocent bystander here. I don't want to meddle in this cloak-and-dagger stuff."

"You don't have to meddle with it, Uncle. Just tell him you have a friend by the name of BJ Sircar and are wondering if he is the same as the new owner of the building. Then when you both start describing your BJ Sircars, I'll be able to find out if it is the same man. Simple."

If it was simple, why didn't he think of it himself? He looked suspiciously at his niece and asked, "What is the name of the school you go to?"

"St. Mary's. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I thought it must be something like 'Police Girls Institute' or even 'Sherlock Holmes School for Girls'."

They reached their destination and climbed the three steps to the Cafe.

Unseen by them up on the terrace of the same building and looking down into the street stood a very
frightened man clad in a white kurta, pyjama. 'I can't believe it,' he told himself. 'She's still around, and actually on my tail. But how in God's name did she guess? Even the police have been fooled...'

He circled the terrace thrice in quick steps and then made a decision. He called up a number on his cell phone. "Kania? You're in luck. I have another job for you. Be at my Shaniwarwada building in five minutes. Come straight up to the terrace."

Downstairs in the Cafe, Vijay Uncle was being tutored about what exactly should be said to the owner, who had gone into the kitchen to get two plates of batata wada. The batata wadas came and they both instantly lost their appetites. The snack looked quite burnt, a little soggy from too much oil and almost crumbling into pieces. They both avoided looking at it.

"So," started off Vijay Uncle after nervously clearing his throat, "the name of the new landlord of this building is BJ Sircar? You know, I have a friend by the name of BJ Sircar. I..."

"Why didn't you say so yesterday, when I told you about him?" the owner asked brusquely.

Vijay Uncle looked stumped. He didn't expect a counter question. He looked desperately for help from Karishma. "They met only this morning," she helped out, knowing it was not a convincing explanation.

"What does your Sircar look like?" the owner asked Vijay Uncle with a hint of suspicion.
"Oh... well... let's see now... He is middle-aged, a little overweight maybe, and wears glasses with..."

"Sorry, not the same man," said the owner, walking away.

"Excuse me," called out Karishma, deciding to handle matters on her own. "Doesn't your Sircar generally wear white kurta pyjamas, and sport a pencil-thin moustache?"

"That's right," beamed the owner, coming back to the table. "Do you know him?"

Karishma was so elated with her successful summation that she could have jumped on the table and danced a quick jig. But she controlled her impulse and simply said, "Well, you could say I've met him a couple of times."

"That's great. You can meet him again if you want, as he is here right now."

Both, Vijay Uncle and Karishma jumped out of their chairs with a hurried, "No, no, no. Please don't take the trouble."

"But..."

"Come on Karishma, I'm getting late," said Vijay Uncle, paying the bill, pulling Karishma out of her chair, and guiding her to the door, all at the same time.

"But you haven't had your batata wadal" protested the owner, looking offended.

"They were good, very good. Thank you." Vijay Uncle had by then opened the door.
"But you haven't even tasted them."

"I know. That's why they were so good." And the door was shut.

Once outside, Karishma burst into an excited reaction. "It is the same man, Uncle! I was right! He has definitely murdered those men and he was the one who tried to run over us. There are too many things to pin him down for it to be a coincidence. Let's go straight to the police station."

"Calm down girl, calm down. Since we're dealing with a killer, we must be extra careful. What if he recognises you the way you recognise him? Then even your life could be in great danger."

"So let's not waste any more time. Let's inform the police, and they'll get the whole story out of him."

"No! We'll go home first. Next we'll ask your father to contact his cousin in the police department. Let the police come home and you can tell them your story. But you, young lady, need to be behind locked doors immediately."

They took an autorickshaw and headed home.

Just 20 feet behind them, a one-eyed ruffian took another rickshaw and followed them.

It was a quiet but excited group that sat huddled around the dining table later that evening.
"Incredible!" an inspector of the police department finally uttered, after Karishma had finished her version of the story. "Most incredible," he repeated, staring admirably at her. "But how did you get involved in all this?"

"You think she is right about the murderer?" Karishma's father asked, not particularly liking what his daughter had been involved in.

"Positive. After all the facts she has unearthed, that man definitely is behind the killings. Though we've still to know his real identity, his motives, and the way he arranged the killings." Turning to Vijay Uncle, he added, "And don't worry, I'll immediately arrange for her protection."

He picked up the phone and made the necessary arrangements. Wishing them goodnight, he left. He got into his jeep and sped off, not noticing a dark figure standing in the shadows across the street.

Two minutes later, the figure struck a match and lit a cigarette. It was the one-eyed ruffian. His cold eye narrowed as he took in the scene. "So the boss was right. She is onto him. I'd better warn him first, and take care of the girl later in the night."

After an early dinner the family retired for the night, secure in the fact that two hefty policemen - who had appeared shortly after the inspector had departed - protected their lives. One of the policemen was standing inside the main gate of the building downstairs, and the other was outside the door of their flat on the second floor.
But just before retiring for bed, the inspector called to say that they were too late in catching the man at Piccadilly Cafe. Somehow, he must have got wind of the fact that the police were onto him and had already escaped. But his description was passed onto all police posts, as well as to the two policemen on guard. There was no way he could cause any harm to Karishma. Reassuring though he may have sounded, the family was far from comfortable and worried that the killer was still at large.

With all the excitement of the day behind her, Karishma could not sleep. She opened the door to the balcony and stepped out for a breath of fresh air. They had a long balcony that covered the entire front of the house. There were three doors opening onto it, Karishma's, then the hall, and finally, Krishna's room.

She looked down at the road. It seemed almost deserted. The area they stayed in, Gultekdi, was mostly residential and by eight in the evening it was almost deserted, and peaceful. She stretched her arms with a yawn and then caught sight of the lit cigarette. It is said that a lit cigarette can be spotted from as far away as a flying plane, therefore spotting it from a distance of about 50 yards was no big deal. A lit cigarette generally would cause no alarm, but when it is held by a man crouching behind a tree and studying the building you live in, as the headlights of a passing car caught him doing so, it was something to be alarmed about.

Karishma quickly stepped back into her room, shut the door and returned to the safety of her bed. Could it be the killer, she wondered. It was not the man dressed in the white kurta pyjama that she had by now come to
recognise. Maybe it was some hired killer that he had sent. Maybe all the three murders were executed by a professional killer. And if that was so, the kurta pyjama man may still prove himself innocent with solid alibis. However, he would still have to answer the question of having three different identities, but that may not land him in serious trouble. He probably had a ready answer to squirm himself out of that kind of a situation. The thought that the man may actually prove himself innocent angered her beyond reason. NO! She would not allow that to happen. Not after he had almost killed her brother. There was only one thing to do.

She got up from her bed, went back to the balcony and switched on the lights there. Then she leaned over the parapet, as though searching for something. She made sure she was in full view of anybody on the streets. Switching off the lights, she went back to her room, leaving the balcony door wide open. Then she took guard and waited.

It was well past midnight when she heard the scraping sound. Trembling with excitement and fright, she quickly settled her bed to make it look as though someone was asleep there. Next, she tiptoed out of the room into the adjoining hall, and locked the door between the hall and her room. Then she hid behind the sofa in the hall.

She strained her ears but could hear nothing from the balcony. Another few minutes of breathless silence and she impatiently came out of her hiding place and stealthily crept towards the balcony. Suddenly, she heard the soft thud of someone landing gently on the balcony.
She quickly melted behind the large curtains, not daring to even blink or breathe.

Good! So far things had gone as she had anticipated... she was sure that for a professional killer, the climb to her balcony would be easy. Now, he should be entering her bedroom. She parted the curtains slightly to make her next move, but was mortified to see the big man two feet away from her. Luckily, she was so terrified that no sound escaped her.

She saw him give the hall a quick look and return to the balcony. A minute later, shaking like a leaf, she carefully peered outside. He was not there. Now she had to make her last move.

Brushing aside all stiffness that had crept into her body, she swiftly stepped out onto the balcony and rushed to the door leading to her own room. In the faint moonlight she saw the man bending over her bed with outstretched hands. He was holding a thin rope in both hands. Suddenly, he whirled around and saw her. He tried to charge towards the door. But she beat him to it as she banged the door shut and bolted it from outside. He was now securely trapped in her room.

She went back to the hall, where she heard him straining against the door in-between. She rushed to the front door and ushered in the policeman. He was startled to see the young girl open the door.

"You don't have to worry anymore. I have the tiger in the cage," she informed the policeman coolly.
An hour later, peace returned to the Patil household. The killer was apprehended and escorted to the police station. Half a dozen policemen asked a hundred questions, and when all were answered they too left.

Next morning the inspector returned.

"We have both the men now. The paid-killer identified his employer as a Mr PA Shinde, and we nabbed him in one of his dens."

"But the motive behind the murder?" asked Karishma anxiously.

"Yes, we found out that too. Apparently, this businessman had recently entered into the real estate scene. He would spend weeks to locate dilapidated buildings around Pune, where the owner was financially weak and had no heirs. Then he would step in with some cash, entice the owner and get into a partnership deal with him."

"And in the deed it would state that in the event of the death of one of the partners, the property would automatically belong to the other," guessed Vijay Uncle.

"Exactly. So after an appropriate period of time he hired this killer and got rid of the landlords of the three buildings he had identified."

"But what could he do with such old buildings?" asked Karishma. "Surely they were more of a headache with its upkeep. And why change his identity?"
"His plan was to buy off the tenants, or promise to shift them to new houses. Then he intended demolishing these buildings and constructing multi-storeyed ones in their place. You would have noticed all the buildings were located on prime land where he could have sold the flats at very high rates, netting in huge profits for himself. And about changing his identity, his intentions were to dupe the authorities. We at the police station certainly didn't make the connection, as whenever we called him over for routine questioning, he would arrive in different disguises. With different names, and different appearances, we took him to be different persons. Then, at the Land and Building Registration Office, the properties showed up in the names of three different people. Finally, when he later sold his flats, he would have received payments in different names too... thereby saving a huge amount in taxes. Extraordinarily cunning. And were it not for Karishma, he would probably have been successful too."

The family sat quietly for a few minutes. Mr Patil studied his daughter as though he was noticing her for the first time. He wanted to tell her many things, warn her of the many evil people who could cause serious damage. But all that he could come up with was, "Well done."

"What about our own landlord?" asked Krishna, anxiously. "I hope he doesn't need a financial partner too. Else..."

"Else nothing... I'm there!" said Karishma, boldly.

And nobody contradicted her.
A Dog's Day Out

Have you ever noticed that whenever you are about to doze off, a fly comes out of nowhere and decides to park itself on your nose? You hope it goes away without you having to shake it off. But it never does, and goes on tickling your senses, challenging a reaction from you. Finally, unable to bear the tickle, you shake it off. And your sleep goes out of the window with the fly. I find this most annoying.

Even more annoying are the times when you are fast asleep and someone comes along, pats your head heavily and asks, "Are you asleep?"

Believe me, these are the times I feel like jumping up and biting the person's nose off. But definitely, most definitely, the most annoying part of all is when you are terribly hungry, it's well past your dinnertime, and the
dinner plate is still empty. And if you try to remind thej about it, you get a shoe flying back at you.

"Shut up!" you’re told after the shoe has found its mark. "If you have to bark, go outside and bark!"

Er... did I mention I’m a dog?

My name is Cocktail (though nobody calls me by that name any longer), and I believe I’m a pure breed. Frankly, I don't know what it means, but I have often heard my master proudly introduce me as a 'pure half-breed'. The word 'half' I'm sure he adds, as half of me is brown in colour, and the stomach and chest are pure white.

I'm six years old, that's middle-aged to you, and a little hairy (which unfortunately means frequent haircuts). My mother being a poodle and my father a Lhasa apso, I am extremely short. Temperamentally, I believe in the 'You don't bother me, I don't bother you' theory. Currently, I don't have a regular girlfriend, but I do have someone in mind, and I’m working on it. I love my food, my sleep, my home and some of the four humans I call my 'masters'. My secret pact with them? Take me out for a walk twice everyday, and fill my plate twice daily too. In return, I will protect their house from burglars, salesmen, postmen and even rats and cats (particularly cats, as I hate them).

It was a simple deal and I was happy with it. But do they keep their part of the promise? Never! They're always forgetting these simple routines. And, as already mentioned, when I remind them of it, there's hell to pay.
"Cocky!" came the shrill and squeaky voice of Mrs Pradhan, the mother of the household. "Go wake up Vishnu, or he'll again be late for school. It's already 8 o'clock!"

Now this is one duty I detest, and it's not even officially assigned to me. Vishnu is 16 and in his last year at St. Vincent's School, one of the top-notch schools of Darjeeling. He had been a decent sort of chap till recently, and I used to get along fine with him. But of late, this past year or so, he has turned into a bad-tempered, foul-mouthed, lazy fellow who can't talk politely to anyone, not even his own parents. And to wake him up from his sleep could mean only one thing... trouble with a capital T.

But an order from the Commanding Officer (the mother was the one who always filled my plate) was an order to obey. So I gently pushed open Vishnu's door and peeped in. He was not just asleep, he was totally knocked out. With his limbs spread out in all four directions, his head nowhere near his pillow but hanging down from the edge of the bed, and his tongue half lolling out, it would have convinced any undertaker that, somehow, he had missed burying this body a week ago. To wake him from this slumber would take at least an atom bomb.

"BOW WOW! BOW WOW!" I tried. I don't know if that sounded like a lullaby because he seemed to have gone into even deeper sleep, which just didn't seem possible. This needed third-degree treatment, I decided. I jumped on his bed, caught his nightshirt in my teeth and dragged him. With his head already out, it just needed a
firm tug and he came crashing to the floor. I got ready to streak out of the room as I expected a violent chase to follow. But all he did was momentarily flicker open his eyes, mumble something, and go back to sleep on the floor where he lay.

This deserved more professionalism and finesse than the brutal third-degree treatment, and I am not short of these qualities either. On his side table was a plastic jug, half full of water. I clenched this in my mouth, climbed on top of him and emptied the ice-cold water over his head. And I got the desired results.

"WHA... WHA... WHAT HAPPENED?..." He jumped up in one motion, almost making me lose my balance.

I knew what would follow, so I charged for the door. He knew what had happened and he charged after me. The plastic jug was the first missile to whiz past my ear. Then a heavy book (I can't understand why people write such thick books) thudded against my head, making me see stars I had not noticed earlier. But, from the corner of my eyes, when I saw him picking up the brass candleholder, I knew it was time to leave the house. Luckily, the door was ajar with Mr Pradhan chatting with the bread man. As I zoomed through between his feet, I heard a loud clatter of the candleholder as it crashed against the door. I ran out and on, straight for the township of Darjeeling, just a kilometre away, without looking back or topping. I knew things would cool down in a couple of hours, and lunch was still five hours away.
Darjeeling in any season is... Darjeeling. There's nothing to beat it. It has to be the most wonderful place in the world to live in. Sunny, cool summers; cold, crisp winters; cloudy, cool monsoons; and colourful cool springs. Of course, it has its share of shortcomings too... power shortage, water shortage, frequent strikes from various unions and much more. But really, these hardly bother me.

And, of course, it has Trixy. The most beautiful female Spitz I have ever met. My friends don't agree. They say she's too fanciful, too short-tempered and, most of all, snobbish. But I disagree, and I don't listen to what they say about her. I don't think I have still made any impression on her, as she barely notices me whenever our paths cross, but I know I have time on my side. Someday, somehow, I'll change all that.

"You should find somebody more suitable for yourself," suggested my best friend, Raja. "You know, more down to earth. That fancy Trixy will only end up hurting you."

After the 'Great Vishnu Chase', I had decided to spend time with Raja, and found him next to the stables at the Mall. He had not yet found a home for himself. A very large and scruffy looking mongrel, he had been through more fights than he cared to remember. Fully battle-scarred, he had earned the respect of all and sundry in the neighbourhood... including the local human population. In keeping with his formidable reputation, he maintained little or no contact with other dogs, that is, besides me. We made an odd couple, him being so large...
and mean looking, and me so small and, well, cute. But I felt comfortable in his company, and safe.

"Let's breakfast at Alpine Restaurant today," he suggested generously, and that was where we headed when we ran into Trixy and her mistress. She greeted me pleasantly enough (I was happy she recognised me at all), but at the sight of Raja she turned her nose and hurried on behind her mistress.

"You see what I mean?" Raja said angrily. "Believe me, she'll never take to you."

"But I like her," I stuck to my guns, stubbornly. "She's kind of cute. And someday, somehow, I have a feeling she'll more than just notice me."

Raja was not interested in discussing her further, as he had other more important things on his mind. We had reached Alpine Restaurant and the aroma of eggs and bacon reminded him of his appetite. We made our way straight to the kitchen through the side alley at the back. The trashcan was open and we needed no further invitation. Rolling it down, we rummaged through its contents.

"Let's see what we have here," said Raja, deep in concentration. "Ah, there are some fresh sandwich breads... what do we use it with... oh lovely, some bones... W they're licked dry... and noodles! We're in luck today. Somebody has wasted half a plate of chicken noodles... but where's the chicken? I'm sure that sly cat, Lucy, has already gone through this."
Raja looked around angrily for his enemy. "You know, she always does this. Cleans up all the juicy stuff before I get to it."

"After breakfast, why don't we look for her and give her a chase?" I suggested. I already had enough of being chased around for the day, so being on the other side seemed more appealing.

"Good idea."

The rest of the morning was spent hunting down Lucy, and then giving her a harrowing time. A morning well spent, if you ask me.

A growl from the stomach announced lunchtime.

By now things must be back to normal at home, so after bidding Raja goodbye, that's where I headed. I took a somewhat longer route through a lane where Trixy lives, hoping to catch a glimpse of her again.

But instead of Trixy, it was Vishnu I ran into. Strange! He should have been at school at this hour. He was with a group of four other boys, all in their school uniforms. They checked both sides of the lane and started climbing a small slope. Stranger still!

Curiosity, one of my natural traits, got the better of me. So I followed them, keeping a safe distance between us (one encounter a day with Vishnu was enough for me). I saw them going towards an abandoned, dilapidated house. Another casual glance around them, and they all disappeared into the house.
What's going on here? My mind warned me something was amiss. My heart told me to make sure Vishnu was safe. But my stomach urged me to forget this Sherlock Holmes nonsense, and return home ASAP. A sudden shout from within the house, and the heart won. I ran to the house. Now I could hear laughter. 'Good, there is no problem here, so I can return home and to my lunch,' I thought.

A peculiar odour drifted into my nose and I became tense. I had smelt that odour before, but just couldn't place it. I have already told you I am curious about anything and everything. So I turned back towards the house and stealthily crept in. No one noticed me enter. There were two big boys, rather young men, I had never seen before, in the large hall. They were sitting in a corner, smoking. I suddenly remembered the odour. They were smoking ganja!

Heart in my mouth, I proceeded further into the house. God, I hope Vishnu is clean of this evil. The next room was full of smoke. I thought, 'Where there is smoke there is bound to be a fire,' and found about half a dozen boys sitting in a circle, smoking ganja. Amongst them was Vishnu.

My first reaction was of shock and shame, then of indignance, but finally of pity. Don't these boys know they are taking a one-way ticket to hell? Don't they know the tragedy of a drug addict?

I didn't want to see more. Shocked and hurt, I slunk out of the room and out of the house, then headed
homewards. But gone was my enthusiasm to reach my dinner plate. How could I possibly show my face to Mrs pradhan? The news, when it comes out, that her son is a drug addict, would surely hurt her the most... if not kill her.

But what should I be doing? Try to lead the parents to the scene of crime and hasten their shame? Or try to stop Vishnu from getting any deeper into this quagmire? But how could I do that?

"Where were you all morning, Cocky?" Divya, Vishnu's sister, asked me, as I reached home. Sometimes I really wonder why humans ask questions of animals, who they know are dumb and cannot answer. Now isn't that dumb?

Divya is a nice girl... sensible, mature and caring. And being Vishnu's elder sister, she kept him in check. Which gave me an idea. If Divya found out about her brother's new habit, she would be able to guide him back to sanity without herself falling to pieces. And since the trick lay in catching him in the act, there was no better time than now for her to find out the truth.

I tugged at her kameez, barked twice, ran to the door, barked some more and ran back to her. I went through the same charade twice more before I caught her attention. "What do you want?"

There she went again. If I could tell her what I wanted would I waste my time going through this silly act? Really!
A few more repeats and she got the message. Immediately, I was off, and she followed me. I was already tired and hungry, but duty called first. I set a decent pace, but the reluctant Divya was struggling. Were it not for my urgent barks, she would have quit earlier.

"I'm not climbing that," she protested, when we reached the slope under the abandoned house. A few more sharp barks and she started climbing, grumbling all the way. "God help you if it is a bone you want to show me."

I pulled her inside the house and she gasped. On seeing the two young men in the hall she immediately understood what was going on. "A den for druggies! But why did you bring me to this horrible place?"

I pulled her to the next room and she almost collapsed to her knees. "VISHNU!" she called out, but her voice was no louder than a whisper. "Oh my God... oh my God..."

Vishnu was lying on the floor, his eyes half rolled up. It was less than an hour since I had left them, but they already seemed to be on a trip. The other boys were there too, under different degrees of influence of the drugs. Divya rushed to her brother and tried to make him sit up. But it was of no use. Vishnu could hardly hold his head up, let alone his body. But he recognised her.

"Sis... what are you... doing here?" He tried sitting up, but immediately groaned and lay down again. With frightened eyes and an uncertain gaze, he started sobbing.
"I should be asking you that question, young man!"
The stern voice was back in place, as she tried regaining control of the situation. "Come on, we're going home."

She tried getting Vishnu on his feet, but it was a futile attempt. She just couldn't support his dead weight. And I was of no help here. "I must get some help," she said. "You stay here, Cocky. I'll be right back."

Till now the other boys had seen us but had not involved themselves. Now, suddenly, the two young men from the hall stumbled into this room. "What's your hurry, girl? Come, have a taste of heaven," said one of them, offering Divya a lighted cigarette. The other young man laughed aloud and sat down at the doorway, blocking any attempt to escape. Two more of Vishnu's group looked on leerily.

This looked bad and I wished I had not brought Divya to this place.

"You boys better watch out, or I'll get the police here," said the plucky Divya, making her way to the doorway.

"Not just yet!" the first young man said threateningly, holding her wrist.

"Let go of her, Nima!" Vishnu cried out, trying hard to stand on his feet. "That's my sister, you idiots!" But he hardly took a step forward before he came crashing down, this time hitting his head hard against the wall. He blacked out instantly.
"Vishnu!" Divya shouted and tried to rush to him.

But Nima held her tight. "Don't worry about him. He'll be okay. But you can start worrying... about us, ha, ha, ha!"

Now it was up to me. I was Divya's last hope. I growled my deepest growl, bared my tiny fangs, bristled the fur on my back and stepped forward menacingly. I suddenly leapt up and jumped at Nima, and managed to reach his calf, which I gripped between my teeth. He cursed aloud and stumbled backward. He kicked his leg around trying to shake me off, but I held on for dear life. There was a moment's hesitation from the other boys, and then a heavy stick crashed down on my head. I immediately lost my grip and fell, stunned, but still conscious.

Through the pain which ran through my head, I heard Nima scream, "Damn that mutt! He's almost torn my flesh off!" And as a means of retribution, he landed a hard kick into my stomach.

"What do we do with the girl?" one of the boys asked.

"See if she has any money. We need to buy more drugs." They did find some money in her purse.

"Fifty rupees! Bah! That will not last us five minutes."

Divya must have done something to get away because suddenly there was a lot of struggling and cursing, followed by a soft thud, a softer cry, and all was quiet. With great effort I tried opening my eyes, but blood
trickled into it instantly. Blinking hard and continuously, I managed to take a peek. Divya was lying beside me, knocked out senseless.

I silently cursed Trixy for making me use a different route home, and thus finding Vishnu's secret and getting into this ugly situation.

"What now?" one of the boys wanted to know. "All this trouble for 50 rupees?"

"Not necessarily," Nima said slowly. "What do you say to 50,000 rupees?"

There was total silence. "Wh... what do you mean, Nima?" asked his friend.

"Vishnu's father is a rich businessman. I'm sure he won't mind paying just 50,000 rupees for his daughter's safety."

"Kidnap! Are you crazy? This is too serious a matter..."

"So don't join me. I'll have less to share the loot with. Fifty thousand bucks should be enough to last me for months."

The protester fell quiet. He too was desperate for money to keep his ganja stock coming in regularly. He had earlier borrowed from his father, robbed his own family from their secret piggy banks, and cheated several friends to feed the bad habit he had been hooked on. In fact, he knew that all the other drug addicts faced the same problem. Money shortage!
"I am in too, Nima," he confirmed. "But where are we going to keep her?"

"Don't worry about that. I know of a good hideout."
The younger boys heard the exchange but didn't involve themselves. At the first available opportunity, they hurriedly left the place. With that, the two young men tied and gagged Divya, wrapped some cloth around her and carried her away.

A minute later, I passed out.

When I returned to my senses, it was for the first time that I learnt the meaning of excruciating pain. My head throbbed as though a bulldozer was going through from one end to the other. I tried getting up and immediately swooned. When I saw the small pool of blood around me, I realised why I was feeling so weak. With much determination, I did get up and immediately winced as sharp pain ran through my body. Nima's kick must have broken a rib or two.

The room seemed quiet and empty but when I turned my head slowly, I was shocked to see Vishnu lying in a corner, dead still. Not taking my eyes off him, I staggered towards Vishnu. Trembling all over, I checked him. He was alive! Thank God for that. Either he had hurt himself severely as he crashed into the wall, which was less likely as there were no blood marks on his head, or he had had an overdose of the drug. That's what generally happens, I hear. You start off on this evil habit as a joke. But the joke is invariably on yourself as you
increase your dose every few days, until finally it takes you over in its vice-like grip, and there is no turning back.

But first things first. I must bring Vishnu some help. BUT WHERE WAS DEAR DIVYA?! I suddenly remembered her plight. I quickly went through all the rooms in that house but there was no sign of her. What have those devils done with her? I must do something immediately! Both brother and sister were in grave danger. I must bring in their parents. They may get the shock of their lives seeing Vishnu in this condition, they may even never recover from such a shock, but I had to do it. With my head wound still bleeding and my broken ribs still aching, I left the house. It was already evening. I must have been unconscious for over three hours. Weaving my way through the crowds I staggered like a drunkard. Whoever saw me quickly moved out of my way, fearing I was rabid... a mad dog.

At the edge of the town a group of men saw me coming. "A MAD DOG! KILL HIM! KILL HIM!" the cry went off. The next instant I was showered with stones of all sizes. Suddenly from the crowd three men stepped out, holding outsized sticks in their hands, who encircled me. They moved forward menacingly.

"Be careful," one of them said softly. "He looks badly infected. One bite from him and you are a goner."

They did check their enthusiasm after that warning, but at the same time made sure I couldn't escape from between them.
"Just one hit, that's all I need, and I'll finish him off." I could sense they were about to make their charge, and knew my days, or rather my seconds, were numbered, when I heard a familiar voice. "RUN COCKY! RUN!"

It was Raja. He had jumped into the small circle the men had formed and was barking away wildly. And when that big fellow wants to look ferocious, he can persuade anyone to back off. He suddenly pretended to charge at one of them and, instantly, a way was made for me. I took my chance and made for the gap. A stick was swiped at me, but it missed me by inches. Thereafter, it was the speed of light that I tried to break and nobody and nothing came in my way, not even my bleeding head or the broken ribs, till I reached the threshold and safety of my home.

I stood there at the door, panting to my heart's content, trying to catch my breath before I let off the alarm. It took me over two minutes before I was in any condition to bark again. By then Raja had streaked up to me.

"How in heaven can you run so fast?" He too was out of breath, and looked concerned. "But what happened to you? You are badly hurt."

"I'll explain everything but first I have to warn my masters. Just wait here."

The scene inside was in tune with the happenings of the day... 'Disastrous'. Mrs Pradhan was crying and Mr Pradhan was talking to three policemen.
"No, no, no," he was telling the policemen patiently. "I tell you we have no idea where both my children had gone. The kidnapper's telephone call only mentioned that they have Divya, and want 50,000 rupees for her release. Now we also know that Vishnu did not attend school today. But where's he... Oh no! Whatever happened to Cocky?"

Mrs Pradhan screamed upon seeing me (which told me just how bad I was looking), and instantly rushed forward. No fears of my being rabid, here. One comforting arm around me and half my pain had vanished.

A lot of questions followed which, as you already know, I couldn't answer. But to cut a long story short, I enacted the same pantomime I had played for Divya, and finally got them to understand that I wanted them to follow me. So after providing me first aid, they decided that Mrs Pradhan and a policeman should stay behind to manage the situation at home, while the rest of them followed me. Raja accompanied me in the lead.

"Now will you tell me what's happening?" Raja asked, panting.

"Not yet. Save your breath for the run."

We reached the house and found Vishnu still unconscious. Immediately an ambulance was sent for, and while they waited a quick survey was conducted by the police, and the right conclusions drawn. A broken Mr Pradhan cradled his son's head in his lap, fighting to hold back tears. "Vishnu into drugs... when... how?"
Just then Vishnu opened his eyes. "Divya? Divya?" he cried, weakly looking around him.

"Divya has been kidnapped, son," Mr Pradhan informed him.

Vishnu saw his father and instantly realised in which part of the story he had woken up. He immediately broke down and started sobbing on his father's shoulder. "I'm sorry, father. I'm sorry. All this has happened because of me." He saw the policemen and asked, "Who... Oh my God... is it my friends? It must be. Those two young men must be behind all this. I'll... get them... if it's the last thing..." It was the last thing he could do, as he once again collapsed and returned to dreamland. No dreams for him. It had to be a nightmare!

Soon an ambulance came and Vishnu was driven off along with Mr Pradhan and the police.

"Now will you tell me, or is it still not the right time?" Raja sounded offended. So I told him the whole sordid story. He tut-tutted some more and muttered, "What is this world coming to? I tell you, it's going to the... never mind... So what do we do now? Any idea where the boys have taken Divya?"

"No." I was in deep thought, worrying what the Pradhans would decide to do. Fifty thousand rupees for them was not such a big deal, but the mental trauma that was in store for them... how would they handle that? Most important, how could I help? Especially bringing Divya back home safely. She was physically whisked away right under my nose and I felt guilty about it.
"You know we can trail these boys if we can pick up their scent." Raja went sniffing around, trying to identify different odours. "The smell of ganja. It is the strongest here. Difficult to distinguish anything else. Wish I had a more sensitive nose for..."

"That's it! We need someone with a very sensitive nose," I said, getting excited. "And I know just one!"

Raja raised an eyebrow, questioningly.

"Trixy! She has the best nose in town."

Raja made a face. "You'll say anything for her. In any case, how do you expect to rope her in? She is too snobbish to try and help others."

"She'll come if I ask her. And her home is in the lane below, not far from here."

"This I've gotta see."

So off we went to my most favourite place in town... Trixy's house. She saw me and smiled. She saw Raja and turned her face. Before Raja could react, I quickly gave Trixy the story, finishing off with, "And so, if you pick up their trail, maybe we can rescue Divya."

She agreed to come instantly, much to Raja's surprise and annoyance. "Why does he have to come along?" she asked, as we all trotted back towards the house on the slope.

Running a couple of steps behind us, Raja mimicked, "Why does she have to come along?"
"Because both of you are my best friends." It answered their questions but didn't result in any reconciliation.

I knew the culprits were the big boys, Nima and his friend, so I pointed out the corner of the hall to Trixy on reaching the house. "That's where I saw them sitting."

Trixy went closer, sniffed around, moved on to other parts of the room, sniffed some more and announced her verdict. "His socks are stinking. I think I can pick up the trail from here."

With that she was off. She walked out of the house, sniffing all the while, with us right behind her. She ran to the road below, smelt around for a minute and then moved up the road towards the Mall. A couple of times she overran her prey's trail, but came back to stick with it. We passed the Mall, and passed the stables where Raja always hung around and kept moving upwards. A few more twists and turns, and finally she stopped in front of a swanky bungalow.

We were now at quite a height above the buzz of the town. It looked like an affluent locality and I had never been here before. "Are you sure you followed the right trail?" I asked, hesitantly looking around me at the expensive looking bungalows on that road.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Raja. "I told you she was all show and no go. It is obvious she has made a mistake."

Trixys puffed up at the insult and was about to let Raja know exactly what she thought of him too, when
the main door of the bungalow opened and the two young men from the abandoned house walked out.

"It's them!" I cried out in disbelief. "She's done it! Quick, let's hide somewhere or they might recognise me." We ducked behind the bush.

I noticed with some satisfaction that Nima was limping. The result of my attack, I was sure. They went into a garage, which obviously had not been used in years, and returned in a few minutes, deep in discussion. The second young man looked worried.

"She still has not recovered, Nima. I hope you haven't hit her too hard."

Nima seemed the least bit concerned, "Don't worry, she'll be okay. But tell me, wasn't my idea of bringing her here good? We haven't used that garage in years and nobody will dream of looking for her in there."

Divya was locked in the garage, and she was still unconscious! I was truly alarmed now and did not know what to do. Raja looked as lost as I did. "Should we attack them?" he asked.

"No! If they get the better of us, all will be lost." Trixy's face was full of anger. "You two stay here and guard this place, in case they try to move her. I'll go and fetch help. But first I must find evidence."

Before we could stop her she had streaked into the grounds of the bungalow and headed straight for the garage. The door must have been ajar, as in an instant she was in. And in another minute she was out again with
something in her mouth. It was one of Divya's shoes. Without a glance towards us, she was running back towards the town.

Raja looked cheesed off. "HrmphH I've never been given an order by a girl."

"Doesn't she look cuter when she is focused and busy?" I asked with a far-out look, ignoring Raja's remark.

"Oh, shut up! I need a leak, badly. I've held on for hours but now..."

Just then a low moaning sound came from the garage.

"She's conscious," said Nima to his friend. "Come, let's have some fun with her."

As they left for the garage, my ears pricked up. "Fun? What are those devils thinking of?" I asked worriedly.

"I don't know, so let's just be close by in case she needs help." The door of the garage was open two inches and we peeped in.

"Gag her mouth tighter, so she can't make any sound at all," Nima was saying, a silly grin on his face. Divya squirmed and tried her best to fight them off as they tightened her gag, and tied her hands to an iron pipe. It was pathetic to see her like this and my blood was at boiling point. This Nima and his friend needed a lesson they would never forget.

"If they as much as touch her, I'm going after them." Gone was the pain from my bust head and broken ribs.
Gone was my fatigue from running around since morning, jvly focus had zeroed in on Nima's throat. I had not forgotten the hard kick in my stomach either.

"I'm with you," said Raja in a low growl, viewing the scene in the garage from more than a foot above my eye level.

Nima did reach out to touch Divya, but he got no further. That was our cue. "You take the shorter one," ordered Raja, "and I'll take the other." Nima was the shorter one, and I charged at him... and grabbed his ankle. Raja threw himself on the other and physically brought him down.

"What the...?" Nima cried out, more out of irritation than fear.

"Wh... what are you doing?" barked Raja, looking towards me. "You'll have to sink your teeth into something a little higher."

"I can't get any higher," I spoke with the ankle (and the dirty sock) still in my mouth. "I would have..."

But I couldn't finish. Nima flung his leg outwards and I went flying across the room. At the same moment, Raja left his own victim, bounded across the room and knocked Nima down on the ground too. "Now you can take over," he said, looking at me.

My head wound had split open again, but Nima was down on the floor, and I needed no further invitation. In a flash I ran over and grabbed his neck in my mouth Raja returned to his own victim, who was too scared to have even tried to get up.
So there we were, Raja with his feet around the body of the fallen young man, his cold nuzzle almost touching the man's nose. And I, with my small jaw half circling Nima’s neck. My constant growl, plus memories of my earlier bite and the fact that his life now hung by a thread, made Nima lose colour on his face by the second. Raja, on the other hand, didn’t have to threaten at all; the sight of his size and mean looks was enough.

"Do... do... don't try to move," croaked the man under Raja. He was already soaked with perspiration, in spite of the cold Darjeeling weather.

"Ar... ar... are you kidding? I cannot even breathe," stammered Nima, looking at me with terrified eyes. "This little fellow is about to tear my throat out."

And he was right. I would have done just that if he had tried to even move... well, if not that, I would have at least... punctured his ankles.

"Ju... just stay this way. Maybe they’ll go away... or maybe someone will rescue us."

Well, someone did rescue them. It was the police. They rushed in almost 30 minutes later, along with the Pradhans and, of course, dear Trixy. For 30 minutes we had not moved an inch, blinked an eyelid or spoken a word. For 30 minutes I had held that foul throat in my mouth without even scratching it. And for 30 minutes Raja had stood his ground without thinking of a leak. What a bladder he must have!

After it was all over, with the two men arrested and Divya rescued, we made our way to the hospital. Before
that Raja wished us luck and returned to his own haunt, after the longest leak in history. I'm sure the tree under which he relieved himself would not need watering for another year at least. On the way we dropped Trixy at her house.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I said, colourful hearts floating before my eyes. "There are a lot of things I want to tell you."

"Me too," she said sweetly, and I wished we had such adventures everyday. Before that she had explained how she had taken Divya's shoe to her mother. Mrs Pradhan had recognised Trixy, as well as the shoe, and had immediately arranged for an escort, who had followed her to the bungalow. Till date Trixy had been my fancy, but as of today, she was my heroine, my love, my heartbeat. Tomorrow I will tell her of my feelings!

At the hospital, Vishnu recovered to some extent. Upon seeing us all safe he burst out crying. "I'm sorry... I am sorry for causing all this trouble. I promise," he said turning to his parents, "I'll never, never ever take another drug in my life... or even go near that horrible place."

All was forgiven and after a lot of eye rubbing we headed back home. My tummy reminded me I had not eaten all day, except for the delicacies from the trashcan, which Raja had offered in the morning.

Dreaming of Trixy and my ultimate triumph, winning her over, I fell off to sleep on Divya's lap.

• • •
Kolkata is a city of contrasts. Between the many swanky apartment houses, there are also strings of slums, where life is a daily struggle. The five-star hotels house the ultra-rich, and the filthy streets down below could be the homes of the wretched. The city boasts of restaurants that charge well over a thousand rupees for a meal, but there are also street stalls that allow thousands to survive on five rupees. Yet it's a city that is at peace with itself. It has a unique sense of brotherhood, which could bring any number of affluent cities of the West to shame. It lives by the motto of 'Live and let live'.

It doesn't offer many doors to easy wealth and affluence either, but the hard worker invariably finds himself on a higher rung on the ladder of success. And that's exactly where Shiv's father Hemant Sen found himself. Till his son's birth 12 years ago, he was a small
farmer in Midnapore. Not making enough to live by, he came over to Kolkata (then, Calcutta). For over two years Hemant, his wife and son, Shiv, had the toughest times of their life as there was no easy earnings in this city. They lived on the street in the Burra Bazar locality, did whatever work came their way and barely managed to survive. And just when Hemant decided to return to his field in Midnapore, a carpenter took him in as his understudy. The wage was not enough but now at least he had a profession, a skill that he could develop. That he did, and in another two years branched out on his own. As he perfected his skill Hemant prospered in life. Very soon they could afford a room in a shack, and basic education for the boy. Shiv began his studies at a Bengali medium school in Taltala.

"So why aren't you happy?" asked Shiv’s mother in exasperation. "You have so much more now. You have a school full of friends and... and proper clothes... and..."

"You're wrong. I don't have any friends," said Shiv woefully. He was fully dressed, the schoolbag was on his back, but he just didn't seem to have the inclination to get off his chair and be on his way.

"Why? I see so many boys your age playing."

"But not with me. They all laugh when I step on the field." One of Shiv's legs was slightly shorter than the other, and he walked with a pronounced limp.

"So what if you limp? There are so many games you could play in spite of that."
"Yes, but because of my small stature they are always out to bully me." There was no doubt of that as Shiv, though 12, had the body of an eight-year-old boy. "The boys just have fun at my expense and no one really gives me importance. I am just a nobody, who they all like to walk over."

"Come on, no self-pity," his mother admonished him. "Remember, you are the best in essays with your vivid imagination, and no one can be compared to you in the school's handicraft classes. You are so naturally gifted. So chin up and try to win friends."

At school, he did try. He smiled at a couple of his classmates and tried to be with them. But soon they had shunned him. Another boy he liked did speak to him, but as soon as the other boys came, he went along with them, leaving Shiv alone.

By the end of the day, he could stand it no longer. He went home, dumped his bag and left for a long walk. It was dark by the time he turned around to return home. As his blues had still not flown away, he set forth for the one activity that he loved doing the most, the one activity that brought joy back into his little heart... eating chicken rolls at Nizams.

Nizams is one of Kolkata's oldest and best loved restaurants. As far as ambience is concerned, the management had apparently never heard of the word. The place was large, dingy, and almost dirty, but served the best kathi kebabs in the world. Many shops around Kolkata and other parts of India have tried to duplicate their speciality, but no one comes anywhere near the
original. The parathas can never be that crisp, and the kebabs that succulent, as they are here. And their chicken rolls were what always drove Shiv's blues away. They didn't come cheap either (though they were cheaper there than anywhere else), but this was what Shiv would save his money for, and once a month he would splurge his savings on a couple of these delicious rolls.

He entered the restaurant head down. He looked for a vacant table, found one and headed for it. He ordered two chicken rolls and settled down with a long sigh. A minute later, he felt someone staring at him. It was the old man with a bushy white beard he had always seen in there. Right round the large hall were small family cabins. Each cabin sported a swing door, like the ones in the bars in old Western movies. Shiv had always noticed the old man seated just outside one of these cabins. But he never permitted anyone to enter that particular cabin. "It's occupied," was his standard explanation. Shiv and the old man had occasionally exchanged a smile.

Today, upon seeing the dejected boy, the old man came forward and told Shiv, "Sir, I've reserved your table in that cabin," pointing towards his own domain.

Shiv looked surprised and embarrassed. "Reserved? No, thank you, I'm comfortable here."

"Please come," the old man invited him firmly. "It's for you."

"But it's for families and I'm alone. I think I'd prefer K here," he protested, a bit irritably. It was exactly seven 0 clock, and he had to rush back home.
"You must sit there! Now!" the old man raised his voice. A few heads turned towards them and, in sheer embarrassment, Shiv quickly got up. He walked up to the cabin and pushed aside the swing doors. He noticed a clean marble-topped table and two small benches on either side of it. Shrugging his shoulders, he stepped in. Behind him, he heard the old man shutting the swing door.

The moment the doors steadied there was a muffled explosion and a blinding light flooded the small cabin. Shiv put his hand up to cover his eyes from the white light. A moment later, when he put his hand down again, he saw that the table and the benches had vanished, and he was no longer in a cabin.

"Well, hello there!" The voice came from behind Shiv and he turned around expecting to see the old man at the swing doors. But there were no doors and there was no old man. Instead, there was a strange-looking short man... No, it was not a man... a strange-looking creature staring up at him. Half dazed with fear, he looked around him. He was standing in the middle of a meadow with unusually long grass. There was one large hollow tree right next to him! There were clumps of trees around him but he could not recognise a single tree. Was he dreaming?

"Wh... where am I? And who... what... are you?" he asked the little man... or whatever... was before him. He must be little, as he reached no higher than Shiv's stomach. "Are you a dwarf?"

"Bah!" The little 'thing' cried out angrily. "Do I look like a dwarf? Dwarfs are beings of your world!"
Your world? Shiv gulped hard. Either he must be dreaming, or he was dead. He pinched himself hard till it hurt. But there was no screaming to wakefulness. He did let out a painful yelp but he was still standing there in the strange meadow with the strange-looking midget before him. But where did Nizams disappear along with the whole city? Only one answer. He must be dead.

"Are you... an angel?" he asked haltingly, hoping that he had landed on the right side of the fence. Maybe, hell had these kinds of creatures, he worried.

"Don't be silly," said the ill-tempered midget.

"Then... where am I?" Shiv asked desperately, suddenly wishing he were in the safety of his house with his parents.

"Don't look so scared, boy, you are safe here," said the midget, taking on a milder tone. "Let me explain. You are in the land of Tenkos, and I am Filo, your official escort during your visit here."

Shiv heard what was said but he gave a completely blank look. "I don't know what you are talking about? I am Shiv and I just came to Nizams for some chicken rolls. That's all. If there is no chicken roll, I want to go back home," he said, nervously looking around him. A horse... no it was not a horse... but something like that, was grazing close by. And far away in the distance he could see some sort of a village, with smoke curling out of many a chimney. This didn't even seem like India!
"Don't you understand anything?" the small 'man' snapped once again. "That cabin at Nizams is a window for people of your world to come into ours. And sometimes, we use it to go to yours too. But believe me, knowing the conditions of your world, that's not too often."

Your world... our world... the land of Tenkos... Filo the shorty... what was happening to him? Had he gone insane? That's it! That explains all! He had gone mad.

"No, you have not gone mad, and I'm not a shorty!" Filo butted into his thoughts. "I'll have you know that I'm considered quite tall amongst my people."

"How... how did you read my mind? Please tell me what's going on, if I'm not mad," implored Shiv, now almost in tears.

"No need to get so upset. I'll explain all. You see we live in two separate dimensions of the same world. The same way as you all exist in your 21st century, we are there too in our own time dimension. Same land, different times, different planes of life... we exist together, along with other planes of life, but never see each other. The only connection between us is that cabin and the trunk of this tree. On certain days you can come over to our dimension, as many have before you, and on other days we can make a trip to your world, which I just explained, hardly ever happens. Simple as that."

Simple? Shiv's mind was whirling around so wildly; he had to sit down to keep himself from falling. "You
mean the cabin is something like a time machine? And I have travelled to a different period?"

"No, no, no! Boy you must be dumb. You are talking of same dimensions, but different periods. For that there is another window. What we are in now is the same period, but a different dimension... different planes of life. As I just said, there are many planes of life existing together, and a window connects each. Get it now?"

"But... but... if I want to go back home now?"

"You can't," he said with a mischievous smile. "You will have to wait till the window opens from this end."

"And... when is that?" Shiv asked fearfully.

"Oh, about a day later. Hey, don't look so aghast; translated into your time, it works out to about... five minutes."

Shiv couldn't understand that. "What will I do for a whole day? My parents will miss me. How will I..."

"That's where I come in. I will show you around and when the time comes, send you back through that," he explained, pointing to the hollowed tree trunk.

Shiv studied Filo. About three feet tall, long pink hair on a bony head with a large nose and very large eyes. He had the long thin ears of a deer and a thin line of a mouth. With no neck, his chest and stomach merged in one smooth curve, starting from under his chin and ending on two very short legs. He continuously looked fidgety and short-tempered and waved his little arms around whenever he spoke.
Suddenly there was a sharp yell, and a rider on a horse, or whatever, came galloping by and rode on at a frantic pace. Soon another rider came along and went by at a faster pace. Obviously a chase was on.

"Oh no!" cried Filo. "Young Melli is in trouble again. Come on, we must help out before Gomo catches him." With that he said something to the horse, or whatever, and it came galloping towards him. In one quick movement Filo jumped onto its back and then helped Shiv join him. "Go, Trej, as fast as you can." And fast Trej did go. Shiv almost fell off before he caught hold of Filo with both hands.

"You... you... talked to the horse?" he asked loudly, above the din of the thundering hooves and rushing wind.

"This is not a horse. It's a Rocker and his name is Trej, so don't go around insulting him. And what's so great about talking to it," he asked, markedly agitated.

"It's just... not natural..."

"NOT NATURAL?" he bellowed, looking back and glaring at Shiv. "Just because the people of your world have moved away so much from nature that they don't even care to listen to it, doesn't mean we are also as insensitive. You expect your pets to understand you but you never care to understand them. You breathe in all the oxygen of the plant world, but still you mercilessly chop down old trees. You do not even know how to listen to them. DO YOU?"

"Er... no Sir."
All this while they were galloping at breakneck speed over the meadows. At one stage it seemed they would go through the town, but the rider who was being chased suddenly swerved to the left and skirted the town. In the process, he lost a good deal of his lead.

"Why... are we... chasing Melli?" Shiv asked, his voice jumping with each stride of Trej, the Rocker.

"We are not chasing him," came a smooth reply from Filo. It seemed he was astride a bike on a smooth road. No jerks, no bouncing. "We are trying to catch up with them, before harm comes to Melli."

Shiv wanted to ask what sort of harm, but it was too much of an effort. He carefully looked back to spot the hollow tree, his window to going back home, but it was already out of sight. They too skirted the town, a cluster of about a hundred houses, which were built without any design in mind or usefulness of purpose. There were no roads or traffic in sight, but a small crowd had gathered on its outskirts to witness the chase, and no one raised an eyebrow as they saw Shiv behind Filo.

"Gomo is almost on him," Filo muttered under his breath. "Come on Trej, you tortoise! Move those lazy bones!" he called out loudly.

Shiv gulped hard. If Trej could understand, it may be time for a royal toss for both of them. But Trej responded gallantly and somehow added a few metres to his already super-speed.

"Is Gomo going to kill him?" Shiv wanted to know, already feeling quite involved in this 'foreign' matter.
"KILL? NO! Thankfully we haven't come to that stage yet. That is the privilege strictly for you humans... kill for the sake of killing."

If Filo was trying to humiliate him, he was certainly succeeding, as Shiv felt a tinge of remorse at such a scathing remark.

Ahead of them was a dense forest and they could see Melli trying to reach it before getting caught. But it now seemed an almost impossible task, as Gomo had gained considerable ground. They were now close enough to Gomo for Shiv to see him clearly. He was also short, but unlike Filo he was very muscular with a huge chest. His hair had faded to light and soft pink, by which Shiv gathered that he was older than Filo.

They were now abreast with Gomo and young Melli was just five metres away. "What happened Gomo?" called out Filo above the din of three galloping Rockers. "Is it Frehan trouble again?"

"Yes!" cried a visibly upset Gomo. "But this will be the last time, I tell you. He'll never bother her again after I'm through with him."

"Take it easy, Gomo. Let's talk it over," Filo tried to sound reasonable.

But seeing Gomo's eyes, anybody could guess he was in no mood to talk. So Filo took matters into his hands. He leaned over and whispered something to Trej the Rocker, and turned to tell Shiv, "Hold tight!"
Even as Shiv heard him, Trej suddenly swerved to his left and into the path of Gomo’s Rocker. Next instant, two Rockers, two Tenkos and one human being clashed and rolled onto the earth in one confused ball.

"ARE YOU NUTS?" screamed Gomo, jumping back onto his feet. "What on earth did you do that for?"

In the distance, they could see Melli disappearing into the dense forest.

"This is no way of solving your problem, Gomo. And you know it." Filo tried calming him down. "Be patient and we will work out something."

"That no good lout! If I ever see him around my... who is this?" Gomo suddenly registered Shiv’s presence.

"Oh just another human being. You know today is their visiting day. I don't even know his name," he said and looked inquiringly towards Shiv.

"Shiv, Sir," he said meekly, fearing the glaring eyes of Gomo. Till now he thought Filo was the most hostile... person he had ever met. But Gomo totally overshadowed him. Here was a... man, made of fire.

In the next instant, Shiv was a forgotten matter as the two senior Tenkos got back to their original conversation. "Why do you hate Melli so much?" asked Filo earnestly. "He is a decent fellow, and he has never harmed you, or anyone for that matter."

"That puny little fellow had the guts to come to me this morning and ask me for my daughter's hand in marriage. CAN YOU BELIEVE IT?"
"What's wrong with that... if I may ask?" asked Shiv politely.

"What's wrong with that?" thundered Gomo. "I'll have you know young man, if that's what they call you in your world, that I am the chief blacksmith of this village, and I come from a family who have all been chief blacksmiths, all ten generations that I know of, "^ho preceded me. Now maybe you can understand."

But Shiv was far from understanding it. "Sorry Sir, but what has your profession got to do with love?" The minute he had said it, Shiv knew it was the wrong question to ask this short fuse of a Tenko.

"WHAT?!" Gomo could not believe anyone could ask such a foolish question. He turned to Filo, "Where did you find this upstart, Filo? I should forget Melli and teach him a lesson instead."

"Forgive him, Gomo. He is new here. I'll take care of him later," said Filo, hurriedly positioning himself between Gomo and Shiv. Then he turned to Shiv and gave him one of his, 'watch it' glare. "Will you keep out of this? It doesn't concern you."

Gomo muttered something under his breath, got onto his Rocker and rode off back towards the town without uttering another word.

"At least Melli got away," Filo acknowledged thankfully. "Come on, I'll show you our town."

They got onto their Rocker as Filo gently said, "Back borne, Trej."
"Do you generally get under people's skins?" he asked Shiv matter-of-factly, as they plodded on.

"No," protested Shiv. "I just couldn't understand his objection towards Melli. Why doesn't he like Melli? After all, you just said he was a decent fellow."

"Oh, don't mind Gomo. He may seem to be a pot of boiling water, but he too is a good fellow. Blacksmiths in our society are very important men," explained Filo patiently. "They are also the strongest men. They look down upon small and weak Tenkos, and would never allow one to marry one of their maids, and poor Melli is a small-built Tenko, and would never be able to handle a blacksmith's job. But he loves Gomo's daughter, Trehan, and she loves him too. The whole town knows that but Gomo refuses to accept it."

Shiv was silent thereafter. He was small too, so would he also face similar challenges in future, he wondered.

They entered the town of Pintol, and Shiv was instantly fascinated by it. A little while earlier he had seen it from a distance and found it queer. But now he could see the details he had missed earlier. Each house was made of some mud-coloured material. It looked like mud but was definitely of some solid substance as it supported considerable weight. But the shape the houses took defied explanation. It seemed rooms were added on to the original structure, as and when and wherever needed. Rooms jutted out of the walls at any odd angle and height. Unbelievably, the higher the building rose, the larger the oddly placed
structure grew, defying the normal concepts of gravity. And as curiously, the chimneys came out from the side of the buildings.

The inhabitants, the few he could see, gave Shiv just a cursory glance and went about their own business. "Where is everyone?" asked Filo of one of them.

"At Gomo's house, where else?"

"Gomo's? Why?" Filo feared that Melli must have returned and was caught by Gomo.

"Haven't you heard? While Gomo was out chasing Melli, Trehan was caught and taken away by one of the Domens."

"Good Lord! But how did anyone from that evil lot creep into our town and not be challenged?

"Apparently, he was in disguise, and..."

"Disguise? They are twice our size!"

"I know, I know, and he was recognised in time. Three of our boys also tackled him, but they are now all in the hospital and Trehan is in the clutches of the Domen."

How horrible! Such a disaster had not struck their village in many years. Earlier, they had trouble from the bullies that the Domens were, but they had managed to put them in their place with the help of their own neighbours, the Pahaliwans. There was no trouble from them thereafter... until now.
They swiftly rode towards Gomo's house. There they found a small crowd outside, listening to Gomo's wrath. "Not one of you?! Not a single one will ride with me to bring back Trehan?" Gomo seemed about to burst in his frustration. A number of sturdy-looking young Tenkos looked away, not daring to meet his gaze.

Gomo saw Filo. "Can you believe it?" he asked, his face showing genuine hurt. "There are 20 strong Tenkos before me and not one of them will come with me to the land of the Domens? They are scared of them!"

Filo had taken in the situation at one glance. He was aware of the terror the Domens held for the mild-natured Tenkos* but he didn't expect a zero response. "I'll ride with you, Gomo. So let's not waste any more time and be on our way."

Looking at the small crowd, Gomo spat in disgust. "And... and... some of you are so big and strong... and I..." he said in disbelief, leaving his sentence unfinished. Then turning back to Filo, he said, "Come, my friend, the sooner we leave this bunch of cowards, the happier I'll be."

Filo told Shiv, "I think you'd better get off. This may take time, and will be dangerous."

"I am coming along." Shiv's voice may have been frail, but it held a lot of conviction. He had already forgotten his own world, his own family and friends, as he got caught up with the fascinating adventure he found himself in.
Thus the three of them left the hushed town and headed for the faraway Black Hills, where the dreaded Domens lived.

The Tenkos were natural trekkers and in next to no time, they were on the trail of the Domens. The Domens were obviously riding one of their sturdy domiciled creatures, the Cavedors. These were close cousins of the Rockers, though much larger and heavier, and hence slower.

"I still cannot imagine how one Domen had the guts of not only entering my town, but kidnapping one of our maids," Gomo wondered aloud. It was some time that they had left the town and no one had spoken a word till now. The hard ride and cool breeze must have helped in bringing down Gomo's temperature.

"Yes, it's a bad precedent," agreed Filo, himself wearing a grim expression. "If this one gets away, other Domens will be encouraged to make frequent raids. At all cost, we must catch up with this fellow, preferably before he reaches his cave."

"Who are these Domens?" Shiv wanted to know.

"They are half-monsters," explained Filo. "They have small heads on oversized bodies. In fact, because of their small brains there has been no improvement in their way of existence in centuries. They still live in caves and wear skins. They have no laws, no culture and still eat raw meat. In fact, they're known to eat Tenkos alive. To be caught by one of them is a fate worse than hell."
The thought of a young girl in the hands of one of them was enough to make Shiv shudder. Gomo had heard the description too, for he suddenly urged his Rocker to go all out.

They entered the large forest into which Melli had disappeared and their speed soon reduced. The sun played hide and seek with them as at one instant it shone brightly, when they passed under scarce trees, and the next moment disappeared out of sight, as the forest became dense. As they went deeper, the forest became denser, until their gentle gallop had reduced to a light canter. But still, on they went.

"Hopefully, he doesn't have friends waiting for him here," worried Gomo, hand on the hilt of his little sword. A sudden loud yelp, and his sword was out, ready to defend himself. But it was only a small creature of the forest, hurrying to his own home.

"How far is it to the Black Hills?" asked Shiv.

"About half a day's ride, but don't worry, we'll catch up with them before that."

"Oh, oh..." Gomo had reined in his Rocker.

"Looks like this Domen did have a partner. See those new tracks?" He was pointing to a fresh set of tracks that joined the original track.

"Much smaller beast, could be a Rocker," guessed Filo. "Well, so what if he has a friend? It's still two versus two..." He saw Shiv and corrected himself, "Two versus three."
They continued through the forest for another couple of hours, and as the shadows lengthened and dust settled they saw a change in the tracks. What until now were two clean sets of tracks had suddenly become a total confusion of tracks, over an area of 50 feet by 50 feet. The footprints were all over the place and it was hard to distinguish any. Beyond this patch, only the footprints of the original Cavedor continued.

"Looks like they had some problems," opined Gomo, scratching his light pink beard. "Let's continue, but be extra careful."

They moved a little slower, taking all the precautions they could. They travelled a little further when they heard a painful moan. Swiftly getting off their mounts they proceeded on foot.

"Shiv, you stay here behind this tree with our Rockers, we will be back soon," whispered Filo. The two Tenkos unsheathed their swords and moved towards the source of the moaning sounds.

As the sounds grew louder the two moved ahead in a crouching position, and then in almost a crawl. They could see a small clearing just ahead of them. They gave each other a nod for the charge and with a piercing war cry, they lunged forward into the clearing.

What they saw took them aback completely. "It's Melli!?" cried Gomo in disbelief. "What's he doing here? I didn't chase him this far!"
It was indeed Melli lying on a rock almost unconscious. Filo quickly ran up to him and saw blood trickling through Melli's fingers as he held his head. "He is hurt. Quick, get Shiv and the Rockers here. He needs immediate treatment."

After they revived and bandaged Melli, Filo asked him, "What happened?"

In short sentences Melli explained, "I was hiding on the outskirts of the forest, after you all had left... A while later, I saw a Domen ride up from the town... I hid from him. After he had gone some distance, I heard a cry... it was Trehan's voice. I gave chase, but could catch up with them... only a little distance away from here. We had a fight, and he managed to knock me down with a huge hammer kind of weapon. I tried to follow them on my Rocker... but a while later, I blacked out."

The three heard the story in silence. "So the new set of tracks we found were yours?" asked a little surprised Gomo. "Well, get back to town and get yourself properly fixed, while we continue the chase."

"I am quite okay now, so I'll join you. We must catch them before they reach the Black Hills, or it will be too late," saying so, Melli tottered towards his Rocker and mounted it.

Things were going on in Gomo's mind that he tried not to show on his face. He muttered something and with an angry look got on his own Rocker. "Let's go. We have lost enough time already."
Darkness had set in and it was getting difficult to follow the tracks. But they knew where the Black Hills were, and they knew the general route the raider had taken, so they stuck to the route and hoped for the best. They had cleared the forest and were now on rocky area. The Black Hills could be seen in the far distance and by Shiv's estimate, it could have been anything between six to ten hours' ride, depending on their speed.

"The Rockers are tired. I think it's best we give them a breather before continuing." Filo had just whispered something to his Rocker, and this was the response. After dismounting, the three Rockers were left to find whatever food they could in the cracks and niches of the rocks.

"And what did you fight with against that monster?" Gomo asked of Melli as they settled down on a large rock. Filo cast a quick glance at both of them, a faint smile creeping at the ends of his lips. Gomo was actually talking to Melli.

"My sword, Sir," Melli said, rubbing the side of his head where blood was once again seeping out. "He had the advantage of height and wouldn't let me get closer to him by continuously swinging his hammer. But I did manage to nick him on his arm."

Gomo seemed to have cooled down considerably after what Shiv had seen of him earlier. The moon was up by now and the stars were shining brightly. So after a short break, and after consulting the Rockers, they continued their journey. During the break, Filo had
applied fresh bandages on Melli's wound. Somewhat refreshed, they could now move on at a brisker pace.

"Even the monster will have to take a break, so we might catch up with him," said Gomo, the grim look back on his face.

A few hours later they saw the faint glow of a fire. Quickly and quietly they dismounted and instructed the tired Rockers to rest. And taking whatever shelter they could from the rocks, they steadily moved towards the fire.

"It's his camp," whispered Gomo, as they saw a large figure on the ground. "But where's Trehan?" alarmed, he swiftly scanned the area.

"There!" Melli's young eyes spotted a trussed up figure in the shadows of the rocks.

"Is she okay? Is she alive?"

"I think so. She's tied to that large rock. Come on, let's get him while he is asleep."

The four slowly crept towards the resting Domen. Swords drawn (Shiv had found a stout stick), they were about to charge, when a loose stone scraped against the ground. In an instant, the Domen was up, his massive weapon held high threateningly. Shiv saw he was much taller than him and thrice his own weight. Hair and beard growing wildly, broad nose flaring in anger, large eyes ablaze in hatred and large teeth ready to tear any flesh, he presented a formidable picture. There was a small red patch on his arm where Melli must have struck him. A
wild, wild man was the closest term Shiv could think of looking at him.

The four had surrounded him and inched forward menacingly. When they were within striking distance they all charged him. But the results were not as expected. The Domen had waited for the charge and just at the right moment twice swung his weapon around him, just as a hammer thrower at the Olympics would do. His first round swing was at his own arm level. The others ducked under it but it caught Shiv on his arm, sending him crashing backwards ten feet away. In the same motion, the Domen bent down and his second swing came, this time at his knee level. Melli and Filo jumped over it, but the heavier Gomo couldn't avoid it as it banged into his knees, and he too went down with a grunt. But before his second swing could be completed, Melli found his mark as he thrust his little sword into the Domen's thigh. There was a loud shriek of pain and the Domen looked ready to fall. But suddenly he sprang up, jumped over the fallen Gomo, and ran half limping towards Trehan. Melli and Filo realised what he was up to and gave chase, but it was too late. The Domen had reached Trehan first.

His leg bleeding profusely, he raised his hammer above Trehan's head and called out, "Come any nearer, and I'll smash her brains!"

Both Melli and Filo stood still as though paralysed. Shiv, his arm burning, looked on helplessly. He saw the young maid looking terrified, expecting the heavy blow to end her life. She must have been beautiful under normal circumstances, but right now, with her long hair in total
disarray, her face covered in mud and dirt and her dress half torn, she looked far from attractive.

"That's it, stay back!" the Domen screamed in anger as he held his painful thigh with one hand and the hammer with the other. "You two," he said pointing to Melli and Filo, "take this thong and tie up the other two."

He took out some pressed vine from under the skin clothing he was wearing, and tossed it to Filo. After Shiv and Gomo were tied he made Filo tie Melli, and then he tied Filo himself. Finally, he tied all four to a rock. Next, he dressed his own wounds, and looked more comfortable and in command.

"HA, HA, HA! What a nice spread of delicacies you look." Laughing aloud, he came forward and inspected each of his prisoners. "Oh boy, would you all be a feast? Ha, ha, ha! But don't worry. I don't like wasting food, and that delicate damsel would be sufficient for me." He went around prodding each of them, but stopped dejectedly in front of Gomo. "Oh boy, what a lot of fat. You must be delicious." He was actually smacking his lips. "I wonder... should I make a change?" He narrowed his eyes and contemplated between the daughter and the father.

"Take me," offered Gomo. "There'll be much more to eat too."

"That's true... but your meat will be tough." He looked towards Trehan once more, and made his decision. "But she will be tender and sweet. I think I'll prefer her... ha, ha, ha! But you know, I could take you all along for
the others. There would be a feast... but you could be a problem during the journey."

He took their three swords, broke them against the rocks and* threw them afar. He picked up Trehan as though she was a small piece of luggage, and threw her on his Cavedor. She was crying and desperately looked towards her father and Melli.

"Father! Melli! Please save me!" she implored, as the Domen mounted and rode away. They had ridden quite a distance, but still Trehan's mournful screams could be heard, begging to be freed.

A tear rolled down Gomo's face, but the rage had gone. Instead, he now seemed to have submitted to his fate, as he sobbed silently. His leg, where he had taken the blow, had swollen up to the size of a melon, but he was oblivious of the pain.

"Is there no way we could get free?" shouted Melli in frustration.

"The Rockers could chew through the thongs, but it will take too long," Filo said, looking around for a sharp stone within reach.

"Maybe my penknife will help," suggested Shiv softly. Suddenly all attention was on him as he fumbled in his back pocket where his hands were conveniently tied.

"Ah, I have it."

The others held their breath. There was hope.
Shortly, Shiv freed himself and cut open the bonds of the others. Quickly, the Rockers were summoned and in next to no time, the chase had resumed.

Till now, from the time he had been transported to this fantasy world, Shiv didn't have a moment to himself to reflect on what he had got himself into. Now, sitting behind Filo, watching the wild and dark countryside whizzing past him, he once again wondered if all this was for real. He remembered he had pinched himself earlier and confirmed he was not dreaming. But since then, so many more crazy things had happened that he just couldn't any longer distinguish the thin line between reality and fantasy. But why should he be complaining, he checked himself. This had to be the best time he had ever had. So, he advised himself, sit back, and enjoy.

There was a cold wind blowing from the north but it hardly bothered anyone, except Shiv, as they continued on their grim mission. There was absolutely no talk amongst them as each was absorbed in his own thoughts. Shiv's shoulder injury, where he was 'hammered' by the Domen, was really superfluous, with just the red mark and a little stiffness to show for it. But Gomo's leg was getting from bad to worse. The bandage they had quickly tied was of little help, and it was evident he needed urgent treatment. But he rode on silently, his mind totally devoted to his daughter's horrendous predicament.

The ride was long and there still was no sign of the raider with Trehan. "We should have overtaken him by now," said a worried Filo. "Have we missed him by taking the wrong route?"
"Even if he has taken a different route, he'll still be heading f'r the Black Hills. And I don't think he'll risk stopping halfway to harm Trehan. So let's just concentrate on reaching the Black Hills before he does." Melli must have analysed the situation fairly, as there was no comment.

When Shiv saw the Black Hills from close, a chill ran up his spine. He now realised why no folks from Pintol dared to come here. On the dark side facing them there must have been a hundred small cave openings, and from each of them came the red glow of a fire burning within. Every now and then a deep rumble of beating drums arose. The total effect was of a large, dark creature watching the outside world with a hundred red eyes, and growling with hunger. Really scary, and foreboding.

"Just a mile more to go, and yet no sign of the raider," Melli's voice was down to a whisper.

"Let's not give up," Filo tried encouraging. "Come on, now at a gallop."

They did gallop the last mile, and reached the foothills in a couple of minutes. But there was still no sign of the raider, and Trehan.

"It's all over. We're too late," cried a broken Gomo. "He must have reached ahead of us. Now it will be impossible for us to rescue Trehan... not against hundreds of the devils."

"There!" exclaimed Melli, pointing towards a cave halfway up the hill. "That's them! He is taking Trehan to that cave... the one with the square opening."
They all saw the raider, now on foot, entering a cave dragging Trehan behind him. He gave a kind of victorious cry that was instantly greeted by a chorus of noisy cries.

"That's it!" Gomo had positioned his Rocker for the climb. "I am going up there alone to teach those monsters a lesson they'll never forget." He looked at his comrades proudly. "Thank you for being with me till now. Please go home, as it is no use all of us getting killed."

Melli, who was studying the awesome mountainside, suddenly intervened. "I have an idea! It's a long shot but it is better than giving up. You will notice that the mountain is totally cavernous, and all the caves are interlinked."

"So?" Gomo was seeing Melli in a totally new light compared to how he had perceived him just a few hours ago.

"See those dry bushes? They are from the family of oily wood. Burning just one of them can make enough smoke to fill ten large halls. If we burn a few dozens of them within the caves, all the Domen will have to rush out. Trehan is tied and will probably remain within, alone. Then we have a better chance of rescuing her."

"First of all, how do you expect to go into the caves without being caught." Filo didn't look too happy with the idea. "And how will the smoke spread to the other caves quickly? It may take hours, by which time it will be too late."
"You will notice that some of the caves have no fire. Maybe they are empty, and we can use them without being spotted. And it will be just minutes before the whole mountain is full of smoke, thanks to the strong wind blowing."

The wind had indeed picked up considerably.

"And what if they run out with Trehan?"

"It would still make our task simpler with her out in the dark. I told you, it's a long shot, but better than doing nothing."

"Okay. Let's give it a try," said Gomo, limping towards the bushes.

"Not you. With your injured leg you will not be able to move fast. I'll go alone," said Melli, with that determined look set on his face.

"I'll come along too." Shiv stepped forward, surprised at his own daring attitude. "Two of us together will be able to carry more of the bushes."

"Fine, so let's get started. And the two of you," Melli looked at his two senior members, "if you can think of any way of slowing them down in case of a pursuit, it will help."

When Shiv and Melli went to collect the bushes, they left behind two puzzled elders. Gomo had his hands holding his sides. "Did... did you see that?" he asked Filo, flabbergasted. "He actually ordered us!"
The bushes collected and tied to their backs, Shiv and Melli crept up the slope the Domens used as their regular pathway. There were no sentries or guards posted, as no one would want to raid hell. Halfway up they decided to move away from the pathway and make their way slowly over the rocks. Keeping to the shadows, and with an alert eye for encounters of the unsavoury kind, they made slow progress. Shiv wondered if even in his wildest dreams he had ever got into such a situation... so close to being eaten up alive.

Their climb went without a hitch and soon they were inside a dark and empty cave. They had selected the lowest empty cave available, as it not only saved them time, but since the smoke they intended making would move upwards, they would be able to cover the entire mountain and all the caves. The mountain was acutely cavernous and fully perforated, as they could see dozens of holes in the empty cave they occupied. From each of these holes came faint glows of fires burning closely in adjoining caves.

The bushes were set alight, allowed to burn for a minute and then doused off. Immediately, huge puffs of smoke started coming out. They fed the smoking heap with more dry bushes and soon the forceful wind coming in from the cave entrance pushed the smoke into dozens of holes. They repeated this process till all the bushes were used.

Shiv and Melli themselves could no longer see or breathe in the thick smoke that totally engulfed the cave. But with the help of a cloth over their faces, and a lot of
determination, they stayed on helping the smoke increase. Only when they were sure that the smoke was now rushing into the holes did they themselves rush out of the cave.

Their eyes streaming with tears they breathed in the fresh mountain air with large-gulps. Already they could hear the hum of excitement and fear all around them. Soon the Domens, their heads covered in skins to protect themselves from the engulfing smoke, started streaming out of their caves. Shiv and Melli had found a safe vantage point, and from there they watched the uproarious scene that followed.

All the Domens were now out of their caves - the young, the old and children in arms, as thick smoke belched out of every cave in the mountainside. A row had begun amongst them as to who was responsible for the mishap. The row had heated up faster than the fire, and in a few minutes there was mayhem as fists and hammers swung around in all directions.

"I can't see Trehan," Melli whispered urgently. "That's the cave she was taken into, and I don't see anyone around it. The poor thing must be choking inside."

"While they are preoccupied, let's make our move," urged Shiv.

"We can't use the tunnel network inside as I had hoped. We'll have to go through that crowd of Domens. Since most have their heads still covered, we'll cover ours too and hope they don't notice us in the confusion," Melli said.
It was too daring, thought Shiv, too desperate. But there seemed to be no alternative, and time was running out. He pulled his shirt over his head and covered his face. Melli used his cloak for the same purpose. Using whatever cover they could till they reached the crowd, they stealthily moved upwards.

And thus into the jaws of death, strode the two brave lads.

They reached the crowd of Domens without being spotted, and melted amongst them. As Shiv was comparatively taller, he wasn't conspicuous. But Melli stood out due to his short stature. Hoping he would be mistaken for a kid, they pressed upwards. Just below the cave the Domen had taken Trehan in, they saw a family hiding behind the rocks, avoiding the free-for-all the others were indulging in.

"That Tenko girl must be roasted by now," a Domen was saying.

"Not fully roasted, I hope." Melli recognised the raider Domen's voice. "The taste is lost if overcooked. I like them lightly smoked... so that the sweetness of the meat remains."

A cold shiver ran up the spines of both, Shiv and Melli. They went around all the Domens and stood on the landing in front of the cave. No jane was looking towards them.

"Cover your nose and eyes," Melli suggested and the two stepped into the dense cloud of smoke. Shiv's spectacles helped a bit against the smoke.
They felt their way into the cave as Melli called out softly, "Trehan! Trehan, are you there?"

No answer! Was she already dead? Fearing the worst they went in deeper, and called out louder.

They heard a faint whimper. They rushed towards the sound and almost tripped over Trehan. She was lying on the ground, tied up securely. But it was thanks to the fact that she was lying down that she was still alive. As smoke is lighter than air, and moves upwards, down at ground level, there was some clear space to breathe. Alive she was, but far from okay, as considerable smoke had already entered her lungs.

Shiv and Melli were themselves choking heavily. Their lungs were full of smoke too and breathing was getting more difficult by the minute. Seeing Trehan, they too dived to ground level and got some relief. They knew finding Trehan alive was half the job done. The second half was going to be equally crucial.

Melli held Trehan in his arms. "You'll be fine now, love. Trust me, we'll get you out of this' hell-hole." Shiv tried looking the other way, got more smoke in his eyes, and turned back. Soon he cut through Trehan's bonds and the three got ready to leave. Holding each other's hands they once again groped their way to the cave's entrance. The fight outside was still on in full swing. Melli breathed a sigh of relief, as now, hopefully, they could all walk out the same way they had walked in.

"LOOK, TENKOS!" A loud cry rang out.
The fighting ceased instantly, as though an order was passed. Two hundred wild faces looked up. Two hundred pairs of lips smacked in anticipation, as two hundred pea-sized brains made some quick calculations. Three Tenkos for two hundred Domens would never be enough. It would have to be on first-come-first-served basis. The next moment, two hundred pairs of feet made a mad rush for the ledge the three stood on. And above the general din came the voice of the original raider, shouting on top of his lungs, "ONE OF THEM IS MINE! THE GIRL IS MINE!"

There was only one thing for the three to do, and they did just that. They hopped back into the cave. "On your knees, and crawl back as far as possible," Melli, now the natural leader, gave the instructions. "Trehan, you've seen the interior. Any suggestions?"

They heard the mob reach the cave entrance. There was a lot of noise as almost everyone was shouting something or the other. But nobody dared follow the three into the smoking cave. They had learnt how to make fire, but were still eternally afraid of it.

"They have made rough steps in the cavern to reach other caverns, above and below that level. We can go up..."

"No!" Shiv called back over his shoulder. They were all crawling as fast as they could, while at the same time keeping as low as possible. "Since the smoke is moving upwards, let's move downward. Maybe the lower caverns have already lightened down. Plus, when we have to make a run for it, we'll be closer to the ground level."
"Brilliant!" Melli sounded hopeful again. "Trehan, which side are the steps? You lead the way."

Once again holding hands so as not to lose each other, they followed Trehan, one behind the other. The first set of the steps were the most difficult to tackle as the dense smoke did not permit any visibility, and they were all choking very heavily. On the floor of the lower level they once again bent down to ground level, and breathed in a mouthful of smoky air.

"I... can't breathe... any longer... I think I..." Trehan seemed about to pass out.

"Don't talk, dear. It will be better one level lower," encouraged Melli, now himself losing hope.

Coughing continuously, they tackled the steps to the next level. The smoke was slightly less dense on the third lower level, and still lighter on the fourth level. A little better, but still gasping for fresh air, they continued moving downwards.

They finally reached the seventh level, where their fire had originated. The smoke there was just a light mist, but their lungs were already so full of smoke, they were hardly breathing. Their eyes too were red and vastly impaired with the continuous streaming of tears.

"Good! ...The smoke is almost... gone here. But the rest of the mountain... will also clear up soon." Shiv spoke in short bursts; his eyes in a better condition than the other two, thanks to his spectacles.
"So let's not waste... anymore time," pursued Melli, fighting to take in gulps of air. "The Domens... are all up at the cave we went in. If we charge down, we could reach... our Rockers and Gomo and Filo... before they can catch us. So, one-two-three, let's go."

They charged out of the cave and into fresh air and cool breeze. They wished they had a few minutes in hand to return to normalcy. But that was a luxury they couldn't afford. So, still coughing wildly, they ran as fast as they could for the pathway that would lead them downhill.

They had just reached it when an eerie and shrill shriek came from above them, and silenced the mountainside.

"There they are!"

Another moment of silence, and the chase was on. The whole mountain seemed to shake as the Domens thundered down.

"Run... as you've never run before," urged Melli, as he led the race, pulling Trehan behind him.

But Shiv found it difficult to keep pace. His leg, where he had been hit, was beginning to bother him, and soon he was lagging behind. He took a quick look behind him. The Domens, with their larger strides, had already narrowed the gap between them.

"GOMO! FILO!" shouted Melli, on the run, into the darkness below. "KEEP THE ROCKERS READY!"
"What about the Domens' beasts?" asked the limping Shiv of Trehan. "Where do they keep them?"

"Not far from the start of this pathway," cried Trehan, looking back. "They are all within a corral of some kind," she said, recollecting the place the raider had dismounted.

"Good," shouted Shiv. "That should give us some extra time before they mount."

"That's if Gomo and Filo have heard me and kept our Rockers ready," Melli shouted back.

"What... er... who is he?" asked Trehan, still being pulled by Melli.

"A friend," Melli threw a backward glance and was not happy with what he saw. The Domens were almost upon Shiv.

They reached the foothill at a gallop (with Shiv on a canter), and were relieved to see Gomo and Filo ready with the Rockers. On the run, Melli mounted his Rocker and Trehan jumped up behind him.

But Shiv was still 20 feet away, with one of the Domens just five feet behind him. In a flash, Gomo whipped his Rocker around and charged straight at the Domen. The Domen jumped aside to avoid being trampled, and that gave Shiv precious time to reach Filo, and jump up behind him.

"GO, GO, GO!" shouted Gomo, digging his boots deep into the side of his Rocker.
The leading Domen gave a short chase, lost out, and went to fetch his own Cavedor. The other Domens too made a beeline for the corral where the Cavedors were kept.

"We have just about a minute's lead before they are after us again!" cried out a worried Melli. "We'll never have a chance with two of us on a Rocker."

To his surprise, instead of spurring on, Gomo and Filo had slowed down to a gentle gallop. "Not to worry. We've taken care of that part," said a confident and extremely happy Gomo.

"We opened the gates and herded out all the Cavedors into the open," clarified Filo, equally happy. "It will take them hours to round them up again."

Once they had put a decent distance between the Black Hills and themselves, Gomo called for a halt. "I want to hold my daughter," he said. He got off his Rocker and instantly Trehan rushed into his arms. Melli fidgeted on his saddle wondering what he should be doing. A few hours earlier Gomo had chased him out of their town, threatening to break every bone in his body. Now that his daughter was safe, would he continue his chase?

"Melli, get down!" Gomo said, looking sternly at Melli.

Melli gulped hard. He should have galloped away when he had the chance. Trembling slightly, he got down and stood before Gomo.
"You, young Tenko, are small in height and in weight. Almost a misfit and a weakling I would say. But you have the stoutest heart of a warrior, the shrewdest mind of a general and the fiercest determination of a leader. I would be proud if you married my daughter."

The short speech done with, he handed Trehan over to a totally stunned but happy Melli. The two embraced awkwardly, and the engagement was over.

A lump had crept up inside Shiv's throat as he witnessed the happy scene. A small built never meant a small character. He knew that. Though he wished more people in his own world knew that too.

"And you," Gomo continued, turning towards Shiv, "you have shown us all today that bravery and chivalry exists in your world too. But more important you have shown that help is given not just to friends and families, but also to total strangers. You, Sir, are the true hero today."

Amidst light applause from the rest, a totally embarrassed Shiv took a bow. A hero! People had never bothered to stand next to him, and today he was called a hero.

A feast was called upon their arrival in the town, and a formal announcement of the engagement made. The town's special Medal of Honour was presented to Shiv and he just couldn't stop smiling, till Filo whispered in his ear, "The window to your world opens in another 15 minutes. If we don't hurry..."
Hurry he did, and soon they were standing just outside the trunk of the hollow tree. At the appropriate time, and after a short hug, Filo gave him a gentle push into the hollow tree. Again there was a flash, a vertigo feeling and the next instance he found himself in the dark cabin at Nizams Restaurant.

The old waiter pushed the swing doors open and welcomed him back to the hall outside, with a smile and a twinkle in his eye. "Come again, Sir," the old man said. "Maybe another cabin next time?"

Another cabin? Shiv wondered what he meant. Looking back at him with fear and awe, Shiv walked towards his own table in the hall, just as the bearer brought him his order. "Two Chicken Rolls, Sir, as you ordered."

Stunned, Shiv saw the time; it was just five minutes past seven. The entire adventure was over in five minutes! He couldn't believe it. It must have been a dream. He felt something in his hand. It was the Medal of Honour. So, it was not a dream. Then what was it?

Later, as he headed for home, there was no denying the swing in his step, in spite of the limp; the light in his eyes, in spite of his spectacles; and the hope in his heart, in spite of it being tiny.

"I am not a nobody. And no matter what anyone says or does, I know I can be a hero too." And holding the medal high in his hands, he ran home the rest of the way.
"We have once again lost to them," said Rahul dejectedly. "Oh GOD! It's so, so very humiliating."

"But just by one mark. That's not so bad," Amir sympathised.

"One mark, or one hundred marks! What's the difference? They stood first and we came second. The record books will show only that... and they'll never let us forget it."

Rahul Chaturvedi was passionate about his school, Delhi Day School, and the thought that North India Boys' School, their arch rivals amongst the private schools of Delhi, had just pipped them at the school's Class X results, maddened him more than anything else.

"Don't forget, Bedi, our star student, couldn't appear in one of his exams," Amir Ali tried his best to pacify his
friend. He wished the other two boys who completed their friends' circle were around too. But Patrick D'Souza was ill and Brahma Roy was simply not interested in competing with any school. He was happy just to be left alone with his books and his music. "I can almost see the beaming faces of those four clowns from NIBS. I'm sure they'll be coming over to taunt us today, even before..."

"Thinking of us? Ha, ha, ha!"

It was Arun, the Prefect of NIBS, and along with him were his three best friends, Cyrus, Pramod and Snehashish. "Why don't you accept it? We are the best school in town and there is nothing you can do about it."

Both the groups were in Class XI, and for the past five years they had an intense rivalry. Not that it harmed the schools in any way. In fact, because of their desire to outdo each other in every field, the other students had got involved too, resulting in great progress in their overall performances... be it education, sports or other extracurricular activities. Invariably, it was either of these two schools that ended with the honours list each year.

"You were lucky this time," Amir tried responding hotly. "As you know, one of our star students..."

"No excuses, please! No excuses!" The plain-speaking Cyrus shut him up. "Either you beat us, or you don't. Simple as that."

"Well, this is not the end. So, you beat us in the Class X exams. Big deal! Don't forget we beat you in the Interstate Elocutions."
"Maybe. But we came first in Delhi’s Annual Debate."

"But that was after we became champions at the All Delhi Schools’ Athletic Meet."

Things were quiet after that for a minute.

"That makes us 'two all'," concluded Rahul, his face grim with pent-up emotions. "The last competition left in this year is the Inter-School Cricket Tournament. Let the winner of that be the champion school of the year."

That made everyone think. Cricket was not the best sport either of the teams played. They were good but certainly didn't monopolise the game. The previous year's winners, St. James' School were the favourites this time, and La Martiniere were the dark horses... It could be anybody's game.

"Agreed!" said Arun, dramatically. "Whichever school has a better standing at the end of the school term is the ultimate winner. And the prize?"

"Let the winners be carried on the shoulders of the losers... around both our schools."

Lines drawn, the two groups withdrew.

"I wish you hadn't said that," Amir confessed later, as they walked back towards their classroom. "You know our cricket rating isn't particularly good right now. Jeev Singh, our strike bowler, is down with a broken arm and Patrick is ill, and the competition starts next week."
"What else could I do to stop their mocking grins? At least it has brought us some time."

Just then they ran into Brahma Roy, the weak link in their quartet, his head as usual in a book, even as he walked.

"Just look at him," criticised Amir bitterly. "He's least concerned about our humiliation. He may be part of our group, but he certainly doesn't contribute much."

"Unless, of course, it is a quiz competition. Then there isn't anyone to touch him in Delhi." Rahul always stood up for Brahma, his favourite. Though he too wished sometimes that Brahma would put down his books once in a while and behave like a normal schoolboy.

"Hi Brahms!"

That's what everyone called him, since he was totally in love with classical western music. The only time he was not reading, they say, was when he was hearing classical western music.

"What's it you're reading?"

"Oh... Hi Rahul! Hi Amir!" Brahma grinned behind his bifocals. "This is the latest from Sunil Gavaskar, 'Out... in the Middle!'. Gives some superb tips on how to play fast bowlers."

"That's what bothers me the most!" said Amir, glaring at Brahma. "He has the most knowledge about the game, he knows which shot to play for each ball. He even knows how those shots should be played. But he
has never played a game in his life! What can one say of that, I ask you?"

"Take it easy, Amir. No need to take your frustrations out on him."

"What's got into you?" asked Brahma, innocently. "What did I do now?"

"It's not what you did. It's what you're not doing," Amir hissed, as they entered their classroom.

The rest of the day the teachers of Class XI found their favourite student, Brahma, most inattentive. He kept brooding in his seat all day, deep in thought. Must be working on some complex mathematical problem, they surmised.

"What did I not do?" asked a perturbed Brahma of Amir, the second after the bell rang for the day.

After school the three friends visited their sick classmate. Patrick was still in bed, somewhat under the weather, but well enough to digest all the fresh news from the school.

"And so, we have till next week to whip up a fighting cricket team," concluded Rahul, bringing Patrick up to date.

"Without Jeev Singh we have a snowball's chance in hell," predicted Patrick. "We can handle the other teams, I am sure, but La Martiniere, St. James' and NIBS... They will go through us like a hot knife through butter." He saw the others look at him quizzically. "I know, I know.
I am watching too much of cricket and Sidhu on TV. But what else can I...

"Maybe if we practise hard..."

"Be realistic, Rahul. Nobody can train in a week. Not without a proper coach."

Two minutes of silence followed as each tried finding a more realistic solution.

"What if I coach the team?" asked Brahma suddenly. He had not spoken a word since they had left school, and since Amir had told him in no uncertain manner all the things that Brahma had not done. Rahul was sorry for the confrontation, as he never expected Brahma to do anything other than what he loved to do... read, listen to music and solve mathematical problems.

"You coach us?" cried out Amir, half laughing. "You, who have never held a bat in your hands, want to coach us? Since when did you become a joker?"

An uncomfortable silence followed the taunt. The only thing that changed during that short period was the colour on Brahma's face, which steadily turned to the shade of a beetroot.

"Actually, that may not be such a bad idea," said Patrick slowly.

"Are you kidding?" Amir looked aghast.

"No. We all know about Brahms' theoretical knowledge of the game. He knows every stroke, every move and every strategy in the game. All this information
is stored in his brain. He has seen us all play almost everyday for years. He must be aware of all our mistakes as well as our strong points. He may never have intervened to rectify our errors, but we never ever bothered to ask him either. Maybe if we help him unlock those nuggets of information, perhaps our individual games could improve."

There was a lot of wisdom in those words and Rahul was quick to acknowledge it. "You know, you may be right. At least it's worth a try."

If Rahul sounded excited, Amir still didn't seem convinced. "I'm not so sure. Seems like a big risk to me. I suppose the last word should be Brahms'. What do you say Brahma?"

"I say the first thing you, Amir, must learn to do is bat without trying to lift every other ball for a six. You want to occupy the crease? Learn to play every ball along the ground."

The coaching had already begun.

The practice session started in earnest the following morning itself. All the players were on the field by six in the morning. At first they were all confused when Brahma walked onto the field. "Forgot your books, Brahms? Or is it the melodies of the morning birds that brought you here?"

But once he got down to the nitty-gritty of professional cricket, it shut all up as he pointed out
fundamental flaws in their games. By eight o'clock each was working on his own specific mistakes.

The rest of the day at school went off normally and the players were itching to get back on the field for the evening practice when the first bombshell fell.

"Have you all heard?" burst in Parthiv, their star opening batsman. "Mr Ghosh, our physics teacher, has just announced a special examination for Classes XI and XD."

"When is it?" asked Rahul, smelling trouble.

"Next Tuesday."

"WHAT? Our first match is next Tuesday, and most of the players are from Classes XI and XII."

"How could he do this? He knows..."

"Wait!" said Rahul, eyes narrowed in concentration. "I think I know who is behind this. Mr Ghosh is Snehashish's uncle... you know Snehashish of NIBS? I am sure it is a plot hatched by those boys. They can stoop to anything. They must have made Mr Ghosh set these exams."

"But Mr Ghosh is a teacher in this school. His loyalty has to be with us!" said Amir hotly. "How could he..."

"There are many ways to twist an arm," said Rahul philosophically. "Let's go to our principal. He may help us out."
But Mr Dixit, the principal, said, "Sorry! I don't interfere in my teachers' methods and time tables."

Dejected, the boys returned to the field. "Okay, let's take stock of the situation," Rahul, the skipper, gathered his team around him. "On Tuesday, the team we are to face is A.G. School... one of the easier teams. Seven of our players are from Class XI and XII and the rest from Class X. So we have to look for seven new players. We can take in the three reserve players from our class who are in the Arts section and two more of the same from Class XII, who we know are decent players. The last two, we'll borrow from Class X. This way at least, we will be able to field a makeshift team."

"Maybe, but I think you've missed the main purpose behind this plot," pointed out Parthiv. "The next match is on Thursday. And then on Friday. We will not be able to practise the entire week for those matches. In one stroke they have grounded us for good."

The other boys had not thought of this, and a heavy gloom set into the team. Brahma too joined the browbeating session to find a solution to their predicament.

"I have an idea," he said. "I really don't need time off preparing for the exams. I prepare myself around the year. I will coach you all in small batches of three each. That way I will need just one hour from each of you daily. Four such stints per day and I'll be able to cover you all. And the training will be more focused too."

The idea appealed to all and a time schedule was set.
The second bombshell came with the news that NIBS had just enrolled Dilip Lai, a Ranji Trophy player, as a student of their school. He was a great all-rounder, and was sure to play in the tournament. The news dampened their spirits further.

"It's no use. They've really floored us this time."

"Not to worry," Brahma tried encouraging them. "This is one game where team strength on paper doesn't count. It's how you play on a given day. Just play to your potential and leave the rest to me. I've seen Lai play and I know his weak and strong points."

So the coaching continued as planned. The seven new players who were to be included for the single game on Tuesday had their techniques fine-tuned too. And the studies for the physics exams went on unhindered.

On Monday was the first match of the tournament, NIBS versus Victory School. The latter had a mid-level reputation in cricket and went down to NIBS fighting. First points for NIBS. Next day there was tremendous excitement at Delhi Day School and though Classes XI and XII couldn't attend the match, there was lot of support from the other classes. It was a very closely fought match, but eventually DDS won by two wickets.

The next few matches were played with full strength, and DDS won five of the six. Since this competition was on a league basis, it was enough for them to reach the last four. In the semis, they were scheduled to play the current champions, St. James' School, while NIBS were pitted against La Martiniere, the dark horses.
"So what should be the strategy for the game against St. James'?" The question was put up to Brahma, now the acknowledged leader. Rahul was the captain on the field but everyone depended on Brahma to chalk out the game plan... that is everyone but Amir, who still harboured reservations about Brahma's abilities.

"We'll be playing the best team, so the sensible thing to do would be not to try any fancy stuff. Just play your normal game, try and use all the 50 overs and hope they make mistakes."

That didn't sound specific, but it was the best advice.

On the fateful day, Rahul won the toss and elected to bat. The batsmen followed Brahma's advice and dug in well, not trying any fancy shots and not trying to up the scoring rate forcefully. The top bowlers of St. James' were frustrated, as at the end of 40 overs just three wickets had fallen for 140 runs. The last ten overs saw 80 runs being added for the loss of another four wickets.

"220 runs for seven wickets," said Rahul to his team at lunch break. "Better than what I had expected. Now if only they make a few mistakes, we'll have a major upset."

But St. James' didn't oblige... they made no mistakes, and won the match in 45 overs. Deep gloom set into the team that evening. Long faces, drooping shoulders and heavy legs were the general outlook.

"Don't forget," Brahma tried cheering them up in the dressing room, later. "We lost to the best team. There's nothing to be ashamed about."
"It's not losing to St. James' that's bothering us," said Amir without looking up. "It's the prospect of carrying those louts at NEBS on our shoulders that's getting us down. Really Rahul, we shouldn't have taken that bet."

Rahul didn't have any words of explanation, either. He was sure that somehow a miracle would see them through. "All is not yet lost," he said, unable to convince even himself. "Tomorrow NIBS play La Martiniere. If NIBS loses, we still have a chance of beating them for the Bronze Medal."

"La Martiniere beat NIBS?" Amir laughed mockingly. "Haven't you heard La Martiniere's star player, Sanjay Das, has been rendered hors de combat? He is the one who brought them to this stage."

"What happened to him?"

"Yesterday evening as he was returning home, a car knocked him down from his bike. A hit-and-run case. Poor chap is badly shaken up, and is still in the hospital with minor injuries."

"What bad luck!" someone commented.

"Bad luck?" asked Amir with a sneer. "Grow up, man. It was definitely a move by NIBS. They won't stop at anything from beating us. And what do we do? Take on a novice as our coach! How can we expect to win?"

The room was silent, first on hearing the news of the accident, and the possible identity of the attacker. But more so with the thought that Brahma was a possible reason for their failure.
"But they have other good players too," Rahul tried diverting the conversation. "I believe Zahir, their fast bowler, has the potential to go all the way to Test match level."

"Potential, my dear friend, is a poor cousin of a winner, and I'm not quoting Sidhu. He bowls fast but has very few wickets to his credit," Amir pointed out what everyone already knew.

While the discussions continued, no one noticed Brahma quietly leave the room. Amir's word had stung him, but only for the moment. Ever since he had taken over as the coach, Amir had frequently criticised him. Now he was quite used to the taunts so that was not the reason for him to have left the room, alone.

He had a plan in mind and it had to be executed, now.

Next morning the grounds were almost choc-a-bloc with spectators. The major section naturally comprised students from the competing schools.

"Too bad about Sanjay Das," one of them was saying. "Without him they will find it hard to win this game."

"You're right. They were the dark horses, largely thanks to Das's form."

That was the general view in the stadium and it was no different amongst the small group from Delhi Day School, who sat separately in a huddle.
"Concentrate on the playing styles of the Martiniere boys," advised Rahul to his team mates. "After all, we will be playing them for the Bronze Medal."

Rahul was a mentally defeated man, as far as their rivalry with NIBS was concerned. No one noticed the marked excitement on Brahma’s face. They took his silence as sulking after yesterday’s sting from Amir.

La Martiniere won the toss and batted first. After a promising opening stand, the wickets started falling at regular intervals. They were finally dismissed for a paltry 176 in the 46th over.

"Well, at least it won't drag on till evening," Amir said glumly. "I'm sure it will all be over by the 30th over."

The match resumed after lunch and the ball was handed over to Zahir. Brahma pulled himself to the edge of his seat, and tension showed on his face.

The first over was played cautiously and only one run was scored. Zahir’s second over fetched him two wickets and his third over another wicket. His bowling partner got one too and by the tenth over, NIBS were reeling at 40 for 4. The spinners bowled the next 20 overs and NIBS got themselves back into a winning position.

At 135 for 5 with 20 overs to go it seemed a Cakewalk for NIBS. Then the ball was once again passed on to Zahir. He took three more wickets and NIBS was bowled out for 165 in the 38th over.

Total mayhem followed. Amidst the disbelieving eyes of NIBS players and spectators, La Martiniere
celebrated their victory with great zest. With backslapping and shoulder rides witnessed on the field, the significance of the victory was lost on the DDS boys, who watched in a daze. They were now at an even keel with NIBS, and the two would have to fight it out for the Bronze Medal. Equally, if not more important, the winner would also take the honours of being the top school in overall performance.

As the La Martiniere team started walking off the field in a blaze of glory, one player detached himself from the rest, and began jogging towards the other end. It was Zahir, and he jogged his way towards the DDS group. He climbed over the fence, over a few rows of chairs, and stood before Brahma.

"Thanks mate," he said with a huge smile. They shook hands warmly and as he turned to return to his team mates, he added, "Anytime I can return the favour, you have only to ask." With that he left.

Brahma's friends were all looking up at him, their mouths open, as though expecting an invisible rossogolla.

"Wh... What was all that about?" Rahul asked finally.

"Oh nothing much, really," the ever-modest Brahma answered. One could see he was enjoying this. "I always knew Zahir was a classy bowler, but he had a couple of major flaws. I just pointed them out to him, last evening. He did as I suggested, and you've seen the result."

"God! I don't believe it," was Amir's immediate excited reaction. "Do you realise what you have done?
You bloody genius, you’ve brought us back into our private competition with NIBS! We still don’t have to carry them on our shoulders."

"Well, actually, that was the general idea."

There was a burst of cheers, a collective sigh of relief and hearty back thumping.

"It’s too soon for celebrations, friends. Remember, we still have to win the game against NIBS," reminded Brahma.

"We have just two days to prepare for that, so we’ll spend all our time training," asserted Rahul. "Starting right now. On to the field boys!"

A couple of rounds around the field and they had warmed up. Soon, under the constant guidance of Brahma, the close-in fielding practice had begun in earnest. They were a few minutes into that before the taunting voice of Arun from NIBS drifted in.

"Don’t strain your backs, boys. It’s of no use. What you saw today was a freak performance from a weak team. It doesn’t happen every day of the week. Since you don’t have anyone even close to Zahir, there is going to be only one result in our game. And you know it."

"You’re nervous, Arun, and you show it," the mentally tough Amir countered. A lot of performances depended on mind games. They had all learnt about it, but it was only Amir who handled it well. "What happened today, in spite of all your efforts off the field, is only the beginning. We’ll be ending it, once and for all."
The psychological warfare on, the practice was forgotten. As the other members of both the teams faced each other, strong words were spoken, clenched fists waved and threats made. At the end of it all, as night pulled its dark blanket over the field, everyone knew that their match would probably equal an Indo-Pak match, at least in terms of emotions.

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The fateful morning did arrive, and from the moment their eyes opened, the boys of DDS had butterflies in their bellies. It was one thing to talk about the big fight, but quite another to actually be in it. They had all practised hard for the entire two days and had tuned their skills to the optimum level. They had skipped school and all other personal activities. They had heard hundreds of pieces of advice from Brahma, their mentor, and they had batted and bowled for such long hours that they could no longer hold the bat in their hands or swing their arm with the ball. They were mentally weary, tense and edgy, as they had bid goodbye to each other the night before. Not the right frame of mind to walk into a big match.

"Rahul is late," said Brahma, checking his watch for the umpteenth time. It was just ten minutes to match time, and everyone else was on the field.

"I think your captain has cold feet. After all, we all know he is chicken hearted," said Arun, walking towards them with a grin.

Amir was about to respond when their 12th man came running towards them. "Rahul's father just drove
in. Rahul is suffering from food poisoning and it will be impossible for him to come and play."

The news had the effect of a sledgehammer being brought down on their heads. Stunned, all crumbled to the ground one by one.

"Lost, without even a fight," Amir muttered barely above a whisper. "And I’m sure those devils are behind this too." Eyes blazing with hatred, he stared at the NIBS team, as they stood leering at them.

"Hey, I hope you’re not blaming us for your captain's absence?" called out Cyrus. "If not the chicken heart... it must have been the chicken soup... ha, ha, ha!"

"He's right," whispered the 12th man. "Rahul's father said it was chicken soup that infected him, as he didn't have anything else for dinner. But, how did he..."

"Enough of bantering," Arun quickly interrupted. "Do we have a game, or not?"

"You’re damn right, you have a game on your hands, you... you..." Amir, the vice captain, took the stand.

"No need to describe us. We know who we are... winners!" laughed Arun. "And who's going to be your captain? You Amir?"

Amir looked around him and saw only fear and despair amongst his team mates. "No. It will be Brahma."

There was stunned silence but it lasted only for two seconds and then there was a roar of laughter from the NIBS team.
Just then the match referee called. "Will the two captains step forward for the toss?"

As a protesting Brahma was pushed forward by Amir, the rest of the two teams formed a circle around the captains. The referee tossed the coin. Arun called 'tails', and won.

"We'll bat first," he said, chuckling. "That way the spectators will enjoy some real fun."

"What have you done?" cried Brahma imploringly to Amir, as they all walked towards the changing room. "You know I've never played before."

"That's right," agreed another senior player. "You should have taken over the captaincy, Amir, and the 12th man should have taken Rahul's place. Brahms will be of little use on the field."

"The only people who know and understand our strategies are Rahul and Brahms. With Rahul indisposed, it is vital for us to have Brahms close by, and not in the stands," Amir didn't waste any further time in explaining his decision.

And this is how Brahma played his maiden match, that too as captain!

NIBS went about their task in a professional manner, but thanks to some excellent field placing, bowling changes and tight fielding, they were restricted to 258 for 5 in their 50 overs.

"More than enough," said a satisfied Arun. "In fact, half of that would be enough to beat this team."
'Cautious', was the key word Brahma drummed into the heads of his team mates in the half-hour he had before they began batting. "With a little bit of luck, we may still make a game of it... but only if we have wickets in hand."

The opening pair of Amir and Parthiv did just that, and at the end of ten overs they were 30 for no loss. Earlier Brahma had taken Amir aside and told him, "If there is any chance of us making it an even game, someone will have to play out the 50 overs. I can think only of you."

Amir hadn't answered, but his set jaw, as he quietly played ball after ball, said it all. What he normally would have tried to whack for a six, he now played as though the ball was loaded with dynamite... with utmost care and respect.

"Good," said Brahma. He sent the 12th man to the openers with a pair of gloves and the message, "One gear up. The next ten overs should bring us 40 runs."

The batsmen tried increasing the run rate, and soon they were two wickets down. But Amir was still there. At the end of 20 overs they were 74 for 2, and things looked under control.

"Forty runs again, in the next ten overs," came the message from the pavilion, and the batsmen set about achieving it. At the end of 30 overs, it was 120 for 3, with Amir still playing with a patient 45.

"Fifty runs for the next ten overs," Brahma set the next target. But he immediately regretted it, as they suddenly plummeted to 148 for 6 in the 35th over.
"Steady, steady, hold on to your wickets first," was the next message. Fifteen overs were still left and they only had the tail-enders to support Amir. The next five overs produced just 15 runs, and they knew they were in trouble. At 163 for 6 in the 40th over, they would never get through. Amir, now on 55, was getting visibly impatient by the minute.

"Okay Amir, you can open up now," came Brahma's instructions. And open up he did, as he began creaming 6-8 runs per over. Sledging, till now, was minimal. But as the runs started piling up, the sledging increased in tempo.

"Come on, old woman, you're making me fall asleep. Can you hit, or can't you?" was how it began.

Eight runs in the next over and their tone changed, "You fat lout, is this the first time you're playing cricket?"

Seven runs off the next over and the close-in fielders began abusing and using filthy language. Amir was a seasoned player and the taunts fell on deaf ears. But his partners got carried away, and at the end of the 45th over the score read 200 for 8, with Amir batting on 72 runs.

In the 46th over, batsman No. 10 just couldn't get off the mark. After four wild swishes, he was out on the fifth ball.

Last batsman Brahma then walked in. The opposite team greeted him on the field with a plethora of the choicest words. But it didn't seem to work on Brahma... not because of his mental toughness, but because he was
so nervous by now that he moved around in a sort of trance.

He had to face just one ball of the 46th over. He took his guard, middle and leg, and awaited the ball. The ball came, and went past him... and Brahma didn't move an inch. Luckily, the ball just whistled past his off-stump. Forty-six overs completed, and DDS were still on 200 for 9.

During the changeover, Amir let his frustrations out on poor Brahma. "Are you asleep? Is this how you react after all the pep talk you've been giving us? Walk in like a zombie, stand like a dead duck and play like in a dream? We have four more overs to play. Either wake up and play like a man, or live in regret for the rest of your life!"

This may have sounded a bit thick to a man who had faced just one delivery in his entire life - but it helped.

In the next over, Amir hit four boundaries, but couldn't retain the strike. "One run, Brahms, just one run from you, and I'll be back on strike," he implored.

Brahms was wide-awake now, as he faced the first ball of the 48th over. He tried pushing at it but it whizzed past his bat. He tried sending the next ball over the ropes, but it went no further than the wicket keeper and smacked into his gloves.

Amir came forward angrily. "Just touch and run. I'll do the rest."
Brahma tried to do just that, but the ball came in and smashed into his pads. As he stood looking for it, he heard Amir yell at the top of his voice, "RUN! YOU MANIAC, RUN!" Without looking up he ran, and made it to the opposite end in time.

Amir hit a sixer and a boundary off the next two deliveries, but again failed to retain the strike. He was now on 98 well-compiled runs. And the team score was 227 for 9, with two overs to go.

"Two more overs, Brahms, and you're facing," Amir said dejectedly. "What in God's name are you planning to do?"

"Not to worry, Amir. I think I know where I went wrong. The next bowler is Dilip Lai, the Ranji Trophy player. Right? He bowls at 120 kmph. Right?"

Amir was not sure where this was leading, but he replied, "Right!"

"As that is from 22 yards away, it will take exactly 0.5625 seconds to reach me. Right? And my swing of the bat takes 0.2453 seconds to cover the arc to the point of impact. Now listen carefully. If I were to start my swing at exactly 0.3172 seconds after the ball leaves his hand, I should be able to make proper contact with the ball. Right?"

Amir gaped at him as though he had just fallen off the moon. All the excitement of the past few days had finally taken its toll, he concluded. Brahms had finally gone off his rocker! But Amir needed him for just one more strike at the ball.
"Right!" he said, patting Brahma on the back sympathetically, and walking back to the runner's end.

The first ball of the 49th over did come at 120 kmph, and Brahma did strike it right out of the grounds. Six! The next ball too came at the same speed and left the field at more or less the same speed too. A boundary. In that over, Brahma scored two sixers and three boundaries, and set the stadium ablaze. DDS was 250 for 9 at the end of 49 overs.

Last over, nine runs to win, and Amir was taking strike. Seven fielders were sent to the boundary line to stop the fours. First ball, no run. Second ball, two runs. Third ball, a boundary. Three balls left, three runs to win. Next ball, a single.

Two balls left, two runs to win. Brahma on strike. And suddenly, Brahma went blank. One over ago he was another man, but with two balls to go he seemed to have lost his nerve. He was not thinking straight, he was not seeing straight, and all his senses had suddenly abandoned him, leaving him dumbstruck.

Five of the deep fielders were brought in to save the singles. Brahma was sweating so much, he could hardly see through his wet spectacles. The fifth ball zoomed past him, and he didn't even move.

Last ball, one run to draw, two runs to win. Amir came up to Brahma. "You must... GOD! Look at your specs! They are full of sweat!"

No wonder he didn't see the fifth ball. With shaking hands he quickly wiped his glasses clean. He could see
Amir telling him something, but couldn't hear a word. The whole world was in a state of deep silence. He wasn't aware of the huge spectator roar, he wasn't even aware of the NIBS team, as they further closed in around him with all nine fielders. As if in a trance, Brahma went back to his crease and took guard. The last ball was bowled at full speed, and he lifted it two inches above the point fielder's outstretched hands. Four! They had won!

The DDS fans wild went, and wilder went Amir as he physically lifted Brahma on his shoulders and ran a short lap.

"You've done it, man! Only you could have done it. You know, you used the bat like a violinist uses his bow... and pure music flowed out," cried Amir, ecstatically.

"Now, let's not get carried away," Brahma had at last found his voice, and the rest of the senses slowly drifted in too, as he began to hear the stadium explode.

The immediate cheering and celebrations went through in a semi-daze too, until Arun and his full team walked up to them and the DDS team.

"Well done," Arun said, stretching out his hand. "We are here to fulfil our part of the bargain. Each one of us will carry one of you on our shoulders around the stadium."

Brahma shook his head. "We have already achieved victory. We want nothing more from you."

Everyone was taken aback by the captain's decision. Feeling defeated from the game, humiliated at being spared
further humiliation, and guilty of all their nefarious methods, the NIBS team walked off the field silently, their heads bowed in shame.

Amir was angry. "They deserved the humiliation of carrying us on their shoulders! You should not have set them free!"

"What you set free is yours forever. Clutch at it, and it is gone.' And I quote Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore," Brahma smiled softly.
The Witches of Waitiki holds you spellbound till the end, wondering whether Rishi will be overcome by the witches’ spell or not. Then comes The Third Connection, where over-inquisitive Karishma pursues the man who murdered three landlords. Will she end up as another victim of the killer? A Dog’s Day Out tells the tale of how the kidnapped sister of a drug addict is rescued by, but naturally, their dog! The Cabin at Nizams is a sci-fi story that transports you into another dimension and the world of Tenkos and Domens. And Brahms Symphony tells of a boy who never held a cricket bat but went on to coach and win for his team.

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