13 STRANGE STORIES
Illustrated by Subir Roy

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"It is a family heirloom," said Dadi as she handed out the set of pearls to Rakhi. "So take good care of it."

"I will," promised Rakhi, thrilled that her grandmother had finally given in to her. Rakhi was to attend the engagement ceremony of her classmate Sashi's elder sister. She was to wear a sari and she badly wanted a unique piece of jewellery to go with it.

"You are a kid yet," Dadi had said. "You will enjoy yourself more if you go dressed in your usual salwar kameez or even jeans. You will feel more at ease."

"I am not such a kid," Rakhi had retorted. "I will be taking the Board exams next year. Ma is lending me her new Dhakai sari for a day. Oh, Dadi, be a sport and let me wear that set of pearls you have in your box. It will be just right for the sari."

After a good deal of cajoling, Dadi had relented and taken out her antique jewellery box. It was so old that
in places the silver had grown black, and contained jewellery, whose design and make were of another age. There were pieces in it that had been passed down to Dadi from the late 19th century, from distant Manikgunj (now in Bangladesh), the original family home. The box was usually kept in the bank locker, but had been brought home a few days ago on the occasion of a wedding ceremony. Rakhi had not taken much interest in its contents earlier, but this time, she did. Perhaps it was the fact that she was now in her teens. Perhaps it was her friend Sashi’s habit of showing off her jewellery. Anyway, this time, Rakhi wanted the pearls and had finally succeeded in making Dadi take them out of the jewellery box and handing them over to her.

'I will try them out once now before I wear them in the evening,' thought Rakhi, as she went upstairs to her own room, bright with yellow and red laminated furniture.

'Fabulous/ she said to herself as she looked at the small mirror fixed to her cupboard. 'I bet Sashi’s eyes will pop out of their sockets when she sees me!'

There was some homework she had to submit to school tomorrow. There would not be any time to do the work later in the evening, when she would get ready and go to the great event. 'I will get it over with now,' thought Rakhi and bejewelled as she was, sat down at her study-table.

It was May and even as evening fell, it was so hot that Rakhi felt drowsy. The mathematics work she had to do was difficult. The jewellery too was something of an inconvenience. The bangles—solid gold, studded with pearls—got in the way when she had to use the compass or protractor. The pearl pendant
swung right on top of her exercise book and distracted her. Her ears hurt with heavy ear-rings, laden with big pearls. The graphs Rakhi had to draw began to get wobbly, untidy and crisscrossed.

Suddenly she gave a start. Someone was pulling her hair!

"At your books again? Will you not ever listen to me?"

"Oh, you are hurting me," Rakhi squealed.

She raised her pearl-laden hand to her hair—a neat coil of oily hair bound up with ribbons—and freed it from a tight fist. 'Where did her elastic hair-band go?' she wondered for a second before someone from behind began to shout at her.

"Haven't I told you not to touch books?"

It was an elderly woman, a widow with her hair in a 'boy cut', clad in white. Her shoulders were bare and she wore her sari without any pleats. She carried a japamala (rosary) in her hand. She was counting the beads and muttering in the same breath: "Haven't I told you again and again that books are not for us women."

'Who was this? How did she get in?' Rakhi looked wildly around her. It was then that she noticed that her graph paper, exercise book, the pens and pencils on her table, were all gone! Instead, there was a Bengali alphabet book of archaic paper and print, *Varnaparichaya* by Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar. And that was not all.

Not only the table but the whole room had changed. Nothing was in its usual place. No, the place itself was different. This was a room on the first floor of some ancient mansion. The very style of construction was different and there was no electric light or fan. As for the furniture, it was wooden, with elaborate carvings.
'Where was she and who was this woman?'
"Do you not attach any importance to what your Dadima says?"
Rakhi was shocked.
"I tell you again and again not to touch books and there you are, reading books on the sly!"
'Her Dadi never said such things,' thought Rakhi. Dadi was always at her for not studying hard enough, for watching too much television and getting her head full of trinkets.
Meanwhile, this Dadi, strange, unfamiliar one, went on counting her beads and muttering in the same breath. "You have been born a woman and you must be one. Dress up, learn to make tasty dishes, make yourself useful about the house. No, you must creep away and sit with that book of your younger brother. He tells me that you have even taught yourself to read a little! Shocking, I call it!"
"But my Didi says," Rakhi managed to say, "that it is essential for every one, especially the girl-child today, to educate herself! Why, only the other day she was saying that I should study hard to get admission in a medical college!"
The words must have made no impression on this Dadi. For, she grabbed hold of Rakhi’s necklace and shouted, "I got these ornaments made for you so as to turn your mind to things which we women are supposed to like. But you are as obstinate as ever. Silly girl, do you not know it is courting disaster to read? The scriptures say you are bound to be widowed if you read. That is what the ancient scriptures say. Worse, if the word gets round that you
can read and write, it will be difficult even to marry you off!"

"But then," faltered Rakhi, "my Dadi says that marriage is not the be-all and end-all of life! That it is far more important to become self-reliant. The first step is to be well-educated! You are not my Dadi. Who are you?"

Rakhi began to feel a little scared. The strange old lady was fixing her with angry eyes. Her blackened teeth were bared in a menacing snarl.

"I will teach you a lesson," she said, "hand over that book to me."

Rakhi shook her head and refused. "I have my homework to finish." But even as she said that, she realized what a fix she was in. How could she do her maths homework out of an alphabet book?

At her refusal, the old lady tried to coax her into giving up the book. She caught hold of Rakhi’s hand and said, "See how this bangle suits you? This pretty hand is not meant for pens and ink-stains. It is meant for bangles, bracelets, rings, and for gold and silver, diamonds and pearls."

Rakhi tried to break out of the strange, cold grip. But old and wrinkled as this Dadima was, she held Rakhi tight.

To free herself, Rakhi ran to the other corner of the room, and the old lady, not relaxing her grip, ran there with her. The two began to scuffle.

Suddenly Rakhi froze. From this corner of the room, the mirror was straight in the angle of her vision. Rakhi could see two persons struggling with each other. One of them was no doubt the peculiar old lady. Who was the other? That was not her!
It was a girl in a sari and braids shiny with oil. The sari was draped casually, with one end tucked at the waist, as though it was everyday wear for the girl. Rakhi had seen girls like that on her trips to the Bengal countryside, or in movies of yesteryears. No one among Rakhi’s friends wore saris like that and certainly not Rakhi herself. The girl looked the same age as Rakhi and even resembled her a little like cousins do.

There was no time to wonder as the scuffle was on. Rakhi, or was it the girl, held on to the alphabet book while the unrelenting old lady tried to take it away. The pearls flashed in the twilight gloom as the two of them jostled with each other.

A moment’s release from that grip and Rakhi found herself running away—out of the room, along the corridor, up the stairs and along the half-constructed rooftop.

Why was the rooftop half-constructed? Rakhi remembered the roof worn-away with age!

Anyway. This was not the time to wonder about such details. The old lady was coming up the stairs, following her. Rakhi could hear her pant.

‘Run,’ she told herself in panic. ‘Do not stop running.’

The pearl-necklace choked her, the ear-rings felt heavy, and the bangles weighed down her balled-up fists. ‘I wish I had never put on this set of pearls,’ mumbled Rakhi. ‘I do not know how, but somehow all this is happening because of this set.’

The old lady had made it to the rooftop! Rakhi could hear her shout! Her heart beating madly, she leapt forward. She stumbled against the half-finished railings, lost her balance, and toppled over!
She heard herself scream as she fell.  
"I knew it," said a familiar voice as Rakhi felt herself being helped up. "I knew she would doze off in her chair in this heat."

It was Dadil with her hair intact, in her usual sari and blouse, no rosary in hand, sprinkling her with water and grumbling at the same time, "She is just not serious about her studies. Her mind wanders off every time she sits down with her books."

Rakhi looked around the room and found it comfortingly the same. The books, the brown-covered copies, the graph paper, the ballpoint pens, the table lamp, thank goodness, they were all there!

Dadi was going on, "You girls, how we encourage you these days to study. Attractive books, expensive schools, own corners to study in, tutors and constant urgings from guardians. And yet the likes of you are not interested. Only a century back, it was not like this. Girls like you were barred from all opportunity to educate themselves. They were not even allowed to touch books! They were made to feel that cooking spicy food and dressing up were the only things to do. It was like that everywhere, even in our family. The few girls who taught themselves, did so with difficulty. They had to hide their efforts, work in secrecy, and get punished if they were caught. And look at you, wasting the opportunities this age has given you!"

"No, Dadi, I will not any longer," Rakhi interrupted her. "Look, I am settling down to study again. As for this set of pearls, I am taking it off. It is a bother, especially when I am drawing graphs."

Dadi gathered the precious pieces to be put away
again in the jewellery box. But before she got to work, Rakhi asked her one more question.

"This set of pearls, Dadi, does it have some kind of story?"

"Well, it had belonged to a great-grand aunt of yours. She died even before my time. Died young. About your age. She had fallen off the roof-top of this house. In those days it was still under construction. That is all I have heard. No one knew or remembered how exactly the accident had occurred. Oh, yes, I have also heard that even in those times, she had a great interest in learning to read and write."
It was at dinner time that Raghu had started the conversation.

"Dad, our class is going to Trichy for an excursion," he hesitated. "We will be away for a week and are to pay Rs. 400 each. Can I go too, please?"

"Trichy?" Granny asked, wide-eyed. "Why? That is the place of our ancestral home. A beautiful place with beautiful temples."

"Yes, Granny," replied Raghu, enthusiastically.

"Let him go," recommended Granny. "I wonder what happened to our ancestral home though," she seemed to be talking to herself, "nobody came forward to buy it because it was haunted."

"Ghosts!" chorused the children.

Raghu's sister, Sumi, too now showed interest in the conversation. "You must tell us all about it."

"Come on, carry on with your dinner," Dad commanded, "only then will you get the story."
Later, in Granny’s room, both sat on either side of her, eager for the story to begin.

"My grandmother was the only daughter of her parents," began Granny. "Her father was the Dewan to the rich Zamindar of Naattuputhur which was very near Trichy."

"The Dewan Sahib wanted his daughter to be well-educated and well-groomed. He engaged a British governess. Though she was given a suite with a kitchenette on the first floor, she had access to the whole house and was like one of the family. My great-grandfather had a palatial house with a beautiful garden and plenty of servants."

"Wow!" chorused the children with gleaming eyes, "how romantic!"

"My great-grandmother had plenty of beautiful jewellery. Um..." Granny heaved a deep sigh.

"Then what happened?" Raghu prodded her.

"With freedom movement picking up, the Britishers started leaving the country. The governess too probably intended leaving, though she made no mention of it to the family.

"One day, they found great-grandmother's costly jewellery missing and the governess gone! Later they found her murdered among the bushes in a corner of the garden but the jewellery could never be found. They say heavy diamond sets, pearl and emeralds and ruby sets, whose value would be impossible to assess, are now lost forever."

"Who could have killed her? Did they find out?" Sumi was anxious.

"Yes. Her boyfriend was arrested and admitted to
having killed her. The tie with which he strangled her was still round her neck and that gave him away."

"How mean!" exclaimed Sumi.

"Greed," explained Granny. "They had together plotted the whole thing. Though he killed her with the intention of double-crossing her, he swore that the jewellery was not with her."

"Then what happened?"

"Well, once the Zamindaris were abolished, my great-grandfather too left the job. My grandmother got married and soon after, my great-grandparents died one after the other. The house is still there. They say the governess’s ghost still haunts it."

"How very interesting," said Raghu.

"I wonder where all that chunky jewellery is lying!" sighed Sumi.

"That old chest in the drawing room is the only item I got from my grandmother," said Granny.

"Let us have a look." All three went out together.

Standing majestically along the wall, the chest was no doubt a beauty A masterpiece in heavy rosewood with intricate carvings, silver inlay and silver handles. In the centre were painted the capital letters V.J. in gold overlapping each other within a rectangle, and below it, very faintly, was the number 33221.

"What is that big pattern in the centre for?" Raghu asked.

"My great-grandfather’s name was V. Jayaram. It was his insignia."

"And the numbers?"

"I do not know," shrugged Granny.

"Come on, children. Time for bed," announced Mother.
"Dad, can I go to Trichy?" Raghu felt a strange inner compulsion to go.

"Yes, yes, you can take the money tomorrow," said Dad. "Remember, no mischief and no haunted houses."

The next week Raghu was off to Trichy with his class, escorted by three school masters. His best friend Amit's family lived there and they were all invited for dinner. Two days later they would return to Chennai.

"Sir, can Raghu and I spend two nights with my family?" requested Amit.

"Do not worry, sir," said Amit's father "they will be safe here. I will bring them to the station as scheduled."

Next morning, Amit and Raghu went for a walk. "What is that?" asked Raghu, pointing to an old, dilapidated, yet imposing house.

"That house used to belong to the Dewan of Naattuputhur. It is haunted."

Raghu turned and dragging his friend by the hand, ran towards the house. The creaky wrought iron gates had the insignia on them. "Yes, this is my great, great, great...I do not know how many generation back...grandfather's house," Raghu was excited.

"He must have been really great," laughed Amit. "Yes, he was the Dewan."

Amit was surprised. Raghu told him the whole story. "Tonight I am going to sleep here." Raghu did not know what made him say that.

"No, you will not," protested Amit. "Remember, we are responsible for you." Raghu pleaded with Amit to agree to his plans. They would leave Amit's house late that night and return before they were missed. Amit reluctantly agreed on condition that his
servant Binoo too came along. Binoo in turn was sworn into secrecy with a bribe of a movie ticket for the next evening. As planned, they arranged the pillows and sheets to give the customary silhouette of their being in bed. Then they were off to the Dewan’s house. Binoo carried a stick and a torch.

Inside the gates and up the pathway they went and climbed on to the verandah. Strangely the door to the hall opened at their touch. Switching on the torch they found the interiors to be magnificent. There was a wide wooden staircase, leading from the hall to the rooms upstairs. Deciding to skip that part, they soon spread sheets and lay down.

Raghu did not know what woke him up. He stared at the apparition—a young English woman in a white lace gown and white bonnet coming down the stairs.

Raghu felt like screaming and running away as she stopped near him, but he just lay still, staring into her beautiful blue eyes.

"Come, I have been waiting all these years."

Raghu turned round to see that Amit and Binoo were fast asleep. She held his hand and took him to the place under the stairs. There he found an identical rosewood chest like the one in his house. He looked up in surprise.

"Listen to me quickly. I do not have much time."

She took a tiny key from the pocket of her gown and gave it to him. She traced the five tiny keyholes hidden in the insignia letters V and J.

"Open," she said in a kind voice, "the locks on both arms of the V first. Three times."

"One, two, three," Raghu counted as he turned the
key thrice in each of the keyholes.
   On the J too, there were two keyholes.
   "Twice," she directed.
   One, two. Raghu turned the key twice in each. And where the J and V met, there was one keyhole.
   Raghu turned the key to find the whole insignia and the portion below it coming off on a spirig door to reveal a deep compartment. Inside it was a bundle in white brocade and lace.
   "That is yours. I had guarded it all these years. Now I am free. Remember 33221."
   "Oh! so that is what it meant. The code number to open the locks."
   "Yes," she answered. "I heard the Dewan explaining it to his wife. A secret compartment but somehow unused. Though I took the jewels, I realized that I could not deceive the family that had been so good to me. It was little Uma’s jewellery to be given to her as dowry. I hid the jewels here but forgot the key. I have been waiting all these years to return it. Now take it and go home and I, too, will be free."
   So saying, she was gone!

   When he woke up the next morning, Raghu brushed off the whole incident as a strange dream. He put his hand in his pyjama pocket and was shocked to find the tiny key inside. He could not believe his eyes. 'Anyway, strange things do seem to happen in the world of spirits in story books. Who am I to judge?' he thought.

   Just then Amit came into the room. "Arrey, there are no ghosts or anything. All rumors and gossip."
   Raghu just smiled.

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On returning to Chennai. Raghu told Granny and his parents what had happened. They scolded him for his irresponsible behaviour and refused to believe a word of what he said, until...

Until...he took out the key and opened the secret compartment...33221. Inside, there was an identical bundle in white brocade and lace. Raghu gave it to his grandmother.

Granny sat down on a sofa. Keeping it on her lap she slowly opened it.

They all gave a low cry in unison. Inside were the precious sets of diamonds, emeralds, pearls, rubies, glittering and dazzling!
Anita stared at the photograph on the wall in her room. A lovely girl gazed back at her. The sad look in her eyes startled Anita. "Who is that?" she asked.

"Veena," replied her aunt, tears glistening in her eyes. "My friend's daughter. They were tenants in my house for a few years. Last year they died in a terrible road accident. Veena was an accomplished Kathak dancer. The accident occurred on their way to a dance recital."

"Why is Veena so sad in the photograph?" asked Anita.

"That is a strange story!" replied her aunt. "The photo was taken on her sixteenth birthday, a few days before the accident. Veena was smiling happily in it. After the accident, the smile disappeared! I tried removing the photograph. The moment I touch it, a strange feeling envelops me. It is as if Veena wants to be there!"

Anita looked at the photograph. Suddenly it seemed as if Veena was smiling at her! Anita moved closer.
Veena’s eyes seemed to glow with life. Her face was filled with hope, anticipating some wonderful moment! Startled, Anita turned around. Her aunt had left the room. Anita fled out of the room!

Anita was staying with her aunt, in Pune, for a few days. Her mother was with her. The climate was pleasant. The next few days were spent in hectic shopping. Her mother always enjoyed shopping in a new town!

"Tomorrow, we will go for a dance recital," said her aunt at tea time.

"Not me!" declared Anita. Her mother frowned at her. "You will love it!" declared her aunt.

"Bharat Natyam, Kathak, Odissi and even a gypsy dance! Do you dance, Anita?"

"To mother’s tune!" giggled Anita.

"She learnt Kathak for a few months and then stopped attending her dance classes," said Anita’s mother. "Took a violent dislike to my dance teacher!" Anita grinned.

"You could have learnt from someone else!" exclaimed her aunt.

"Kathak is not going to get me a job!" declared Anita mutinously.

"Don’t start off on your pet theme!" beseeched her mother. "What time is the concert, Didi?"

"At 7 p.m.," replied her sister. "Be ready by 5.30."

As Anita was dressing up for the concert, she had a strange feeling that someone was standing next to her. It was Veena! Startled, Anita looked up at the photograph. A blank space was all she saw!

"I am coming for the dance!" said Veena.

Anita stared at her. Veena stared back.
"See you there!" said the apparition.
"Anita!" shouted her mother. "Hurry up!"
Anita ran out of the room as if a thousand wolves were chasing her!
"A train to catch?" asked her mother sarcastically.
Anita looked furtively around. No Veena! But she could hear soft bells jingling. "Heard that?" she said raising her eyebrows.
"What?" asked her mother.
"Bells!" replied Anita.
"It must be the cows in the fields!" said her mother, solemnly. "What is wrong with you? First you charge like the light brigade and then conjure up bells! You have to come to the recital. No excuses!" At that time Anita’s aunt called out that she was ready
They all went to the car. The auditorium was a half-hour drive from the house. Anita shivered in the back seat. "Can I shut the window?" she asked her aunt.
Her mother was astonished. "It is such a hot day!"
"Now don’t pretend you have fever!"
"But it is cold!" said Anita, with a shiver.
"Hi!" said a voice.
Anita turned her head. Veena was sitting next to her! Anita’s mouth fell open!
"Close your mouth!" scolded her mother.
Anita saw that Veena had again disappeared.
"Now you see me, now you don’t!" giggled a voice.
Again, Anita heard the soft melodious chimes of bells. She realized what was making the sound. Ghungroos\ Veena was going to the dance!
The auditorium was packed. The dance recital was good.
"They invite anyone in the audience to perform an
impromptu dance! That is the last item in the programme. Interested? The prize is a trophy!" said Anita's aunt.

"No way!" muttered Anita, angrily.
"Anita!" cajoled her mother.
"No!" retorted Anita.

It happened then. The strange urge to go backstage! Someone seemed to be pulling her.
"Anita!" Her mother was most surprised.
"Be back in a second!" called back Anita.

'Hey! That was not her voice! She had not even opened her mouth!'

"Hurry up!" muttered a voice urgently. It was Veena! Veena tugged Anita's hand as they both ran backstage. Anita heard herself telling the lady in charge of the programme that she was going to do a Kathak dance! Someone pushed her on the stage. Bright lights shone on her face making her blink.

"A Kathak dance by...by Vinita!" announced someone on the mike.

"It is Anita!" exclaimed Anita's mother.

Her aunt stared at Anita, a queer look on her face. "It is Veena!" she gasped in amazement.

The music started. Anita danced. She had no option! Someone was compelling her to move her hands and feet rhythmically:

Tha thaiya, tha thaiya, tha thaiya, thai! Tha thaiya, thaka thaiya, tha thaiya, tha!

Finally the music stopped! The applause was loud. Anita's dance had been appreciated.

"Vinita, sorry Anita, gets a special trophy!" said the lady at the mike. Amazed she made her way back to her seat.
"You were wonderful!" gushed her mother, tears of pride in her eyes. 
Her aunt was silent. 
"What a talented child!" said a lady in the row behind. "Who is your guru?"
"Guru Hariprasad Krishna!" replied Anita.
"Why did you lie?" asked her mother as they drove home.
"I did not!" replied Anita.
"She did not!" said her aunt. 
Her sister stared at her.
"It was Veena who danced! The body was Anita's but the movements were Veena's. Hence Vinita, was a combination of Veena and Anita," explained her aunt.
"I saw Veena's face! You saw your daughter's! The guru Anita spoke of taught Veena for many years."
Back home they all went to Anita's room. "This trophy is yours, Veena!" said Anita, placing it on the mantlepiece below the photo. Bells chimed softly. This time they all heard it.
"Rest in peace!" said Anita's aunt softly.
Next morning, a loud scream rent the air as they were having breakfast.
"Hai Ram, Maji!" shouted Muniya, the maid servant. They all rushed to Anita's room. Muniya was sweeping the floor. Muniya pointed a shaking finger at the wall at Veena's photo. "Bhoot (ghost)!" said Muniya, in a quavering voice.
They looked at the photograph. Veena stood smiling happily. In her hand she clutched a precious object. The dance trophy!
Always A Friend
Cheryl Rao

Tarun heard the pounding of feet behind him even as his own skid and slid on the slope. ‘I should have headed straight home/ he thought. ‘I should have called the Police from there.’

In his panic, Tarun had taken the short cut through the wooded area along the road, forgetting that a high wall enclosed the colony on that side. He stopped for a moment under the banyan tree he knew so well because Sheba rested in its shade. He bent and pushed the camera under a small mound of flowers he had placed at the base of the tree just that morning. Then he turned and started to run again.

He veered to the right and began to work his way back to the place where he had bumped into the gang.

He was returning rather late from his tuitions. He was delayed because he had been photographing birds on his way home. As he turned the corner of
the lonely road, he came upon Rakesh, Sanjeev and Arun, gabbling excitedly under a lamp post: "Eight hundred! Good for one evening! Come on, leave the pouch and let us go!"

They held something in their hands and Tarun recognized it as a wallet. Then he saw the figure of a man lying face down on the road. In a jiffy he focussed his camera and clicked. The flash made the three boys turn on him. "Stay out of this!" snarled Rakesh. "Just give us the camera and go away quietly. You will not have any problems."

"It is you who should go away quietly after you return that money," shot back Tarun. "You are never going to get away with this!"

"What will you do?" jeered Sanjeev. "Squeal to Mama? No one will believe you!"

"I am not going to Mama this time," said Tarun. "I am going straight to the Police."

Tarun had had several encounters with Sanjeev and gang. They were about the same age as him and were also in Class X. Like Tarun, they came from comfortable homes, but somehow, they were not happy unless they created trouble in the neighbourhood. A shattered windscreen, air let out from the tyres of parked vehicles, a bulb taken from the front porch—all that was tame stuff for the trio.

One night, when Tarun had taken Sheba, his German Shepherd dog for a walk rather late, he had seen Rakesh and Sanjeev vaulting over Metha's wall and running off into the darkness. The next morning his mother had told him that their neighbour, Mrs. Mehta was very upset because she had found
the door of her garden shed broken and her latest consignment of pots damaged. Mrs. Metha was an artist. Her painting and decoupage on ordinary clay pots transformed them into works of art and these were in demand in many of the large shops in town.

"So that is what they were up to!" exclaimed Tarun. His mother was puzzled. When she heard the story from him, she reported it to Mrs. Mehta who straightaway marched to Sanjeev’s house. Mrs Mehta and Sanjeev’s mother were friends. Sanjeev’s mother believed her son. Mrs. Mehta believed her friend. In the end, Tarun was not only considered a liar, he was accused of having done the damage himself. Since Sheba could not talk, there was no one to support him.

'Oh, Sheba, why are you not with me to face this?' thought Tarun now. 'With you by my side, these guys would not dare to do anything!' In his mind her name rang like a tattoo as he ran. 'She-ba! She-ba! She-ba!'

Tarun had never thought Sheba would really leave him. She had always been there. She was a year old when he was born and by the time he began to feel her presence, she was quite devoted to him. 'Aa-ja, Aa-ja’ he had called out to her when he had uttered his first words. He had thought Aa-ja was her name because his parents always said, 'Sheba Aa-ja’ when it was time for her meals or for a walk.

It was years before he could bring himself to think of her as Sheba and by then, the two of them were inseparable. Tarun did not think twice about being left alone at home, or about going down the road on his own at night because he was not really alone. Sheba was there. Even when she grew old and her hearing
failed and she could not run anymore or pounce on anyone, she kept people at a distance by her sheer size.

Sheba’s collapse was sudden. She walked out from where she slept in Tarun’s room and went to eat her breakfast. Then her legs gave way and she sprawled over her dish. Tarun screamed and tried to lift her, but she was too heavy. She looked up apologetically at him as if to say, "I am sorry I know I should get up but I cannot."

For the next three weeks, they spent every evening at the vet’s clinic. Each time Sheba got back on her feet, they would rejoice. Then she would weaken before their eyes and fall again. She was trying so hard to stay on, but her body willed it otherwise. Tarun held her, his face pressed close to her chest, as she gave one last gasp and slipped away.

He could not believe it. She had never gone anywhere without him and now she was all alone where he could not follow.

He did not watch as she was laid to rest under their favourite banyan tree in the woods but he went there almost daily, leaving a few flowers and sometimes a bone there.

During the next few months, Tarun saw and heard Sheba everywhere. He forgot that she was dead and looked forward to greeting her when he returned from school. He looked back when he walked to the bus stop because he was sure he could hear the nails of her hind foot dragging slightly as she plodded behind him.

Sometimes Ma and Pa suggested that he choose another dog for himself. He had not known Sheba as
a pup and they thought a mischievous bundle of fur would entertain him and divert his mind from the loss all of them felt—Tarun most deeply. But Tarun was adamant that he wanted no substitute for Sheba. Bringing up the subject only upset him, so finally, no one spoke of another dog. Sheba was allowed to live on in their hearts.

Tarun reached the road again. He slowed down as he came to the lamp post. The man who had been robbed was sitting up groggily. Tarun went close to help him. Then he heard a laugh and saw Sanjeev and Arun in front of him. He stopped and whirled and saw Rakesh behind him. He was cornered.

"You have needed a lesson for a long time," said Sanjeev, "and you are going to get it now."

Tarun stood his ground. "The camera is safely hidden. You better return the man's money and see that he is okay if you want me to keep quiet and not report to the Police." His words were brave but he quaked inside as he waited for the first blow to land on him.

Suddenly, out of the corner of his eyes, Tarun saw a movement near the bushes. A large German Shepherd dog stood at the side of the road from where Tarun had emerged from the woods. "Sheba!" cried Tarun, disbelievingly. How was this possible? And what was that in her mouth? She had retrieved his camera!

Sanjeev turned to look at what Tarun was staring at. "Ah-ha. So your dumb dog has brought the camera to us. Not man's best friend for nothing, huh?" He went towards Sheba, saying, "Give it here, good dog."

Gently, she lay the camera down on the road.
Sanjeev bent to pick it up. In a blur of fur, Sheba leapt. She dropped Sanjeev down and stood over him. He screamed and screamed until Tarun came up. Then he rolled over, got up and ran, but not before Sheba had snapped at him and at the other two boys who had turned tail with him, and had torn a patch off his jeans! Arun, in his fear, dropped the money he had removed from the wallet and still clutched in his hands.

Tarun was not interested in what the boys did. He wanted the dog to stay. "Sheba! Sheba!" he called. This time the dog responded to his cries and came to him, wagging her tail and looking at him with his distinctive golden-brown eyes. No other German Shepherd he had seen had eyes as light as hers. Every mark on her face, every expression was the same as he recalled, except that she seemed young and full of energy.

He knelt down and put his arms around her. She dropped the piece of cloth she carried and licked the tears that were running down Tarun's cheeks.

A hand fell on his shoulder and Tarun looked back. It was the man who had been robbed. Tarun let off Sheba reluctantly and stood up. He began to pick up the notes that lay scattered on the road.

"I saw everything. You were brave to confront them, but also foolhardy. If it had not been for your dog, who knows what those boys would have done to you?"

Both of them turned to look at the dog but Sheba was gone.

On the road where she had been a moment earlier, was the camera and a piece of blue denim. Tarun picked them up. They were still damp from Sheba's mouth.
Old Mrs. Fernandes caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror opposite the school gym. Like every year, for the past seventeen years since her retirement, her eyes misted with memories. Today was the Founder's Day of the school she had founded, a whole forty-five years back. She was now a special invitee, an honoured guest. Her face was wrinkled, her hair tufts of white, and her walk slowed by arthritic joints. But whilst her stamina had decreased and the power of her horn-rimmed glasses had increased, the school had grown stronger, with deeper roots and higher walls. She had smiled, shaken hands and chatted accessibly with dozens of eager students. A bell had rung somewhere and the group around her dispersed regretfully, promising to see her again at the Felicitation Function. She stood watching the crowd of children packing the corridors, a sea of young faces
with a singular intention—to reach class on time. She looked out for familiar faces. She did not know most of the children, though they recognized her very well from the life-like portrait of 'Fernie' (Mrs. Fernandes, naturally!) in the entrance hall.

"Are you looking for someone, Ma'am?"

She turned around to see a little girl in a pretty blue dress. She felt mildly surprised.

"...I could help you if you like..." the girl offered sweetly, with a smile that revealed a missing upper tooth.

"Thank you, child, that is very kind of you. I am not looking for new faces, just old places." Mrs. Fernandes twinkled at her own little joke but did not elaborate. "So, what is your name?"

"Tara."

"Well, my little star, why are you in a coloured dress? Are you part of the Welcome Song group? Are they not the ones in home clothes today?" Mrs. Fernandes asked, glad to have some new company.

"No, Ma'am, though I love singing, my parents are here to see the Headmistress to try for my admission to this school. We are here on a transfer. They say I will be lucky if I get in!" Tara said, with solemn eyes.

"Oh, I see," said Mrs. Fernandes. And then to erase the worried look in the young eyes before her she smiled, "Well, you look so smart in that lovely dress, they will probably take you in right away!"

"Thank you, Ma'am," Tara smiled too. "I chose it myself. Sakhi wanted to get me one in orange, actually."
"Sakhi?" Mrs. Fernandes queried.

"My mother," said Tara, without any trace of discomfiture. "She is my best friend, that is why."

"How appropriate!" agreed Mrs. Fernandes. "Where is she now?"

"At the Headmistress' office, to the left of that flower pot," said Tara, pointing to the end of the corridor. "They hope to have the meeting before their Founder's Day. It is for Mrs. Fernandes," she concluded, helpfully.

Old Fernie's eyes twinkled some more. She resolved to put in a word for this little girl in blue. Would it not be fun meeting her after she found out!

"You better get back to your Sakhi. I doubt if she can get you admission without your being there," she urged, just like the teacher she was.

Tara hurried back and Mrs. Fernandes moved on. She had just about crossed the sweeping staircase leading to the floors above, when a girlish voice called, "Mrs. Fernandes!"

She turned to see who it was. Why, it was Tara once more! "Hello again," Mrs. Fernandes answered, puzzled. Had she dropped something? "So, now you know my name."

"Of course, Ma'am. Mrs. Venkat told me to find you. They are looking for you for refreshments in the canteen."

Pretty Tara, in her lovely blue, caught up and shook a (left!) hand with Mrs. Fernandes. "Am I to meet them there?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Should I tell Mrs. Venkat to come here for you?" the child asked.
"No! No! I can find my way. You better get back now," the old lady said sternly, wondering why a new child had been sent on an errand. She headed for the canteen and caught a glimpse of Tara's dress, sandwiched between her parents outside the Headmistress' office. And it finally struck her—the little detail that had been bothering her ever since she had received the message from Mrs. Venkat. Why had the ribbon on Tara's short ponytail changed to a matched blue from the earlier white? Old Fernie had an awesome reputation for a sharp mind.

She was just mulling over other doubts when Mrs. Venkat accosted her in a breathless fashion, "Oh, there you are! Thank Goodness. We have arranged the snacks in..."

"In the canteen. I know," said Mrs. Fernandes.

"Oh, so you got the message. I told Antara to rush before her rehearsal," Mrs. Venkat explained, taking the old lady's elbow as she directed her to the get-together.

'Ah! So Tara was really Antara, but what rehearsal?' There was no time for introspection in the midst of hot samosas, sweet kaju (cashewnut) rolls and chilled soft drinks. And of course, old and new gossip. Then off they went to the auditorium, old Fernie with some of the teachers. Enroute they caught up with the little girl in blue—Antara? Tara? It didn't matter, for she was singing like a nightingale and distractingly so.

"Beautiful!" exclaimed Mrs. Fernandes. The child stopped singing (and walking) right away. She blushed a nice pink. "I can see you enjoy singing. And dressing up in blue frocks. So, tell me, what else
"Do you like?" asked Mrs. Fernandes.

"Bhelpuri," (a spicy, puffed rice snack) she exclaimed. Her hand shot up to her mouth to cover her goof-up. But luckily, Mrs. Fernandes gave one of the gregarious laughs that she was so famous for and everyone joined in.

"Tell me, do you always drive your Sakhi crazy? Are you not supposed to be with her?" Mrs. Fernandes asked, slightly exasperated with this footloose slip of a girl.

"Oh, yes, Ma’am. That is exactly where I am going."
The girl turned to almost run, then suddenly, she was facing them again!

"Yes?" Since this was Mrs. Fernandes asking, no one could object. There was something about the girl that made her very, very curious. The child was asking something and she could not concentrate.

"...you know that I called my mother Sakhi?"

"Why, you told me, of course," said Mrs. Fernandes more and more curious. A teacher glared when the girl looked like she was going to object, so she left hurriedly. It was only after she was gone that old Fernie figured out what had been bothering her all along. Earlier the child had an upper tooth missing. Now it was the lower one! This time even the gaggle of gossiping teachers could not distract Mrs. Fernandes. She deliberately peered at the Headmistress’ visiting area, hoping to see the girl again. Disappointingly, she was not there.

On an impulse, the old lady headed for the office herself. Her instincts were right! The girl was there. In a white ribbon. Old Fernie was introduced and she came to the heart of the matter rightaway. "Tara?" she asked.
"Yes, Ma'am."

"You are left handed, you sing well, love bhelpuri, and call your mother Sakhi?"

"Of course, Ma'am. But I did not tell you all that!" the girl cried, looking genuinely surprised.

"Oh, yes, you did, when we met again," said Mrs. Fernandes, puzzling everyone with her strange insistence.

"But I saw you only once," the girl said firmly.

"We met thrice. Should I believe you or my eyes?" asked Mrs. Fernandes, astonished herself while she astonished everyone else.

"If you do not believe me then why are you talking to me?" The girl sounded hurt and close to tears. That was not Mrs. Fernandes' intention at all.

The old lady said, "I only wanted to know why you keep changing the colour of your ribbon and the position of your missing tooth!"

Everyone, including the Headmistress, thought Old Fernie had gone crazy. And yet, she proved to be the sharpest mind around. She refused to be apologetic to the bewildered gathering. And she kept mulling over her question. She found the answer in the Welcome Song sung by (amongst others) Antara, in the same blue dress, with a blue ribbon, and a missing lower tooth! Founder's Day had found a pair of twins! Besides being lefties, fond of blue dresses, bhelpuri and singing songs for their mothers whom they called Sakhi, they also had three more things in common. First, an orphanage from where they had been adopted. Second, a delighted surprise at being reunited. And last, a fab friend in old Fernie!
Detectives Two
R.K. Murthi

Schools closed for summer holidays. Sunita and I told Appa that we would like to spend the holidays with our maternal grandparents. He would not agree readily. But we persisted. Finally he gave us permission. It came with strings.

We had to make promises...we will not run wild in the sun, all day long; will take our school assignment for the holidays along and complete the tasks; will be helpful to the old folks; be reverential to them, always...

We readily promised. We could do that. For we did not take promises seriously. And we forgot them the moment we boarded the bus to our grandparents’ village.

Appu, who worked at grandfather’s house, as kaiyyal (man at hand), was at the bus stop to receive us. He caught my face framed against the window
seat of the bus. Rushing to the exit door, he took the suitcase from my hand and waited for me and Sunita to get down.

"How are you, Appu?" we asked, as we trailed behind him to the bullock cart waiting to take us to the village that lay two kms. off the main road.

"Fine," Appu deposited the box in the cart. Pushing it to one side, he made room for us and helped us get in. He then went round, hopped on to the driver's seat and sat by the side of Velu, the driver.

The cart moved. The bells tied round the necks of the oxen jingled and jangled. We swung back and forth when the cart moved over uneven roads and bumped our heads repeatedly against the ribs of the cart.

"Good to get knocks on the heads. They clear the mind, make our brains alert and agile," I joked, when I noticed Sunita rubbing the back of her head after a rather hard knock.

That was when my eyes set on a tongue of fire-spewing red flashes into the sky. Appu too noticed it and screamed, "Hari Swamy's house is on fire!" He jumped off the moving cart (he was as agile as a monkey) and raced along the short cut to the village that meandered through the paddy fields.

Sunita asked Velu to get us home quickly. He nudged the oxen, put the stick in the wheel to produce a whirring sound that somehow made the animals move faster. Not once did he bring the stick on the back of the animals. There seemed to be perfect understanding between Velu and the oxen. They responded to his nudges and moved fast.

_Paatti_ (Grandmother) was at the gate. She blessed
us when we touched her feet, led us in, made us sit with her on the mat spread on the floor and enquired about Amma and Appa and others. Janakimami, the cook, brought two cups of hot cocoa for us.

"Where is Thatha (Grandfather)?" Sunita asked, taking the first sip of the drink.

"Appu came and reported that Harimama’s house is on fire. Thatha went with a few others to help fight the fire," she said.

Thatha returned an hour later. He did not look quite pleased with himself. Paatti asked, "Has the fire been put off?"

"Yes." He was very brief.

"Hope the fire didn't do much damage," Paatti wanted more information.

"The main house, but for a section of the rear verandah, stands. But the store, cowshed and the servants’ quarters have all been gutted. Hari has lost heavily. But he is not upset. He has insured the premises. So he would be compensated. The fire began with the haystack that stands at the backyard of the house. The police are making enquiries as to how it could have caught fire."

That was when Appu raced in. His face looked ashy pale. His eyes wore a haunted look. He made a beeline to Thatha, fell flat on the ground, touched Thatha's feet and cried, "Valiaswamy (Grand master), my Annan (elder brother), Sukku...Police take away...say Sukku set fire to Hari Swamy’s house. A match box in his pocket..." Appu spoke in broken sentences.

"But why?" Thatha raised his eyebrows.
"Yesterday, Hari Swamy checked the store. A bag of paddy was damaged. He blamed Sukku...shouted at him... slapped him once. Sukku did not say a word. But his face glum... he turned away, growling," Appu became a little more coherent.

"The police will find out the truth. I will tell Inspector Kurien not to be too harsh with Sukku. That is all I can do," Thatha said.

"Poor Sukku. Done no wrong," Appu broke down.

That was when something ticked in my mind and I mumbled, "The fire began with the haystack. Dry hay catches fire, readily. It is highly inflammable." Strange, this English language. Flammable should do. But no, anything that catches fire easily is inflammable.

I poked Sunita in the ribs. When she turned towards me, I signalled her to come with me to the verandah. She caught the flash in my eye and followed me meekly.

"Do you think Sukku is innocent?" I asked.

"How do I know? He is sixteen and at sixteen one is a little too quick to take offence," she said.

"Appu says Sukku would never have done that," I pointed out.

"Sukku is his brother. Blood, my brother, is thicker than water," Sunita paused, before adding, "If Sukku did not do it, who did it!"

"An invisible force," I rasped out.

"Ridiculous. Someone set fire to the haystack."

"Do not ask me who did that? Ask me what could have set the house on fire," I stressed the word WHAT.

"You think behind this fire is an invisible force?" Sunita found it hard to believe.
"Possibly," I drew closer to her and whispered in her ears, the thought uppermost in my mind. Her lower lip dropped. "You mean..." she chortled. "At the moment, it is only a theory. I am determined to test my theory. Will you come with me?"

"Of course," Sunita clapped her hands loudly. That brought Paatti to the scene. Right behind her was Appu. "Have you gone mad?" Paatti rolled her eyes. "Paatti, we go mad every time we come here. Blame the air around the village." Sunita lowered her voice and asked, "Paatti, can we go for a walk?" Her tone now was sugary.

"Take Appu along. He knows the place well," Paatti gave us the green signal. Appu followed us, silently. His eyes were moist. He was worried about Sukku

"Cheer up, Appu, we may find some clue to the fire. That may clear Sukku," I put my arm on his shoulder and made him sense that we were with him.

"You mean it?" hope lit up his eyes.

"Yes," Sunita was quick to comment.

Hari Swamy's house was set in an acre of land like other houses in Kerala those days. Coconut trees with their crowns of leaves and nuts danced in the wind. The footpath ran round, twisting round the trees. On the sides stood plantains, some holding heavy bunches of bananas.

Nobody stopped us till we neared the spot of the mishap. The policeman who was still gathering evidence, gave us a stern stare. "This is no place for you," he growled.

"Sorry. Just tell us, when did the fire start? Any idea?" Sunita put on such a sweet face that the cop cooled down instantly. "At about 11.15, I think," he said.
"Thank you," we walked off, looking out for anything that would explain the role of an outside hand in the fire. But we drew a blank.

"Phut goes your theory," Sunita said, while we walked back to Thatha's house. I

"I would not say that. We shall return here with a roll of old newspapers around 11 a.m. tomorrow and place it where the haystack once stood. We will then get a chance to prove our theory or to discard it," I asserted.

Patti was not happy when we set out the next day around 10.55 a.m. Appu was with us. He was downcast, for the police were holding Sukku in the lock-up on suspicion.

Harimama was at the gate. We greeted him. He asked us, "When did you come?"

"Yesterday. Sorry to hear about the fire," Sunita grinned.

Harimama smiled wanly. Then he moved off saying, "I have to report the matter to the insurance company. I will see you in the evening."

We moved fast towards the spot where the haystack once stood. I checked the time on the watch. It was 11.10. Hurriedly we tore the paper to shreds, formed a pile on the ground and waited. It took ages, I thought, before a flash of light fell on the pile. And lo! the pile burst into flames!

"There it goes," I could not contain my joy. Sunita and I traced the direction of the light to its source. We noticed a broken piece of glass, hard and tough and cylindrical, embedded in the ground. Only a small section of it stood above the ground. It caught the sun's rays and sent them back. At around 11.15,
the rays of the sun came at an angle and focused on the pile of paper.

"There is your culprit," Sunita told Appu.

We did not disturb the piece of glass. We needed it to hold another demonstration the next day to prove Sukku’s innocence.

We did that beyond a shadow of doubt and we were hailed as Detectives Two!
Suresh glanced at the table clock. It was twenty minutes to seven. 'I must hurry or I will miss the seven o'clock steamer to Patna,' he muttered.

He hurriedly gulped down the glass of milk in one go, grabbed his file and pen and shouted, "Ma, I am going."

"Wait a minute, beta, eat this curd and sugar before you leave. Have you taken everything you need for the exam?"

"Yes, Ma and now I must hurry. The steamer leaves at 7 a.m. sharp and if I miss this ferry, the next one is only at 9 a.m. The test starts at 9.30 a.m. so I will not be able to reach in time," replied Suresh as he dashed out of the door.

The road was muddy and very slippery. Suresh walked gingerly with all concentration—one missed step and you could fall flat on your face.
It had been raining continuously for the last two days and all the roads in the village had become a big sea of slush. 'I wish I was an acrobat. Treading on these slippery roads requires all the skill of one,' thought Suresh. The rainy season always brought havoc to this tiny village on the banks of the river Ganga. Every year the river turned dangerous owing to heavy floods and rain.

How scary was the sight last evening when he visited the river bank with his friends. It had looked like an ocean, you could not see the other end of the river. A slight shiver went up his spine.

It had started drizzling again. 'Oh no! This was all I needed!' grumbled Suresh. 'As it is, it is not easy to walk on this slippery road and now with an open umbrella it will be impossible!' he moaned. He opened his umbrella and looked at his watch—five minutes to seven. 'Oh my God, I took fifteen minutes to cover the distance that should have taken not more than five minutes. Curse this wretched rain.' The river ghat was still some distance away.

Suddenly Suresh heard a feeble voice, "Oh, beta, please help me."

Suresh stopped with a start and looked at the shadowy figure, old and frail, standing in the middle of the road.

"Who are you?" stammered Suresh nervously. He was really startled by the sudden appearance of this small, shrivelled old man in front of him.

"Can you help me in pushing my bullock cart? It is stuck in the mud and I am not able to push it out," the old man spoke softly. He was wrapped up in a
dirty sheet and only his face was visible.

Suresh looked at his watch. It was almost seven and he could see the steamer, all ready to leave any moment.

"Baba, I am sorry, but I cannot help you. I have to catch that steamer which is about to leave. Wait here, you will find some other passer-by who will help you," Suresh said apologetically and continued to walk.

The old man caught his sleeve and pleaded earnestly, "It will not take much time. I could have done it myself, but owing to a long illness, I have become very weak."

Suresh felt irritated. He could hear the first hooter of the steamer. He was tempted to ignore the old man and go, but then suddenly he glanced at his face. Those soulful eyes touched his heart. He was still muddled, deep in thought, when he saw Gopal and Sunder, friends from his class, who were also going for the same entrance test for the medical college.

"Hey, Gopal, wait a minute, I am also coming!" Suresh shouted.

"Then hurry up, the steamer is about to leave," Gopal shouted back and hurriedly walked away.

"Wait a minute, let us help Baba first. If you both give me a hand, this wheel will be unstuck in a jiffy and we can all catch the steamer," pleaded Suresh.

The steamer gave the third and final hooter.

"Are you crazy? No way! And you should also hurry up or you will miss the steamer," Gopal replied and rushed towards the Ganga ghat.

"Baba, they are right, I must go. I am sure someone will certainly come this way and help you." Suresh
spoke quickly and prepared to leave.

"Who will come here in this rain? I am still recovering from the illness and cannot survive in this rain for long. Please, son, just one try."

There was something in his voice that Suresh could not resist. Against all logic he decided to help. With all his might he pushed the wheel. Nothing happened. He pushed harder. It did not budge. He tried again, this time the old man also helped him. There was a movement, Suresh gathered all his might and gave a hard push to the wheel. It gave way and the wheel became free from the mud. The old man was overjoyed and showered blessings on Suresh.

Suresh hurriedly collected his books and rushed to the ghat. He panicked as he saw the steamer moving. He shouted, "Hey, wait a minute!" and gestured wildly with his hands." But the steamer moved on. By the time he reached the ghat, the steamer had moved quite far and there was no way he could catch it.

"You came very late. I even tried to delay the steamer for you," said the jetty clerk. Suresh sat down on the bench with a thud, disappointment writ large on his face.

He sat there for a while gazing aimlessly at the swirling Ganga waters in high flood. He could see his future dreams and aspirations drowning in those fast currents. 'It is really a scary sight, Ganga in flood,' muttered Suresh. After a while he got up and slowly started walking back to the village, then suddenly he thought, 'Why not help Baba reach his destination now that I have all the time in the world?'

He reached the spot where he had left the old man
with his bullock cart, but there was no trace of the old man or his bullock cart. No sign whatsoever on the ground that a big wooden wheel of a bullock cart had ever been stuck there. The ground was as smooth as it could be.

Suresh stared in disbelief at the spot. 'Did I imagine every thing?' He was amazed at the events of the morning. Shaking his head in disbelief he left.

He got a shock when he neared his house. A big crowd was gathered there. His father was standing in the middle of the crowd and his mother was standing in the verandah, both were crying bitterly. People were trying to console them. Everybody was shouting and screaming, none listening.

'What is the matter? Why this crowd? Has there been some very bad news?' Suresh thought in panic and rushed towards his home.

As he entered the courtyard, a hush fell. People stared at him in disbelief as if they were looking at a ghost. Suddenly his mother ran to him and hugged him tight. She was unable to say anything and kept on crying.

"Ma...Ma, what is the matter? Why are all these people here? Please, some one tell me," Suresh screamed.

His father also rushed to him and embraced him. For a minute pandemonium broke loose. Then his father got control of him and said, "Thank God, you are alive! How did you come out of the clutches of death?"

"Do you know if there are others who came out alive from the disaster?" asked Ramlal Kaka.
"Disaster! What disaster? What are you all talking about? What is this clutches of death and all? I was not in any danger of loosing my life. I missed the seven o’clock steamer. I went to Ramu’s house for a while and am now coming home," Suresh explained. He was really at a loss.

"Oh! You did not take the ferry?" asked his father in surprise.

"No, I missed it by a few minutes."

"But you left house quite early?" asked his mother.

"Yes, I could have reached in time for the ferry, but I got delayed in helping an old man," he related the whole story, "...and thus by the time I could push his cart out of the mud, the ferry had left. But what is the matter?"

"The steamer you were to catch could not complete its journey. It capsized on its way," one of the villagers said.

"What!" uttered Suresh in horror. It took him time to understand what was being said. He sat down in utter shock and horror as he thought of his friends on the ferry and of his own narrow escape.

"Where did you say this bullock cart was stuck?" asked Ramlal Kaka.

"On a mud trail near the big banyan tree before you reach the Ganga ghat," replied Suresh.

"That mud road? But nobody uses that since the big road was constructed connecting the village with the ghat. I wonder who was that old man and what he was doing there in this weather with a loaded bullock cart!" Ramlal Kaka spoke slowly.

This is precisely what Suresh was also thinking. Who was that old man?
Uncle Mohit presented the picture with a flourish. "A housewarming gift for the nicest people I know."
"How thoughtful of you/" said Daddy and Mummy, thanking him.
"Where shall we hang it?" asked Golu.
Only last week they had moved into this house, their very own, built as Daddy and Mummy said, after years of saving and scrimping, planning and praying. It had a little lawn in front and space for a vegetable garden at the back. A duplex, it had a staircase leading up from the sitting room to the bedrooms upstairs. The kitchen was downstairs, while upstairs there was a tiny study, which was to be Golu’s own.
Right from packing their furniture in their old tenanted flat, to arranging it in this new house, Golu had been working as much as Daddy and Mummy.
In fact, in his eagerness to take part, he had smashed some of the crockery and chipped the legs of the dining table. Mummy had gently refused his offer to help her with her precious knick-knacks, but that had not dampened his spirits at all. He had untiringly dragged the furniture pieces here and there, every time Mummy had wanted their position changed.

And now, as Uncle Mohit gave them his gift, Golu immediately busied himself thinking about where it should be placed. "It will look best on the wall next to the staircase," he suggested.

Mummy agreed. "Yes, that way it will catch the eye immediately as one enters through the front door."

"Yes," said Daddy. "It will be the first thing one will see on coming in."

And so Golu, with some help from Daddy, hung the picture up. It showed a battle scene, with splendidly armoured soldiers on horseback with their swords and spears done in gold and silver. The rival kings faced each other on elephants with decorative canopies on their backs. The kings had run spears through each other's chest and yet they were fighting on.

"A fine specimen of 14th century Indian art," explained Mummy, who Golu remembered had recently done a course on art appreciation at the Academy of Indian Art.

As they had moved a great distance away from their old neighbourhood, Golu had to go to a new school now. Twice as big as the old school, the new one made Golu feel rather lost. The new classmates were unfriendly. They teased him and Golu felt miserable at their ragging.
"It is a pretty unfriendly neighbourhood," Mummy also complained. "Why, the lady next door has already picked a quarrel with me. She was throwing some of her garbage across the wall into our lawn and when I objected, she started to actually shout at me."

"What did you do, Mummy?"

"I was too shocked today to do anything. But if she does this again, I will really give it back to her!" Mummy glowered.

Next day at school, a girl in his class, who sat right behind Golu, scrawled 'Fool' on the back of his shirt. A boy deliberately tripped him up. When Golu complained to the class-teacher about them, she waved him away, saying, "Oh, they will soon get tired of these pranks."

Golu boiled with rage inside. And when in the last period, another boy purposely spilt ink on his brand-new school-bag, Golu blew his top.

The next thing he knew, he was in the midst of a fight and, of course, being one against many, he came out the loser. He was a sorry sight when he reached home that day.

"Oh, what is the matter?" cried Mummy as she opened the door.

Golu's eyes fell listlessly on Uncle Mohit's picture as he started to go up the stairs to his own room.

His eyes moved across the bright sitting-room. He had come to this house so full of enthusiasm. Now he wished they had never moved!

A few days later Daddy said he felt the same way. He had got himself transferred to a branch of his office that was nearer to this house. It had not been
easy to arrange such a thing and Daddy had been triumphant at managing it. Now it seemed that this branch-office was most hostile to him.

"That Chakravarty, the one who is section-in-charge here, is after my life! And Trivedi, that is the boss, is being most unfair to me. I wish I had never taken this transfer."

"Do not crib," said Mummy, "I've got a splitting headache."

"You and your headaches!" cried Daddy. "You are always having them every time I have a problem to share with you!"

And as Golu watched unhappily, Daddy and Mummy began to quarrel.

As always, it did not last very long and soon Mummy was making soothing noises as Daddy announced, "I will show Chakravarty! I will bring Trivedi down a peg or two! They don't know who they are dealing with," and more in the same vein.

The day after there was a terrible row between Mummy and Golu.

"I am sick of bread and jam for tiffin everyday,“ Golu had complained. "Why can't I have bread-pakoras or French toast sometimes?"

It was, Golu thought, a most reasonable demand, but Mummy may have been having one of her headaches. For, she burst out with how tired she was with all the housework and how no one ever thanked her for all she did for them. The evening was quite spoilt for both of them.

"We seem to be doing nothing but fight ever since we came to this house," Golu wrote that night to his
grandfather in Patna. Grandpa was a scholar in ancient Indian history and culture and, after his retirement from the University, spent most of his time with old manuscripts and texts.

In his letter, Golu poured out his heart to him. "I just don't know what has come over us," he wrote.

A couple of days later, as Golu returned from school, all bruised and beaten in a fight with his classmates, he found that, in full view of amused neighbours, Mummy and the lady next door were shouting at each other at the top of their voices. To his horror, they were close coming to blows. Just then Daddy returned, his shirt all open at the front and his hair rumpled, as though he had been involved in fisticuffs himself.

"I can't take it any more," Golu burst out crying, "this fighting, fighting, fighting all the time."

A firm hand fell on his shoulders. Golu looked up and in a second was clutching on to the elderly gentleman who had just got down from an auto-rickshaw. "Grandpa! I am so glad you have come!"

At his words, Mummy stopped midway in her quarrel to welcome Grandpa in with, "What a lovely surprise, Baba (father)."

Tired as he looked, Daddy picked up Grandpa's suitcase and hurried in.

Grandpa halted right at the entrance. As soon as Mummy opened the front door for him, he stopped. Eyes fixed right ahead, he stood still.

"What is the matter, Grandpa?" asked Golu, while Mummy and Daddy exchanged puzzled looks.

"That is what is the matter!" said Grandpa, pointing right ahead.
Daddy, Mummy and Golu looked towards where he was pointing. There was nothing except for the staircase going up, the wall beside it and the picture on the wall. It was the picture that Grandpa was pointing at.

"Take down that picture at once and you will find things improving!"

"The picture, Baba?" gasped Daddy. "What is that got to do with the state of things?"

"What is wrong with the picture, Baba?" asked Mummy wondering. "Mohit gave it to us, Baba, and I think it is a perfectly fine specimen of 14th century Indian art."

"Do as I say and then let me know a month later if things are any different."

At his command, Mummy took down the picture and Grandpa entered the house.

"You can put it somewhere else," Grandpa said, "but not there. Got it? Not there."

And he would not give any reasons just then.

Explaining his surprise visit, Grandpa said that it was Golu’s letter that had made him come. "That letter worried me. All that fighting and bickering that he mentioned, I found it very strange. I had been so proud of the fact that my son and daughter-in-law had built up a quiet, happy family with a pleasant circle of neighbours and colleagues. Why should they be at loggerheads now among themselves and with others? Why? And as soon as they entered this dream house of theirs? I knew I had to come and find out for myself."

"But what did you find, Grandpa?" Golu kept pressing him till Mummy asked him not to.

"He is getting on in years, Golu. Just humour him."
It was fun showing Grandpa around the house and the new neighbourhood. Grandpa even made a couple of visits to the neighbours, in fact, to the very lady who had been fighting with Mummy as he had arrived. The short visit passed all too quickly and as he left, he presented them with a gift, a picture of green fields and blue skies.

"Hang it right where the other one used to be!" he commanded once more.

The specimen of 14th century Indian art was placed in an obscure corner of the house, where hardly anyone's eyes fell on it.

Curiously enough, within a month Golu found himself settling down at school and making new friends. Mummy had hardly any fights with the lady next door. In fact, they often politely greeted each other when they came face to face. Chakravarty and Trivedi, Daddy's mischievous colleagues became quite pally with him. Mummy hardly had any headaches and Golu never found her irritated with either Daddy or Golu.

Peace and quiet descended over their little family and the new house was now 'Home, Sweet Home'.

It was a good report that Golu sent Grandpa this time. Pat came the reply. "Your news couldn't have made me happier," Grandpa wrote, "but of course, I had expected it. You see, that picture was at the bottom of all that you went through. When you removed it, things improved. What is the picture got to do with it, you had asked me then. Let me tell you now. There is an ancient Indian body of knowledge named Vastushastra, which describes how houses should be built and furnished so as to make the householders
happy in them. As soon as I entered, I realized that the way you people had placed that picture was all against the principles of Vastushastra."

"Vastushastra says that pictures depicting scenes of violence and unrest, battle-scenes for example, should never be displayed in a prominent place in the house, and certainly not at the main entrance, where you are likely to see it every time you enter or leave the house."

"Whatever the artistic merits of that battle-scene your Uncle Mohit had gifted you, it had affected all of you adversely, cast a spell over you, as it were. Once it was replaced, the spell was broken and the family found back the peace it had lost."

Golu showed the letter to Mummy and Daddy.

"Superstitious nonsense!" snorted Daddy.

"All this Vastu stuff is nothing more!" Mummy agreed.

"But then," asked Golu, "things did improve once we listened to Grandpa and took the picture down. How do we account for that?"

"Coincidence," answered Daddy.

"Well," said Mummy slowly, "it can be that a gory battle-scene in red and gold awakens violent thoughts in you if you see it every now and then. A scene from nature, in green and blue, has a soothing effect on you. I remember being told something like that in my art appreciation course. Yes, I remember it now."

"Perhaps," said Golu, "the makers of Vastushastra had known this in ancient times."
The Ghost Who Talked

Lalitha Sridhar

Nidhi rested her aching legs and leaned on the railings of Panorama Point along with the rest of her fellow trekkers. After a long day of almost continuous walking, she should have felt bushed. Yet, the sight of the breathtaking sunset, made her feel peaceful and fulfilled.

Just then a haunting whistle pierced the air. It was so eerie and dismal that she could feel the hair on her neck bristle.

"Did you hear that?" Ritu exclaimed. Nidhi instinctively moved towards her best friend. Mrs. Rai, their Science Teacher and Group leader said loudly, "Time to go back!" They were all trying hard to look normal. Nobody succeeded. Their heartbeats had not yet returned to normal when the whistle howled again, this time going on longer. Thoroughly unsettled and ready to run, the children heaved their rucksacks and...
started for the dirt track which led to their camp.

'Cannot figure out where the sound is coming from, no?' Ritu wondered like the rest of them.

"Must be the north side, over that rock ridge," Pooja of class VIII said decisively. Certainly, she had no way of being sure, but she usually liked to make sweeping statements. A thick cloud wafted in with the breeze; they had been lucky to avoid the pre-monsoon showers so far.

"Did you know the north is haunted?" Pooja continued forcefully. No doubt, they had all heard about it but this was not the time to bring it up! "There are always three wailing whistles just after the sun sets." And as if to prove her right, the third sinister wail began.

"See! I was right. In the night an orange light moves in different parts of the forest. The forest officer posted here disappeared over a year ago. His shed makes strange sounds. They say he was killed by wild animals and left to die. His ghost haunts this place, you know," Pooja finished, sounding quite satisfied.

"That is the why we should return to base camp by 6.30. Always," Ritu stressed

"We are late already," said the twins, Sneha and Sharad in chorus, as usual.

"Nobody can survive a night in the forest," tall Nagu said theatrically.

"Oh! Oh!" Ritu squealed as the mist shrouded them in the increasing darkness. They could barely see anything beyond the first few feet—so thick was the fog enveloping them.
Mrs. Rai, a quiet and level-headed woman had been making dismissive cluck-clucks to Pooja's hyper story. Now they were all so jittery that when a monkey rustled through a branch above them, they almost jumped out of their skins.

"The ghost!" Pooja yelled. "You must close your eyes and pray if you want to be saved, otherwise the ghost will throw you to the animals. Imagine a tiger..."

"Enough!" Mrs. Rai barked. "I will not tolerate one more word out of you!"

"But, Ma'am..." Nagu started.

"Silence! All of you! Keep moving. Quietly!" Mrs. Rai ordered in her don't mess-with-me voice.

Nidhi stumbled over a stone. She suppressed a gasp. She noticed her left shoelace had double-knotted. She bent down to set it right. She breathed hard, perspiring in the cold air. How irritating! Anyhow, she finished her job, re-adjusted her backpack and looked up. And all she saw was the swirling mist. Her group had disappeared in the thin (thick) air! Her heart plunged for a minute as the road forked in two. To her left she thought she heard voices and caught a glimpse of Nagu's slouched walk in the swirling mist. Relief flooded her mind as she walked fast to catch up with her group. Five minutes later she knew she had made a mistake, a very big one. She heard shouts in the distance but she could not make out the words. She shouted back but her voice echoed off the trees. It was frustrating and frightening. The mist thinned as she came to a clearing—she must have walked farther and farther away from help for she was hopelessly alone and lost now.
Then the cloud swept in again, making her shiver in the chilly air. Tears sprang to her eyes as she wondered what to do next. How was she going to spend the night here? Should she try climbing a tree for safety? A bat screeched as it swooped down from a branch. She gasped and decided she was not going to climb any trees! Her legs buckled under the strain she was feeling. As she lowered her knees to the ground, her backpack felt like it weighed a ton.

Just then she heard voices. 'Saved!' she thought as she rose to her feet with renewed energy till she saw the flicker of an orange light moving towards her! 'The ghost!' Nidhi concluded wildly, suppressing a scream. Instinctively she crouched behind a bush, hand over her mouth to make sure she did not make a sound. But the light swung on directly towards her and she saw two forms squelching through wet leaves. And then, voices again!

'A rhino would make a good catch for tonight. Or at least an elephant. Thanks to this ghost fear, business is taking a beating.'

These ghosts were afraid of other ghosts! Nidhi almost giggled in relief. As the poachers set their orange glass lanterns down, she felt relief she had human company. Could she ask these burly men in hooded jackets for help?

"I thought we had cleared our way by finishing off that forest officer. Never thought he would haunt us even after his death!" said the fatter man, making Nidhi's eyes go round with a new fear. What was to stop these killers from killing her? She started sneaking away backwards, forgetting her bag as terror
gripped her mind. She would not have gone more than a dozen steps when her leg was yanked with enormous force and she was hung upside down from a rope tied to a tree.

A trap! She screamed like any trapped animal would.

She could hear the men thrashing through the woods to investigate the catch. She screamed harder. Just then the haunting whistle started almost right next to her! Both the poachers and she turned ice cold and silent for one petrified second. Then the men ran for their life. Nidhi had nowhere to escape from her nightmare. The long wail ended, and the only sound was that of her heart thundering—the men were gone. She closed her eyes tightly and prayed, like Pooja had said. "No, I am not a ghost," said a gruff voice. She opened her eyes and saw an old man cutting the rope around her ankle.

"You saved me!" Nidhi cried, hugging her saviour as soon as she was free.

"Not soon enough. I was watching you. I did not want to show myself to those murderers. You left your rucksack behind. Here," said the man as he returned her bag. He put an old tin with holes and a pair of billows into his shoulder bag.

"What is that?" Nidhi asked.

"Oh! I will show you." Smiling the man blew air through the tin with his billows, humming along with the eerie whistle! The poachers were probably running harder! Nidhi did not know whether to laugh or cry.

"Come. We will spend the night at my shed."

"The ghost shed, Babal" Nidhi asked, quite normally.
"Since I am the ghost, it has to be the ghost shed, right? My son lost his life there. I try to take revenge against those poachers. The more scared they are, the less they loot the forest."

They walked on. Baba showed her sawed-off trees, burnt foliage, plastic litter and pit traps. A fox howled, a tiger roared and a herd of elephants slept on their feet—so majestic even in the intermittent light of the burning torch that Baba had lit. They were at the shed even before Nidhi knew it.

Nidhi shared her rations with him—dry, khakra rotis and a bar of chocolate. Baba shared his sad memories, his love for nature and his knowledge of the forest.

Baba gave her a simple straw mattress to sleep on. He could take her back only in the morning. Nidhi was no longer scared, just tired and sleepy. She could hear strange cries of different creatures from the forest. Just before she drifted off to sleep, Nidhi asked Baba, "Is it not dangerous to be so close to animals?"

Many days later, safely back in school, Nidhi wrote her prize winning essay about her trekking (mis)adventure. Her last line was the answer Baba had given to her fearful question. She wrote:

'It is not the humans who need to be saved from animals. It is the animals who need to be saved from humans. Even in the strange surroundings of a huge forest, home to many wild animals, you do not have to be scared of the ones on four legs.'
Today was her birthday and Priyanka was very depressed. She picked up the framed photograph from the side table. "I miss you!" she whispered. "Why did you leave me alone?"

The photograph laughed back at her silently, and with a sigh Priyanka kept it down. It was the photograph of a young girl of Priyanka's age.

Priyanka got dressed and went to join her parents for breakfast.

"Happy birthday, darling," said her Mother and hugged her.

"Do not be sad. Today, after all, is your birthday!"

Her father did not say a word and just held her tight showing that he understood her feelings.

It was strange for Priyanka to celebrate her birthday all alone for the first time in twenty years. Throughout
her life, she and Menaka had always shared birthdays. When they had been old enough they had planned their party together, went shopping together, and always bought the same dress! They did so as if to make people stop and stare and ask the inevitable question, "Are you twins?"

Yes, they were twins, but to their disappointment they were not identical! "Thankfully not!" Their mother often exclaimed. "Just imagine the confusion you two would create if you looked alike!"

They had often imagined how it would have been to be identical, and the fun and mix-ups they could have, like what they read in books or saw in movies. Still, that did not deter them from dressing alike and doing things together. They had always been inseparable and were each other's best friend and confidant!

When they were young, it had been easy to dress identically and do things together. Problems cropped up when they entered their teens. They started having different choices of clothes and distinct likes and dislikes. It was becoming difficult to do what the other liked, without hating it. Yet, they both felt a sense of betrayal if they did not do things together.

"You are both growing up," their mother had said after one of their tiffs. "Finally you have realized that you are two individuals and not one entity. You have your own choices and preferences and the right to be different. You are lucky to have each other, which is a bond no-one can break. However, learn to go your own way and give each other space to breathe, without feeling guilty that you are not together."
Priyanka and Menaka were glad to withdraw slowly from each other. They stopped dressing alike. Menaka cut her hair and Priyanka started using make-up.

Priyanka insisted she was happy reading books and Menaka liked to go with her friends to see movies. Their different ways brought them closer than ever before and they were grateful for that.

A sudden problem had arisen when they had both finished graduation. Menaka was keen on going for a job after graduation, whereas Priyanka wanted to study further.

"No way am I going to slog for another two years!" Menaka had exclaimed. "I have had enough of books and college! I want to be free, independent! I want to see the world."

"What will you do?" Priyanka had asked.

"I will be an air-hostess and fly across the skies," Menaka had answered dreamily.

"A simple graduation is nothing," Priyanka had told her. "You have got the brains, you can go for computers or management. There is a lot of scope in these. There are other ways to see the world!"

Menaka had been adamant. She did not want to study further and she wanted to fly! Her parents tried gently to persuade her, but to no avail. Priyanka had watched unhappily as Menaka enrolled herself in a Public Relation Course and in no time she was selected by a foreign airline as an air-hostess. Menaka had been thrilled.

"I will earn so much and be travelling all over the world! Apart from that I will get free tickets every year. We will all go to see the lovely places we have read about," she
had said excitedly to Priyanka and her parents.

Menaka had to leave in two weeks to attend the training course in Hong Kong. She was excited beyond words but felt sad as she saw how miserable Priyanka was.

"I know we have never been separated even for a day," she said to Priyanka. "Oh, Priya! I will really miss you! What will I do without you? You have always looked after me. Yet, I have to go! It is something I have to do! Do you understand?"

And Priyanka did understand. It was like her wanting to study more and become a computer professional. Sometime in life they will have to separate, only the parting had come sooner than they had expected. Surely, there will be a time when they will have to get married and go their own ways, but Priyanka and Menaka had both envisaged that to happen far off in the future.

Their mother had cheered up both the girls and involved them in Menaka's plans for departure.

"At least I will have a room to myself, and it will not be so messy," sniffed Priyanka through her tears.

"And neither will I have to close my eyes to the light while you insist on reading in bed," retorted Menaka, laughing.

Menaka had finally left. "I will always remember you," she had whispered to Priyanka. "Any time you need me, just think," she added. Priyanka weakly smiled through her tears. It was a joke between them.

"Is it true that you can always know what the other one is thinking?" they were often asked.

"Do you feel pain or hurt in the same place when
your twin is injured?" was another question.

Menaka remembered when they were children, how they would sit in silence seriously and look at each other trying to read their thoughts! On another occasion she had cut her knee deliberately with a knife to see if Priyanka experienced the pain in the same place. But never had anything happened.

"I guess all that is fiction and concocted for stories and movies," they had decided.

"Maybe it occurs only to identical twins," Priyanka had added.

True, they were close and were lonely without each other, but nothing like the freaks other people expected them to be!

Priyanka shook her head to clear her thoughts and got ready to go to college. She had not even felt like buying a new dress for her birthday, but her mother had insisted. Out of habit, she had bought one for Menaka as well. Menaka would definitely call up today whichever part of the world she was in, but the time was uncertain. Priyanka reached college and settled herself in the class.

Suddenly, she felt a wave of shock go through her. She felt as if something had 'knocked her off'. She gasped! And then she felt her feet and hands burning. She screamed suddenly with pain and started writhing in her seat in agony!

The lecturer came running and everyone crowded around her. She could not speak! She appeared in agony and did not know what to do! Someone called the college doctor who too could not find anything wrong with her. She was sent home. She lay in bed,
her body burning with fever, giving the feeling her whole system was suffering.

"It is something psychological," the doctor told her mother. "I can't find anything wrong with her. Give her this sleeping tablet and pain killer and let her sleep."

Priyanka felt a strange feeling of disaster in her. Something was going to happen or would happen. She fell asleep drugged by the tranquilizers. When she woke up, she felt better. She went to join her mother, and found her sitting, holding the phone in a state of shock. "What is wrong?" she asked, shaking her mother.

"It is Menaka," her mother said. She was coming home and the plane she was in crash-landed at the airport about five hours ago. She is in hospital and injured seriously. They were able to contact us quickly! Let us hurry!" her mother gasped.

Leaving a message for her father, Priyanka took charge. She called a cab and hustled her weeping mother into it. She felt a shiver run through her. It was almost five hours ago that she had experienced the sudden pain and burning sensations. It was no doubt what Menaka had undergone during the crash! And she tried to shake off the feeling of disaster. "Nothing will happen to Menaka," she said fiercely to herself. "Nothing!"

At the hospital, they were allowed to enter the ICU to see Menaka.

"She is very weak and has lost a lot of body fluid. She was burnt badly. She is still critical and needs a lot of strength to pull through," the doctor said.

Priyanka sent her mother home and spent the whole night keeping vigil outside Menaka's room, willing
her to live with every breath.

'You have to live for me!' Priyanka tried to communicate with Menaka through her thoughts. 'If you can ever listen to me, do it now! I need you,' she said, prodding Menaka to listen. And as she repeatedly tried to urge Menaka to pull through, she felt sudden peace, as if her message had been received.

"Well, your sister is very lucky and is well on the way to recovery," the doctor told Priyanka the next morning. "She is almost conscious and you can talk to her soon," he said and left a smiling Priyanka behind.

When Menaka opened her eyes, the first person she saw was her twin.

"Priya, I was coming home to surprise you. I wanted to spend our birthday together. When the plane crashed and I felt the flames licking my body, I thought of you only. And I did so for a desire to live. And yesterday night I could feel you urging me to live and I felt as if your strength surged through my body," Menaka whispered.

Priyanka felt the tears pricking her eyes. "When your plane was crashing, I could actually feel what you were going through," she said to Menaka.

"At least now we know that we can communicate with each other when we are in danger, or in need of each other. I just hope and pray that such an occasion never arises again in our lives!"

Menaka smiled and nodded at Priyanka through her tears.
The Voice On The Phone

Cheryl Rao

Vineet stood beside his bicycle and looked at his watch. 'He is always late!' he muttered.

Just then he heard a thumping sound behind him. Deliberately, he did not turn to look until he heard Ajay's voice saying, "Hi! were you waiting long?"

"Can't you ever be on time?" grumbled Vineet, with a sour look at his best friend.

"Oh, I was just packing in some last-minute foodstuffs."

"The Incredible Hulk needs food in bulk," growled Vineet.

"And you, dear Vinu, are the Incredible Sulk!" shot back Ajay. "Come on, smile and let us go," he added.

The two boys had been friends for years, sharing all their joys and pains since Class IV. They had just finished school and to celebrate, had decided on a
camping trip to the ruins of the fort outside town. Listening to their banter as they cycled, one would imagine that they did not agree on anything, but actually, they were so close that each could almost tell what the other one would say or do next. Their friendship was strong, their minor squabbles making no difference to it.

It was an hour’s ride to the fort and soon the boys were looking for a place to set up their camp. "Under a shady banyan tree would be the best," suggested Ajay, as he draped his rucksack down and lay on the ground with his head on it. Vineet did not argue. He too was tired after the long ride and the ground seemed comfortable enough.

They fell asleep in the shade and when they awoke, it was almost lunch time. They opened a tin of beans and had their fill.

"Let us go exploring," suggested Ajay and off they went in the direction of the high walls of the fort. By nightfall they had been over only a quarter of the fort but they did not mind.

"We have plenty of time," said Vineet, as they got back to their camp and rummaged in their bags for the food.

"Hey, this place is not all that deserted," said Ajay. "I saw a modern bungalow about half a kilometre from here. We can go and see who lives there."

"Tomorrow," replied Vineet. "I am too tired to move now." He lay down as he was and within minutes he was asleep.

The next day, the boys discovered that the bungalow was a Rest House. An elderly caretaker
named Madhav lived in a room on one side. He seemed to take it for granted that the boys wanted to stay in the main house.

"Why not?" asked Ajay. "It will be more comfortable than the bare ground."

Vineet looked at the sturdy walls of the building, the electric lights, the toilets and the running water. He smiled happily. He would not miss the banyan tree!

By mid-morning the boys were installed in the house and when they set off to the fort again, they had with them in their rucksacks the caretaker's hot chapattis and vegetable.

"Let us go back," panted Vineet as it began to get dark. "We can explore the eastern corner tomorrow."

Vineet was in no mood to keep going. "Go home then," suggested Ajay. "I will carry on and meet you there in an hour or so."

Vineet shrugged and turned off towards their Rest House.

It was dark by the time Ajay clambered over the last pile of fallen rocks and entered the corner chamber on the eastern side. It was different from the others he had seen in the fort because it had little niches in it that seemed to be like open cells.

"Was this the prison?" he wondered, then shook his head. "In the olden days, prisoners were thrown into dungeons. This must be something else."

He entered one of the small cells and saw with surprise, several sacks lying in a corner. 'Those do not look old,' he thought, shining his torch on them. He set the torch down and opened one of the sacks. To his horror, he found guns inside! Modern 20th century
guns, not rusty old stuff which would look good in a museum.

'What is this about?' he asked aloud, suddenly scared of his discovery, as though one of the weapons would discharge itself and blow his brains out. As he gaped at the guns, he heard voices outside. Quickly he closed the sack, switched off his torch and hid in another corner.

Three or four men entered the room. Ajay did not dare peep out to count them or see what they looked like. He just stood still and listened.

"How do we give them the guns?"

"We do not. We just take them with us tomorrow night and wait outside the prison. When the noise starts inside we go in firing, with guns to spare. Daya Singh and Makhan will need them."

"Won't anyone question us outside?"

"Do you think we are going to be in full view of the gate, you fool? We keep the jeep behind the trees and creep up as close as we can get without being seen."

"So what are we waiting for? Let us take the guns and go."

Footsteps went towards the cell and then a voice called, "Jeet, come here a minute!"

Ajay's heart thudded. Had they realized that the sacks had been opened? He backed as far as he could into the cell in which he was hiding. He did not know that behind him there were steep stone-stairs leading down into dungeons hundreds of years old. He lost his footing and with a stifled cry went tumbling down the steps, hitting his head and blacking out before he
reached the bottom.
"What was that?"
"I heard someone."
"Go and see."
"Take a gun."
"Use a light."
Orders flew back and forth and the men moved into action. They flashed their torches into every corner, but they too missed seeing the steps. They gave up, carried the sacks between them and left.

Vineet woke up with a start. Was that a ring that had disturbed him? He stumbled groggily to the front door and opened it. There was no one there. A strong breeze whipped against him and somewhere a window banged. Suddenly the shrill sound of the telephone came from inside. Vineet turned and went in again, groping on the wall for the light switch. He turned it on but nothing happened. There was no electricity. In the dark at last he reached the table where the telephone was kept. Madhav, the caretaker, had said that it was not connected yet, someone must have come and fixed it in the afternoon.

"Who is it?" he said.
"Vineet...Vineet..." a faint voice said. "The eastern side, Vineet. There is a chamber with small cells and stairs. Down the stairs..."
"Yes," said the voice. "It is Ajay...Ajay..."

The line began to crackle and the voice was no longer heard. Vineet put down the receiver. Was this some kind of joke? But then he had left Ajay at the
eastern end of the fort. Had something happened to him? Where was he calling from?

Quickly, he picked up his torch and set out for the fort. Within a short while he was in a room with cells along the sides. Vineet flashed his torch into each one of them. There were footprints all over in the dust but there was nothing and no one to be seen.

"Ajay, Ajay," he called. The name echoed in the chamber. Then, from somewhere below, he heard a horrible groan. His blood ran cold and his hair stood on end.

"Ajay, is that you?" he whispered in a quavering voice. He tried to find the source of the groans and at last he saw the steps. The light of his torch did not reach the bottom and he could see nothing. The groan came again. With trembling legs, Vineet began to descend. After six steps, the beam of the torch fell on a twisted foot. He recognized the shoes.

"Ajay!" he gasped, moving down quickly and reaching his friend’s side. He half-lifted him and Ajay opened his eyes. "Guns!" he babbled. "Escape from prison. Day a Singh, Makhan..."

"Tell me later," said Vineet, getting Ajay to his feet and half-carrying him up the steps and out of the fort. But Ajay would not listen. He insisted on describing all that had happened before he fell.

"You must stop the escape," he urged. "You must!"

Madhav was back and the lights were on when the boys reached the Rest House. With Madhav’s help, Vineet made Ajay comfortable on the sofa and went to the telephone to call up the doctor that Madhav
had said lived nearby.

Ajay and Madhav looked at him strangely as he lifted the receiver. Madhav could not stop himself. "I told you the phone had not been connected yet, beta. You cannot contact anyone that way."

Vineet stared at him and then turned to look at Ajay. "But you called me up, Ajay. I spoke to you and you told me where to come..."

As he spoke, he looked down at the instrument in his hand.

There was not even a wire connected to it!
'It must be untrue,' thought Dinesh, not for the first time. How could his father have faltered on his favourite peak? He had climbed Everest thrice already and this time it was only to test out a new range of gear and facilities that made climbing a peak almost easy these days. You now had bio-medical devices inserted into you that monitored your metabolic levels and put things into the bloodstream just when you needed them, determined by your own wearable computer, custom-made for you.

The computer also received all sorts of information about the conditions on the peak, what it was like, and what it might be like forty-eight hours ahead. They said that everything could be monitored and provided for in advance. It still might not be a picnic getting up the 29,000-odd metres peak, it still was not in the park, but for three
decades now, things had not gone wrong.

"Can I come with you this time?" Dinesh had asked his father.

"Next year, beta," his father had replied casually.

Dinesh was sure his father meant it. He would take him along next year. After all, his father had already let him spend two vacations climbing some of the lesser peaks. Would he ever feel like climbing Everest now? Dinesh felt that it would take him several years at least to shake off this bogey. And yet he had loved climbing, accepting the challenge that a peak represented. As you climbed, you got the thrill of conquering an awesome obstacle bit by bit, sometimes in slow, gritty, hand-to-hand combat, sometimes simply getting the better of it and swinging up! You got to know every bit of it as though it were a person—what kind of rock or surface it put before you, what shelter or pause it could give you, how friendly or deceptive it was...

His father had loved Everest, had felt every time that being up there beat everything. His father had reconciled himself every time from getting back to sea level and going back to earning his living, to being the modest insurance company executive that he otherwise was.

Oh, yes, his father had two distinct lives, two facets to his personality. That was what made him a fairly cool dad to have. Fairly cool? Well, he was okay.

Dinesh's friends had never been sure what to make of his dad. He did not carry much of the glamour with him, really. At home he slouched about in a vest and shorts and sat watching an old movie or the news half the time. And of course, standing or sitting or
lying down, he might just go to work any time on the personal computer that he worked on all the time. Seemed such a stolid guy then, though Dinesh could understand that his father was happy enough alternating between his peaceful desk job and his high adrenaline climbing binges.

What could have gone wrong this time? Had his father not been as fit as he thought he was? Or, as his grandmother firmly believed, had the spirits on the mountain somehow become displeased?

It was to be a few months before Dinesh was to hear of what actually happened with his father on that fateful trip, only after the team returned and his father’s mates came to visit them, and when they could finally be persuaded to talk about it.

In fact they said, it was not Rakesh’s fitness that had been a problem. Dinesh’s father, Rakesh, had been as fit as ever—the tests he had gone through showed that. And did he not say he had never felt fitter?

The trouble started only after they had passed the first easy stretches of the mountain. "Yet, even then," said Shyam Prasad, an old crony who had often climbed with Dinesh’s father and who had been with him on his last day, there were occasions when his old pal Rakesh had seemed a little more tired than usual.

Was there a little tension in him as he climbed?

On the next few climbs, Rakesh had spoken confidentially to Shyam of an occasional queasiness. Yet, the bio-medical stabilizer should have taken care of that if it had detected any temporary imbalance of any sort. Was that piece of equipment functioning all right? The two of them had checked it out together.
There was nothing wrong, it was working fine.

On the next two climbs they looked out for any repetition of the trouble. In fact those were short climbs meant to test the endurance of some special equipment, that had its own in-built computers that programmed its performance. They had debated, should they wear their own computers which gave them that same information? Would the two sets of data be any better than one? For such a short climb, would their internal environment need to be controlled?

Ultimately they went up with just the new gear. It worked beautifully, they were down sooner than they had thought. And Rakesh had no problem both times. It was either something that was taking random swings within Rakesh himself that was causing the trouble, or it was the stabilizer, or as an outside chance, it was his own computer. But then the latter two bits of engineering were custom-made for him, matched with his persona. And nothing seemed to be wrong with them. 'It must be Rakesh himself/ thought Shyam, 'something upsetting him.' He decided to watch his friend more closely.

Rakesh, in his usual methodical way sent off from camp an e-mail asking the mountaineering research foundation to check out and provide all the details they could on the two bits of personal gear now under suspicion. The information had come and Rakesh and Shyam had sat a long time over it. It was much as they had expected, the stabilizer was engineered with a combination of compatible synthetic and animal membranes and tubes, and the
computer was based on what was now well-established technology using neurons.

"Where do the neurons come from?" murmured Rakesh.
Shyam had shaken his head and said, "You worry too much."

"Yes, may be that is it..." said Rakesh
"Because you worry?" asked Shyam.

Rakesh admitted that he could not figure it out. And after all, the problem did not occur all the time.
The next day, Shyam and Rakesh had decided to work their way closer up towards the peak. It was a climb they had done before, they knew that approach.

Shyam had re-lived that moment many times trying to understand what to him had seemed incomprehensible. Rakesh had been some yards below him, when suddenly Shyam had called to him? Had Rakesh heard something like a grunt from him. He had turned and looked down. Rakesh had seemed as though lost, looking below him, to the right and to the left of him, merely clinging to the face of the rock. Shyam had called to him. Had Rakesh heard the call? Shyam would not know. Shyam called again. A look of terror seemed to cross Rakesh's face. He seemed to have lost all his reflexes. Suddenly he dropped, screaming and Shyam screamed with him, unable to do anything as his friend plummeted down.

In shock, Shyam had abandoned his climb and returned to the base. As others formed teams to continue the work, he had returned to the base camp and then to the camp of the mountaineering foundation. Still
plunged in shock, he continued to think about what had happened, trying to make sense of it.

He remembered Rakesh asking, "Where do the neurons come from?"

"Shyam had thrown out queries and received some answers. He now found out that in the beginning, decades earlier, they had used neurons from lesser creatures but now from the beginning of the decade they used human neurons, recovering them just past the point of clinical death. Those neurons must have DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) of course.

"The DNA, what does it carry that belong to its owner? Oh, a lot of things."

"But what we are interested in is the innate ability to process information."

"Yet," persisted Shyam, "can you gauge exactly what it brings along?"

"Well, no, not actually. Even so we do have tests— for capacity, power, speed, tolerance, stuff like that. And we match the computer to the user, there is an adequately long trial period."

"Can you trace my friend’s computer back to the donor’s?"

"No, we are sorry, such information is never revealed. We do not even know if it is possible. In any case, what are you looking for?"

"If the donor of any one neuron was ever scared of heights, would the computer over-react under certain conditions?"

"Now, that seems such a very long shot."

"Could it have made his bio-medical stabilizing
system over-compensate him? Pushed the wrong stuff into him? Upset his physiological equilibrium?"
"But that is just guessing, is it not?"
"It could have happened?"
"Yes, but it is such a very long shot. Such a faint possibility, how can we say?"
One of the advantages of growing up in an Army household was the frequency with which we moved. ‘Postings’ came with predictable regularity every three years. What was unpredictable and therefore exciting was the suspense. Where would we go this time? Ambala, Pune, Dehradun, Allahabad, Tejpur, Bangalore, Yo!...In my short span of thirteen years we had moved lock, stock and barrel eleven times!

Every move meant change. New journeys, new places, new schools, new books, new uniforms, new friends and new houses. We lived in tents, bashas, Nissen huts, flats and bungalows. No matter what the shape and size of the dwelling, mother soon put her own special stamp on it and transformed it into a familiar place—our home—complete with bright yellow curtains, coffee-brown carpet, assorted pictures, hanging ferns and potted palms—providing a
comforting sense of continuity in our essentially nomadic life.

I was thirteen, the year we moved to the cantonment at Allahabad. In stark contrast to the razzle-dazzle of the city’s commercial areas like Katra and Chowk, the cantonment was a quiet, orderly place with broad tree-lined roads that still carried the names of long-dead Britishers. Our bungalow was on a sleepy by-lane called MacPherson Road. When we first saw it, my brothers and I were delighted. It was by far the biggest house we had ever lived in. The task of furnishing those huge, echoing rooms daunted Mother.

"Is a slightly smaller house not available?" she asked Father, "we do not have enough curtains for this place. And the furniture seems a little inadequate. Why did they have to plan the kitchen at such a distance from the dining room? It is like doing a route march. And who is going to help me keep this place clean and dusted?"

Her misgivings and objections were undoubtedly valid. But, seeing our crestfallen faces, she sighed and gave in. We made extravagant promises to help in the household chores. We would make our beds, we said. And fold our clothes. Keep our rooms tidy. Put away our toys and books. She smiled with amused disbelief, her mind already working out how many metres of curtain-cloth would be needed and so on.

Within a fortnight we had settled so well at 3 MacPherson Road that it felt as if we had been living there all our lives. The bungalow was surrounded by an acre and half of land. For my brothers, myself and our two-year-old Labrador, Rex, this kind of
space was paradise, densely packed as it was with bamboo thickets, bougainvillea, jasmine and wild rose bushes. There were enough trees to climb—mango, jamun, tamarind, neem. Enough space to play hide and seek, cricket, seven stones and other noisy games. It was a friendly garden but I always felt that it had a mysterious air as if it was watching us; as if it knew something that we did not.

This feeling was particularly strong late one summer evening when we were playing cricket. It was my turn to field. Our dog, Rex, loved fielding because it gave him the chance to nose around in the undergrowth. Neel, the eldest, was batting. Akhil, the youngest, bowled a cunning googly.

Thapak! Ball and bat made rude contact. The ball soared. Rex barked and raced after it. We heard him crashing through the bushes. My brothers went in for a drinks break. And I went after the missing ball and the absconding fielder. I found the ball all right. It lay clearly visible at the foot of a gnarled neem. How had Rex missed it? Slightly puzzled, I picked the ball and called out his name. No sign of him. I whistled.

This time a faint whine pierced the stillness. This part of the garden was particularly wild. Thick climbers covered the trees, hanging like green curtains from their branches. Stepping gingerly onto the wild hummocky grass, I went after Rex.

Suddenly I saw him. Or rather, I saw his wagging tail. The rest of him was hidden by a Zizyphus bush. There was someone else behind that bush. Someone to whom Rex offered a friendly paw. He whimpered again but it was a pleasurable sound as if that
someone was scratching his ears for him.

"Rex!" I shouted, annoyed. "Come here!"

There was a movement in the bushes. I had not exactly a glimpse but an impression of a boy, disappearing in a quick gliding movement into the shrubbery. Rex was staring after him with a puzzled look and a faintly wagging tail.

"Rex!" I called.

This time he came. We returned and narrated the incident to others.

"How old was he?" Neel enquired. "What did he look like?"

"About your age."

Neel was fifteen.

"Slim, pale, with curly golden hair."

"Golden hair?"

I nodded uncertainly.

"You are making it up," Neel scoffed. "There is no golden-haired boy around here."

Maybe he was right. It must have been a trick of light fired by my imagination, I decided. Yet, for several days after that, whenever we played in the garden I would keep a lookout for the mystery boy. He never appeared.

About a fortnight later, one evening, I was lying on the grass engrossed in finishing a library book that had to be returned the next day. Rex was digging around happily in the freshly watered beds at the far edge of the lawn. The air was alive with the squawking, squabbling sounds of parrots coming to roost.

Suddenly I became aware of a different sound. A long, low whistle. It came from a dense thicket of
bamboo. Before I knew it, Rex was off.

Leaving my book on the grass, I followed him.

This time I saw the boy clearly. He was bending over the dog, gently stroking his head. There was a forlorn air about the scene, a sadness in the boy’s gesture that communicated itself to me so strongly that I shivered. It broke the spell.

"Who are you?" I called out. "Leave the dog alone!"

The boy looked up. He did not seem alarmed to be caught trespassing. He gazed steadily at me. He had blue eyes. And yes, his hair was curly and golden.

"What is your name?" He continued to look at me but did not reply. "Do you live around here?"

He straightened. Then in one swift melting movement he slipped into the thicket.

I saw the boy one more time.

It was about 8 p.m. on a wet night in August. Our parents had gone out. Mother had kept our dinner on the dining table. It was too early for us to eat. Akhil and I played carrom. Neel was reading a comic. Rex whined. He wanted to go out. Neel opened the door for him. Rex slipped out into the drizzle. We knew he would be somewhere close by; he would come when called. A good fifteen minutes must have passed when we heard Rex bark. The sound came from the passage that led to the cockhouse.

"Rex," Neel called, "come here, boy."

The barking stopped.

Suddenly I became aware of the fact that there was one more person in the room. The boy. He was standing at the door. He was looking at me with a strange urgency. 'Come,' he seemed to say. Then he
turned and went out of the door.

"Rex!" I said quickly, "he is in danger."

"Naah," Neel said. "What danger?"

"I do not know. But he needs us."

Neel stayed where he was. Akhil came with me. We peered out of the net door that opened into the long passage leading to the kitchen. The passage was lit by a dim bulb that cast more shadows than light. Rex stood in the passage facing us. A low, deep growl emerged from his throat. His hackles were up. He was staring fixedly at something just outside the door.

At first I did not see it. Then a slight swaying movement caught my eye. A low savage hiss. A black hooded head, raised to attack. My blood turned cold. It was a cobra!

I backed off, slowly.

"Go, tell Neel," I whispered to Akhil. "Tell him to get help."

While I waited, I prayed that Rex would not make any sudden moves. The cobra would lash out in swift, sure revenge. I do not know how long I stood there, riveted by the horrifying tableau being enacted before me. At last I heard footsteps coming along the passage. It was Mataprasad, the mali, with a solid reassuring stick. At the sound of his approach, the cobra lowered its head and glided out of a hole in the wall.

The next day, masons came to seal the hole through which the cobra had slid in. And men in gumboots armed with scythes and grass-cutting swords cleaned up the compound. They hacked away at the tall grass. And what had lain hidden for years surfaced.

For instance we discovered that someone had laid
out a badminton court many years ago.

And we discovered a grave. It was a small grave, close to the boundary wall. There was a moss-blackened stone at its head with just the faintest trace of the words engraved on it. We identified the words with our fingers:

Robin and Alex
Robin the bravest Labrador who died of
Cobra bite while trying to save his master, Alex.
A loyal and true friend till the end.
May 1920
A voice on the phone. A boat missed to save a life! Strange occurings, strange coincidences—stuff that is found in old attics and grandma's late-night tales. It is bold and daring, and has a mysterious aura about it too!