Schooldays
A Collection of 16 Stories
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The stories in this collection are prizewinning entries in the Category School Stories in the Competition for Writers of Children's Books organized by Children's Book Trust.

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Text typeset in 13/16 pt. Bookman Old Style

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Published by Children's Book Trust, Nehru House, 4 Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi-110002 and printed at its Indraprastha Press. Ph: 23316970-74
Fax: 23721090 e-mail: cbtnd@vsnl.com Website: www.childrensbooktrust.com
CONTENTS

A Mountain Adventure
Maithily Jagannathan  5

Babes In Arms
Devika Rangachari  14

Trick Of Friendship
Renuka Vishwanathan  21

New Teacher On The Block
Cheryl Rao  28

Tricky Decisions
Santhini Govindan  35

Recollections
Soma Dutta  41

To School, With Love
Lalitha Sridhar  49

CTRL+Z
R.L. Sailaja  56
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schooldays, My Golden Days</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaijayanti Gokhale</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A School In 1500 B.C.</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dipavali Debroy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schooldays</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vandana Kumari Jena</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Ordinary Boy</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramendra Kumar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horrid Beginning, Nasty End!</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hema Rao</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realization</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramendra Kumar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Boomeranged Prank!</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madhumita Gupta</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Forgotten Homework</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manoj T. Thomas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
NEHRU School was located near the foothills of the Himalayan range. Throughout the year the mountains seemed to beckon the boys teasing them with their nearness. They appeared to offer the very opposite of the hard grind and routine of the school life.

When the boys came to the senior class, their dream was fulfilled. Every summer a party of senior boys was sent into the mountains. Generally, they went in two batches, each with a master. The provisions followed on mules to a little hut of the Forest Department, where they rested after the long trip.

"Yoohoo!" yelled Samir. "We are going, we are going, we are going!"

"Fatso wants to go with us!" cried another boy, pointing to the boy whose extra pounds was the school’s pride.

"Please don’t, Fatso!" exclaimed Ramesh, falling before him in a dramatic pose. "The mountains will sink under your mighty feet!"

"I bet you meet the Abominable Snowman," muttered Fatso darkly. "I bet he tears you up into little pieces."
"What? Didn't you know?" cried Ramesh. "Why! I am going there just to see him. I have even got a bar of chocolate for him," he said.

"Oh, how brave!" mocked Fatso. "I bet you will run like the wind when he comes after you."

At last, the first batch of boys set out. They carried light knapsacks—sandwiches, a few woollens and a first-aid kit. They were in high spirits, talking, laughing, whistling, as they walked along.

Master Anil shared their mood. He was one of the Junior Masters but had been a member of the Indian Expedition to the Everest, and was eager to show the boys the thrills of mountaineering.

Soon the forest was thinning out, leaving only the tall, dark trees. Patches of snow appeared; the boys raced across, flinging handfuls at each other, chasing for revenge.

"Come on, boys!" shouted Master Anil, "or the others will reach there first."

"Yes, Sir!" they replied, rosy-cheeked and still tumbling about in mock fights.

They walked and walked, the sun blazing on them, until, mercifully clouds came to their rescue.

"Lunch," announced Master Anil.

The boys took out their sandwiches. Ramesh waved his chocolate and announced with a flourish, "Not only a sweet, but a food."

"Stop clowning," said Master Anil.

He started talking about his expedition to the Everest. When they finished lunch and resumed their trek, Samir and Gopal kept asking him questions.

They had scaled quite a height now and Master Anil pointed to a little brown dot amid a ring of trees. "That is the hut where we will meet the other party," he said.
"How many miles from here, Sir, do you think?" asked the boys.

Pradeep and Ramesh were dawdling behind as the others disappeared behind some rocks. Master Anil was busy explaining the methods of judging distances on mountains.

"Let us give Master Anil a fright," said mischievous Ramesh. "It will serve him right for chatting so much."

They sat down in a sheltered nook to await a frantic search. But Master Anil was absorbed in his recital, and Samir and Gopal were so eager to hear 'the inside story' of the expedition that the two were completely forgotten.

Soon Ramesh and Pradeep were tired of talking and got up sheepishly.

"Look out, they maybe hiding there trying to make fools of us!" Ramesh warned.

However, there was no one hiding anywhere. Brisk wind had begun to hide the tracks
of the others. Ramesh and Pradeep, stared at each other in despair.

"What rotten luck! How will we get to the hut?" asked Pradeep worriedly.

"Don't worry," said Ramesh grandly, "we can see the hut, can't we? What is so hard about getting there?" They tried to call out to the others, but their 'hellos' went unanswered.

Ramesh and Pradeep started walking towards the little brown dot in the distance. "We must be halfway there," said Ramesh, suddenly sinking down.

"What is the matter?" cried Pradeep, eyeing his lively friend with alarm.

"I am too hot!" said Ramesh.

"What? Aren't you enjoying the fine breeze? The soul-stirring, thirst-quenching..."

"Shut up!" snapped Ramesh. "I am not amused. Water is finished and I am terribly thirsty."

"So am I," said Pradeep, sitting down beside him. "The others must be there already," he said, after a moment. "They must be wondering about us. We had better hurry up or it will be dark soon."

Ramesh looked at his torn boots. "I really wish I had not talked so much about the Abominable Snowman," he confessed.

Pradeep shivered and glanced at the setting sun. "Oh, that is all rot," he said, but they looked at each other with secret alarm.

A sudden hailstorm made them grope their way. The tall, dark trees, standing amidst the snow, were like wicked guards, and with every move they made, huge shadows fell across the snow.

Pradeep and Ramesh kept calling out for others as they crossed peak after peak, without finding a trace of the
others. A flurry of snowflakes began. How they would have enjoyed it once. But now they were anxiously looking for the ring of trees and the little hut.

Master Anil had gone halfway up the Everest in his story when he said, "Hey, where are Ramesh and Pradeep? Gopal, go and see," he ordered.

"Oh no, Sir, they are only fooling," declared Samir. "I saw them whispering behind a rock."

"Go and call them," said Master Anil.

But Ramesh and Pradeep were not behind that rock, nor the next, and Master Anil was worried. "The fools," he muttered. They went back as far as they dared, but their calls and whistles were lost in the wilderness of snow.

"We had better reach camp before sunset. I don't want to lose the way," he said uneasily. "What do you say, boys?" he appealed to the silent group.

A change came over the jolly imps who had started out with him.

"I think we should stay here and wait for them," said Samir hesitantly.

"And get lost too?" asked Master Anil. "I think we should go to the camp, and send out a search party afterwards." He looked anxiously at them and said, "That is the best plan."

The boys and their master walked along quietly. The shadows were lengthening across the snow.

"Enter the Abominable Snowman," muttered Gopal. At last, they came to the slope leading to the little hut.

"Come on, you, don't lag behind," said Master Anil.

They went charging in hoping that Ramesh and Pradeep maybe there already. But the hut was empty, even the other group had not arrived.

They collected wood and lit a small fire outside to warm
their hands when the second batch arrived with boyish whoops. But their yells turned into gasps of dismay when they heard the news.

"Let us go right now and look for them," said one of the boys impulsively.

"No," said the Senior Master who had come with them, "this may take time."

Soon the soup was warmed and passed in mugs, from hand to hand, in true mountaineering style.

"They must be very tired and hungry," said Samir, putting down his mug suddenly.

"And cold," added another boy, uneasily.

Six search parties, equipped with blankets and lanterns, set out for a long tramp. Their calls and whistles echoed in the hills, but there were no answering calls. They were very tired and hungry when they finally returned to the hut.

"Oh, God!" groaned Master Anil, burying his face in his hands as the boys trooped in dejectedly.

"Don't blame yourself, Anil," said the Senior Master, kindly. "The boys should have known better. Their foolish trick could have put us all in danger."

"But just think of them tonight with this freezing wind blowing," replied Master Anil.

"Think of our responsibility to the boys here," the other reminded him gently. "We will search again in the morning."

They looked at each other for a moment, thinking of their return to school, without two of the boys.

"Impossible!" burst out Master Anil. "I won't go back without them!"

Ramesh and Pradeep had found a little tunnel in the snow, and they huddled inside for warmth. "Like an igloo," joked Ramesh, but the thought of the chilly night ahead
was not a bit amusing.

Pradeep was very silent. The wind blew colder, and seemed to pierce like a knife. With mufflers wound about their heads and necks, they crouched close for warmth. The brilliant colours of the sky faded slowly and soon the tunnel grew dark. The boys dropped their voices to whispers. Strange mountain stories flitted through their minds.

"Wish we were somewhere else," said Ramesh, glancing uneasily backwards into the tunnel.

"Where?" asked Pradeep. "We are lucky we found this."

"Still," Ramesh persisted, "I feel as though something was watching us." It almost seemed as if a low grunt came from the tunnel as he spoke.

"Let us try to sleep," said Pradeep practically. "After all, they will find us in the morning. Anything to eat?" he asked. Ramesh made a face as he searched his pockets. "Hey, I have found half a slab of chocolate!"

"Glutton, what did you save it up for?" asked Pradeep. "To give to the Abominable Snowman," said Ramesh.
"Shh...don't say things like that," shivered Pradeep.

Ramesh crumpled the paper, and threw it back carelessly into the tunnel. Again they seemed to hear a grunt from the shadows. There was something darker than the darkness of the cave. Some creature was there! Ramesh clutched Pradeep's hand, and they stared at the thing that came shambling soundlessly out to where they crouched—a shaggy face, a vast furry body, huge hands and feet. Bloodshot eyes peered at them for a moment, and the mouth opened like a red cave.

Ramesh, terror-stricken, hurled the chocolate past the huge outstretched hand into the red jaw, grabbed Pradeep and fled in panic from the tunnel. With no thought of death on the sharp rocks, they only sought escape from the fearful thing in the cave and Pradeep closed his eyes. They came to a steep slope. Ramesh thought he saw something red and gleaming, but, before he could wonder what it was, the ground sloped suddenly and they went rolling and tumbling down...down...

In spite of their anxiety over the lost pair, the boys in the hut had at last settled down to sleep. But Master Anil could not rest. He felt like a murderer. He slipped out of the hut closing the door softly and stood near the dying embers of the fire they had lit earlier. The glittering stars overhead seemed to be reflected from the snowy peaks around him.

"Help me, God!" he murmured, lifting up his face. He remembered his days as a student living on a hard-earned scholarship, his joining of the Everest expedition, the great chance of a good job in a big school and the family rejoicing at his luck. And now the thought of his return to that school, the shocked face of the Headmaster as he gave his stumbling explanation, whispers from the boys, the ordeal
of facing the grief-stricken parents when they came to school, and of being marked forever as the teacher whose carelessness had cost the lives of two boys! Even when others had forgotten, he would remember it all.

A sudden movement on the slope nearby caught his attention. A small avalanche of snow or perhaps some loose boulders,' he thought. The snowballs rolled to a stop, and, as he watched, something slowly fell out into the snow. It was a mountaineering boot!

Within seconds, the hut was in an uproar. Ramesh and Pradeep were bundled in blankets and given a hot drink, as they mumbled out their story.

"Saw a Yeti?" asked the Senior Master. "Must be delirious."

"It is indeed true, Sir," mumbled Ramesh through a pile of blankets thrown over him. "Tell Fatso, I gave him the chocolate," and he fell asleep.
"L right," said Priya wearily, "now let us choose."

We all leaned forward eagerly. My nostrils quivered in anticipation but Priya looked very dull. I wonder why she felt that way. After all, we just had to take care of the school for one morning. The teachers deserved a break, poor things! And they were to go for a picnic while we, the school grandees, were to take over entirely. I was thrilled at the prospect.

"Most new prefects usually are," remarked Priya dryly. "You just wait and see. Teachers' Day is the worst day of the year. I have nightmares about it for 364 days."

I stared at her in amazement. She, the Head Girl, feared and respected by even the most hardened offenders, talking like this!

"You're joking, Priya," I said unbelievingly. "I am dying to take over for a whole morning. It is my first big responsibility since becoming a prefect."

"I told you, just wait and see. This time tomorrow you will be praying for deliverance."

We were to draw lots for the various classes. When
I glanced at my slip, a beam of pure pleasure spread across my face. I had got Class I. How wonderful! This would be really easy.

There was silence while the new prefects glared at me in envy and the old-timers directed looks of pure sympathy in my direction.

"You, poor thing!" said Vinita, the Vice-Head Girl in an awed whisper. "How will you manage?"

I stared at her in incredulous amazement. "Manage? Class I? What is the problem? They are just babies!"

The following day, after bidding our teachers farewell, Priya gave us our last-minute instructions. "Remember, we have to manage till 12:00 noon. That is only three hours. After that, the teachers will take charge. Don't let anybody wander in the corridors. Give them plenty of work to keep them occupied. And come to me if there is a problem."

We nodded and departed to our respective classes. The noise, as I neared my destination, was deafening. Yet that was only natural as both sections of every class were being clubbed together for convenience and there was bound to be noise and confusion as a result. I swept into the room, walked up to the teacher's desk and surveyed the girls with great affection—cute, little things with pigtails and ponytails, and hankies pinned to their blouses. Even the desks and chairs were cute with bunny patterns. Gaily-coloured charts adorned the walls. There was pin-drop silence as they surveyed me.

"Good morning! What a lovely classroom you have, girls, isn't it?"

I beamed around waiting for a response and was rewarded not by an answer but by a crash. Loud sobs rose in the air and I hurried to investigate.

Two girls at the back of the room were tangled on the
floor and, as I neared them, one extricated herself and pulled the other one's plait. The victim howled in protest as I hastily separated the warring duo.

"Now what is all this?" I said sternly. "What do you think you are doing?"

The plait-puller, the little devil, with huge, innocent eyes, turned to me and said, "Miss, I can't sit with her. She is from I-A and I am from I-B."

"And is that any reason to pull her hair?" I demanded. "I had to," she responded in an injured tone. "She put her pencil on my desk."

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"Now, don't be silly," I said. "Come on, stop crying. What is your name? Arti? Okay, Arti, get back to your seat."
"I am Rohini, Miss," said the plait-puller.
"All right, Rohini," I said. "Get back to your seat. Quiet, all of you."
The excited murmurs died down at once. I walked back to the teacher's desk.
"Now settle down all of you and we will play a little game," I said excitedly.
"What game, Miss?"
"Miss, will you play?"
"Miss, can we play hide-and-seek?"
"Miss, she is troubling me."
This last was from Rohini. I glared at her. "I don't want to hear any more complaints. All of you are friends, right?"
Most girls nodded readily but a few of them stared back expressionlessly, making me feel distinctly uneasy. I shook myself free of the feeling and said, "All right, now the game is Spellings. I will ask you..."
A forest of hands waved in the air.
"Miss, Miss, may I sit with Alka while we play the game?"
"Miss, which spellings will you ask?"
"Miss, will you ask 'camel'? I learnt it yesterday."
"Stop that yelling!" I had to shout to make myself heard.
"Miss, you are yelling. Miss, we did not yell." That was Rohini. I had to suppress a strong desire to pull her hair instead.
"All right, let us start the game. Now..."
"Miss! Miss! Miss!"
"What is it?" I snapped.
The girl in question jumped off her chair and ran up.
"Go back to your seat at once!" I exclaimed.
"Miss, I want to go to the toilet. Thank you, Miss," and
she ran out of the room like a little steam engine.
  "Miss, I want to go too..."
  "Miss, I also want to go to the toilet."

My head was beginning to whirl. "Now you can't all to go to the toilet. You may go one by one and...hey, come back!"

Two girls, gathering speed even as I spoke, ran out of the room and disappeared.

"What on earth! What..."
"They have to go," said Rohini kindly as if she were speaking to a dim-witted child.
"Sometimes they do here itself. Then Shama Miss gets very angry," she explained.

I spared a thought for the hapless 'Shama Miss' and sat down, feeling a little breathless.
  "I will read you something till they come back," I said.

I started with Edward Lear's The Owl and the Pussycat'.

I read the first verse and then sat back. "Why aren't they back?" I asked. "It is almost ten minutes since they left."

"Miss, I will go and see," volunteered Rohini.
  "No, we will wait," I glared at her.

Five more minutes passed, still no sign of the three girls.

My heart was not in the poem when, all of a sudden, I heard brisk footsteps down the corridor, and Vinita stalked in with the three missing girls in tow.

"Looking for them," she asked curtly.

I sprang to my feet in confusion. "Yes, I mean...where were they?"

"In the P.T. field," said Vinita dryly. "I suggest you don't let them out again."

I drew a deep breath and glared at the truants. "Why did you go there?" I demanded.

"Miss, I went to the toilet," said the first girl. "Then they wanted a race so..."
I stared at the cherubic faces of these tiny offenders and stole a look at my watch feeling slightly hysterical. It was only 10 o'clock.

I resumed the poem only to be interrupted by numerous, profound questions. Why did the owl and the pussycat go to sea at all? Why did they choose a pea-green boat and not red or orange? Why did...?

"Miss, I am hungry. May we eat our tiffin?"

Before I could answer, the class was neck deep in sandwiches, _parathas_, chips and biscuits. I didn’t feel like stopping them and anyway, a blessed peace of sorts descended on the room, punctuated by the sounds of systematic munching. This took me all the way up to quarter to eleven. Several pleas were made to me to share the food but one look at the sticky, squashed offerings made me decline hastily.

At 11 o'clock, four rows of jam-smeared, oil-stained, crumb-bedewed, sticky and rejuvenated faces smiled up at me. I abandoned all ideas of resuming the game or the reading, and was racking my brains for a peaceful pursuit to offer them, when Priya, my blessed saviour, walked in.

"Just on my rounds," she smiled. "Managing fine?"

She must have noticed my haggard face, dishevelled hair
and twitching fingers for she suddenly turned to the class and said, "Now take out drawing sheets, all of you, and draw your favourite festival. I will tell your teachers to give the best one a prize."

She left me with a terrible feeling of foreboding and visions of scattered papers, smashed crayons and fistfights but I need not have worried. The girls had magically quietened down; the sheets and colours were out in a flash and they set to work with a will. Felt pen marks joined the jam and the crumbs but I was past caring. It was 11:30—only a short while to go.

I kept my fingers and toes crossed all the way up to 11:55. The girls were chattering but not one of them rose from their seats except Rohini, who toured the room with a proprietorial air inspecting the drawings. I decided not to check her—it might stir up fresh trouble.

At 12:00 noon, I was like a dog straining at the leash to be set free, and when 'Shama Miss' and her colleague hove in sight, I almost died with relief! The girls were still happily at work and hardly saw me go, except for Rohini who waved a vigorous goodbye.

The next time round, I am going to beg and plead and cajole for Class IX or Class X or even one of the notorious Class Vs. Any class but Class I for I do want to sleep for the next 364 days!
AYAL and Shanta will be the reserves for the match," said the games teacher, as she smiled at the girls and left.

Mohini saw the dejection on Payal's face and ran behind the teacher. "Miss, you should have included Payal in the team for the match and put me in the reserve," she said. "She is a better player than I am."

The games teacher looked at the red-faced girl and smiled. "My dear Mohini, I know Payal is a better player, but unfortunately, she is not reliable! She will play for herself and not for the school! During her year here, she has hardly shown her love for the school, has she? And I cannot risk playing her in such an important tennis match."

Mohini sighed and made her way to the common room. She found Payal sitting there with a book in her hand, pretending to read.

"Payal, I am sorry!" Mohini said sitting beside her. "You should have been selected instead of me."

Payal threw the book down, and sneered at Mohini. "Do you think I care two hoots? I don't bother about the school,
so why should I worry about the silly team and an even sillier match? And, I don't want anybody's sympathies!” Payal stomped out leaving a shocked Mohini behind her.

Mohini didn’t understand how Payal could not like the school. Despite being in the school for almost a year, she had made no close friends and had remained aloof. She was viewed as a troublemaker, and most of the classmates kept her at an arm’s length. However, she was quite intelligent and used it to a great advantage when she wanted to, and she was very good at tennis. She made it quite obvious that she did not like her school. There was no sense of belonging. Thus the teachers did not trust her or depend on her.

'If only she had a good friend,' Mohini thought, 'she would be happy here and love the school. And then teachers too would be happy with her.'

Mohini adored the school. This was her third year in the school, and she had proved to be an asset to the school, trusted and respected by the teachers. Her mother had studied in this school too and had loved it, so she had sent Mohini here. Mohini was the Head Girl of her class and her dream was to be the Head Girl of the school, like her mother had been. The bell rang just then and Mohini hurried off to the dining room.

One day, Mohini and the rest of the girls of her class were in the common room after dinner, having free time till the bell rang for bed. A sudden noise of stones being hurled at the common room window disturbed them all. They all rushed to peer out. The window was shut tight as it was raining heavily.

"It is Payal and Anne!" exclaimed Mohini. "What are you both doing outside at this hour?" she called down.

"Oh, Mohini, the caretaker has locked the side door, we
thought it would be open! Please let us in! We will be in real trouble if any teacher sees us. Please help, won't you?"

Mohini ran out of the common room despite the risk of being caught. She slipped quietly through the passages and opened the side door. A sulky Anne didn't even acknowledge her help and swept past her. Payal sneezed and whispered her thanks to Mohini, and ran up to her dormitory.

Payal caught a bad cold and fever as a result of her getting drenched in the rain the previous night. She was admitted to the school's hospital. Mohini went to visit her during her free period. She found Payal lying in the bed, looking bored.
"How nice of you to have come!" Payal said. She seemed genuinely happy to see Mohini. "You are the only person to visit me. Even that wretch of an Anne didn't bother!"

"Payal, why did you sneak out last night after time out?" asked Mohini.

"Anne wanted to go to the town. It seemed so daring, and I wanted to rebel," Payal said frankly looking at Mohini.

"Anne is not a good influence on you," said Mohini gently. "I am sure you can make better friends."

"I know, it is just that I don't seem to fit in here," said Payal. "My mother studied here when she was my age and so she sent me here! The only difference is that my mother had a real close friend and they enjoyed themselves the six years they were together. I am not able to find anyone like that. Besides, the only thing I am really interested in is tennis. And thanks to my tomfoolery, the games teacher doesn't trust me! And she will have me only as a reserve," Payal lamented.

Mohini picked up the book that Payal was reading. She saw a name on the front page and almost dropped the book in her excitement.

"Whose book is this?" she asked Payal.

"My mother's. Why? What is wrong?" asked Payal, looking at the flushed Mohini.

"Do you know that your mother was my mother's best friend when she was here?"

"Is your mother Anuradha Mathur?" asked Payal excitedly.

"Yes, and your mother is Mitali Mohan!"

"Yes!" shrieked Payal and the girls hugged each other.

"What news to write home!" said Mohini.

"My mother will be so thrilled! She keeps on talking about your mother and their schooldays together, always lamenting that she lost touch with her!"
"Well, mother always was a rotten correspondent. And when she married father, she was always on the move, as he is in the Foreign Service!" said Payal.

The two girls chatted until the nurse came and shooed Mohini away.

When Payal returned to school after her illness, she was a different girl. She was friendly, happy, cheerful and took part in everything with good spirit. The girls also responded to her, and finally, Payal looked happy. The teachers also appreciated the change in her, and even the Headmistress called her and said she was pleased with her.

Mohini was happy that Payal had begun to love the school. She longed to do something to make her new friend even happier. The day of the tennis tournament was nearing. It was a crucial match; if the school won, they would directly enter the semi-finals for the area’s rolling trophy.

The day of the tennis match dawned bright and sunny. The whole school turned out at the vast grounds to cheer their team! The rival school team arrived and the match started. The school was elated when they won the first match in two straight sets! The girls clapped and cheered like mad! However, they lost the next game to their rival, by two sets to one, and the mood on the field was despondent. It all depended now on Mohini. If she won her match, they would enter the semi-finals.

And then it happened! Mohini slipped and twisted her ankle! She gasped in pain. "Oh, I can't stand up!" she cried.

The nurse came running, and couldn't find anything wrong. "Seems like a sprain," she said and tied a tight bandage around the ankle.

The games teacher was in a panic! She would have to play one of the reserves and Shanta was ill. It would have to be Payal!
"Payal, it is up to you, now," she said. "Best of luck!"
"You can do it, Payal!" said Mohini hobbling up to her.
And Payal did it! She had never played more responsibly in her life! She knew the whole school was depending on her. Her serves were crisp and accurate. No double faults, or irresponsible shots. She won the game in two straight sets, and the ground erupted as the school cheered her.

Payal flushed with excitement. The games teacher hugged her. "Well played, Payal! I am sorry for ever doubting you! And I am so proud of you!"

Everyone in the school congratulated her, and Payal felt that this was the happiest day in her life.

The school was proud of her! She went searching for Mohini, who was alone in the changing room.

"Mohini, it is all right now," she said. "So, dance waltzed on the quidditch ground."

Suddenly, Mohini put up her hand. "I knew you have lost, ah black shee..."

"Mohini, sprain it, but play the match.
Shanta was...

"Suppose you have lost, ah..."

"Anyway, at your cost.
And both..."
"Mohini, I am so happy! I could dance!" she told her.
"So, dance then," yelled Mohini, and grasped Payal and waltzed on the floor.
Suddenly Payal stopped dancing! "Mohini, your foot! It is all right now! How come? You are walking perfectly well!"
Mohini pushed Payal away and hobbled over to the chair.
"Mohini, tell me the truth! There was nothing wrong with your foot, was there? Tell me!"
Mohini smiled at Payal. "Actually, no! I pretended to sprain it, because I wanted you to be given a chance to play the match! It was the only way I could think of! And Shanta was conveniently sick!"
"Suppose I had lost the match?" asked Payal shocked.
"I knew you wouldn't! You play better than I do. I would have lost, and I didn't want to take the chance of being the black sheep of the school. And now you are the games teacher's pet!"
"Liar!" said Payal affectionately, "you made me a heroine at your cost!"
"Anyway, it all ended well. Won't everyone be surprised at the quick recovery my foot makes?" said Mohini.
And both the girls burst out laughing at the thought.
WHY can’t Mrs. Nair continue?” asked Kavita. 
"I like History only because she makes it so interesting."

Rohan looked around and commented, "Let us wait and see what Mr. Ghosh is like."

Kavita made a face at him. When Mr. Ghosh walked into the classroom, she rolled her eyes at her friend Dipali. He didn’t smile nor did he say, 'Good morning'. He merely nodded as the children chanted their greeting. He opened the book he had brought along and read out the title of the chapter. Before proceeding, he asked, "Have you read the lesson?"

There was silence. Who came to class on the first day, after a great vacation, having even looked at the names of their textbooks?

Dipali giggled and Kavita rolled her eyes again. Who did Mr. Ghosh think he was dealing with? Ph.D. students?

To their horror, it seemed that Mr. Ghosh did think just that! He lectured them about coming prepared to the class, and then set an assignment, instructing them to refer to
additional books in the library. When he left the room, for a moment there was dead silence, then all hell broke loose.

"Is History our only subject this year?"

"Why must we refer to more books from the library? Our textbook is thick enough!"

"What is wrong with him?"

If ever there was unity in Class VIII, this was it. The entire class had made a snap decision—instant and total hatred for Mr. Ghosh! Small groups were formed and reformed all through the day to discuss how to handle the new teacher.

"We have to beat him at his own game!" seemed to be the final decision.

"We will come prepared!" said the class in one voice.

There was a general rush for the library.

It was, therefore, a very knowledgeable Class VIII that met Mr. Ghosh the next day and he almost smiled in appreciation of their effort. "Good. Now for tomorrow's lesson, prepare for a debate."

"How I hate this!" exclaimed Kavita as he left the class. "He is going to give us sleepless nights with his assignments and debates and what not!"

Kavita had a disturbing night. Around midnight, she was jerked out of her sleep by dull thuds from somewhere within the building. Wondering if one of the seniors or the dorm mistress had been locked out, she got up and went towards the sound. It was coming from the basement! As she stood behind a pillar and thought of what she should do, the door opened and someone came out. It was Mr. Ghosh!

Kavita quietly followed him. He made his way out towards the extension of the building the construction for which had started last term but had since been stopped. Now it was cordoned off and none of the children or the teachers were allowed to go that side. 'What is he up to?' Kavita
Mr. Ghosh did look sleepy the next day in class, but he didn't have to do much. He just started the children off on their debate and soon they were arguing enthusiastically and he let them fight it out.

When Mr. Ghosh left the classroom, his book was still on the table and Dipali picked it up to give it to him. An envelope fell out of it and she glanced at it. To Mr. Ranjan Roy' was written on it. What was Mr. Ghosh doing with a letter addressed to someone else?

When they exchanged information that night, Kavita said, "Maybe his real name is Ranjan Roy and he is a criminal!"
"We must tell the Principal!" Dipali whispered.
"Why don't we try and find out what he is up to instead?" suggested Kavita.

So that night, they waited until everyone was asleep and then tiptoed down to the basement. This time, there was no thudding noise, only quiet scraping. They pushed the door open a fraction and saw Mr. Ghosh bent over something in the mud. Carefully, he lifted it up and held it under the light.

Kavita gasped and pulled back. It was a human skull!

The girls ran back to the dormitory. "The Principal should know what the new teacher is doing!" Dipali insisted.
"Do you think Mr. Ghosh or Ranjan Roy, if that is his real name, is a murderer?" asked Kavita in a small voice. "Is he trying to cover up some crime he has committed?"

The next day, the two of them went to the Principal's office. They were waiting outside, wondering what they should say, when the door opened and he came out with his arm around Mr. Ghosh. "Excellent," he was saying.
"Don't worry, you have time until the end of the year!"

Quietly, the girls sidled away. Why would the Principal listen to their complaints about Mr. Ghosh when he seemed to have been taken in completely by whatever Mr. Ghosh had told him?

It was Rohan who triggered off the next problem. He got a bit late at dinner one night and as he was returning from the dining hall, he saw a figure enter the roughly fenced-in lot next to the girls' dormitory. "Hey, you can't go in there!" he cried, but he was ignored.

As a junior captain, he took his responsibilities very seriously and he ran towards the area, entering from the
same opening as the man he had seen in the dark.

Suddenly, he gave a yell and then there was silence. Kavita and Dipali had reached their doorstep when they heard him. They raced to the source of the sound.

"Hold on, we are coming!" cried Kavita, seeing that open flap of plastic in the cordoned off area.

They ran in too, but had hardly taken a step when the ground gave way beneath their feet and they slid down into a pit, landing in a heap on top of Rohan.

Standing above them, shining a torch on their faces was the sinister figure of Mr. Ghosh.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "Don't you know this is out of bounds for you?"

Rohan found his voice first. "We know. But it is out of bounds for everyone, and I was trying to stop you from entering. I am a junior captain and it is a part of my job."

Mr. Ghosh stared at the three of them and Kavita shivered. What would he do to them? Would they be buried along with the skull she had seen in the basement? Couldn't all three of them fight him?

"Get him!" she cried, jumping up and launching herself at Mr. Ghosh. He fell backwards and the torch flew out of his hands.

Suddenly, a deep voice from above shouted, "Get up at once! What are you trying to do?" It was the Principal!

The three children were marched into his office immediately, something that had never happened before in the history of the school. But then, a teacher had never been attacked before, nor had a teacher been suspected of murder!

Kavita poured out her story, not daring to look up because she was afraid of the expression on Mr. Ghosh's face.

Then she heard a strange sound and all three children
stared in disbelief. Both the Principal and Mr. Ghosh were laughing!

"I thought I had gone over all the possibilities," said the Principal, "but this one escaped me!" He put his hand on Kavita's shoulder and said, "You're a brave girl to have carried on your work as usual even when you were afraid, but I can assure you, I would never have placed any of the
children in my care in the type of danger you feared.

"Mr. Ghosh, sorry, Ranjan Roy, is a historian and an archaeologist," the Principal said. "I called him here because when we were digging the foundation for the extension of your dormitory, we came upon some bones and pottery, which I thought could be an archaeological find. We didn't want the public to know that the dormitory could have been built on some ancient graveyard, so I maintained secrecy and asked Mr. Roy to teach History to you under an assumed name while he busied himself with the dig. He had done a splendid job and had excavated Stone Age remains—not of a graveyard, I can assure you—under the building site, as well as under the basement. Thankfully, no more digging needs to be done there and your dormitory building will remain intact."

It was a very subdued trio that attended the Assembly the next day as the Principal made the news of the archaeological finds public.

In class, Kavita found her voice again. When Mr. Ghosh (Ranjan Roy!) entered, she said, "Sir, when the dig is over, will you please stay and carry on teaching us?"

Somewhere along the line, while referring to books in the library and debating with their friends, the students had actually begun to appreciate the fact that the new History teacher had opened their minds to the past in a way no one had done before!
INA'S friends crowded around her before the school bell rang, giggling excitedly.

"What new trick have you thought of, Nina? How are we going to tease Mrs. D'Souza today?"

Nina laughed. "Wait till you see what I have lined up for her this morning," she said with a sparkle in her eyes.

She put her hand into her pocket and pulled out an enormous rubber toad. It had rough, scaly skin and eyes that bulged realistically. When Nina placed it on the ground, and gently tapped its back, it leapt forward.

Nina’s friends drew back, squealing in fright. Nina was delighted at their response. "Isn't he a beauty? What fun we are going to have with him today!"

The bell rang and Nina slipped the frog into her pocket and headed with her friends to the classroom.

The first period was Maths, but Nina was just not able to concentrate on the problems written on the board. Her hand kept straying to her pocket, and every time she touched the rubber frog, she giggled. Her friends too, smiled conspiratorially when they caught her eye, and the whole
classroom simmered with suppressed excitement.

"What is going on here today?" the Maths teacher, Mrs. George, asked sharply. "Why are all of you so restless today?"

She did not know that all the students of Class VIII were waiting eagerly for their English period.

A new young teacher, Mrs. D'Souza, who had joined the school only a few days earlier, taught English. Mrs. D'Souza had never taught before in a school, and on her very first day, she gave the impression that she was rather nervous. She had stammered when she had addressed the class, and then when she had started to write on the board, she had dropped the chalk and the duster twice. And that was when the devil had gotten into Nina. As Mrs. D'Souza started writing on the blackboard, Nina had made a paper rocket and had thrown it towards
the blackboard. It had hit the blackboard with a loud noise, startling Mrs. D'Souza who had jumped back with a cry of alarm.

The whole class had burst out laughing loudly, as Mrs. D'Souza had turned crimson in embarrassment.

Nina's friends had looked most appreciatively at her, and she had felt rather pleased with herself.

During the lunch break that day, Nina had felt even more pleased when students from other classes had come up to her to hear about the prank she had played on the new teacher, Mrs. D'Souza.

"She is really a nervous-wreck," Nina had told them describing Mrs. D'Souza, "and I think that I can have a lot of fun with her!" And that was how it had all begun.

In the next English class, Nina had brought a small squeaky toy. She had hidden it in her desk, and just as Mrs. D'Souza began to speak, she had pressed it. As the loud, sharp squeaks filled the
air, Mrs. D'Souza, had looked around agitatedly. "Where is that noise coming from?" she had asked.

Nina innocently had put up her hand. "I think there is a rat in the class, Ma'am," she had said solemnly. "Oh, there it goes!" She had pointed in the direction behind where Mrs. D'Souza was standing, and as the teacher had looked back in panic, Nina had pressed the squeaky toy once more, which made Mrs. D'Souza leap out of her chair.

"Shall we look for the rat, Miss?" Nina had asked with a giggle.

Nina began to run around the class, peeping into corners looking for the imaginary rat.

The entire class had broken into uncontrollable giggles. And even after Nina had returned to her place after 'the hunt', Mrs. D'Souza's efforts to get on with the lesson failed miserably. The class spent the rest of the hour looking expectantly at Nina, wondering what ingenious trick she would think up next!

Nina who was exhilarated by all the attention she was getting from others, was, therefore, eagerly waiting for the next English period.

As Mrs. D'Souza walked in, Nina sat in her place very quietly. The first half hour of the class passed off peacefully as the teacher explained a few rules of the English grammar. Mrs. D'Souza, then set the class some exercises, and as the girls began to work, she strolled around in the aisles between the desks.

Nina watched her carefully from the corner of her eye. And when the unsuspecting teacher's back was turned to her, she quickly pulled out the rubber toad from her pocket and placed it on her desk. She tapped it smartly on its back, and the toad leapt into the air and landed with a loud plop! at Mrs. D'Souza's feet.
The teacher recoiled in horror, and as she stared at the ugly, quivering toad, she shrieked loudly.

The entire class began to laugh. Nina too doubled up with laughter. In fact, she was laughing so much, that she did not realize that Mrs. D'Souza had run out of the classroom leaving her handbag and the books behind.

When the next period began, the Science teacher, Mrs. Mehta, looked at the books and the bag left on the teacher's desk in surprise.

"Who held the last class?" she asked. "The teacher seems to have forgotten her books!"

"Oh, it was Mrs. D'Souza," said Nina with a mischievous glint in her eyes, "she had to leave the class in a hurry, you know!" The class began to giggle.

"Well, then, you had better take them along to her in the staff room," said the teacher firmly, holding out the bag and the books to Nina.

As Nina walked to the staff room holding Mrs. D'Souza's books and handbag, she tried to think of something really cheeky to say to her. But just as she entered the staff room, she stopped short.

Mrs. D'Souza was the only one in the staff room. She was
talking on the telephone, with her back to Nina, and her voice sounded funny and strangled.

"I just can't go on anymore, Mummy," she was saying brokenly into the phone. "You told me that it would be good for me to teach in a school to get over my shyness, but it is really hard for me here. The children really seem to dislike me so much! They devise new means to torment me every day, and then they laugh at me! Though I try not to react, it is so hard..."

Nina was flooded with shame when she heard these words. Suddenly, the pranks that she had played on Mrs. D'Souza, which had seemed so clever and funny at the time, seemed cruel and mean. Nina realized that Mrs. D'Souza too was a person with feelings just like her, and had been badly hurt by all the teasing she had been subjected to.

A sombre and subdued Nina waited outside the staff room for a few minutes till Mrs. D'Souza had finished her phone conversation and then she entered the room.

Mrs. D'Souza looked at Nina, and then at her belongings in confusion. Her eyes were moist. "Oh! I hadn't realized that I had forgotten them in your class. I am sorry," she stammered.

There was an awkward silence.

"Miss, I am sorry that we made you run out of our class," Nina said in a low voice, apologetically. "It was thoughtless of us! But you have taken all our antics sportingly, and we really like you for that!"

Mrs. D'Souza gave Nina a tremulous smile. "I try to do my best," she said quietly.

"I realize that," replied Nina giving her a warm smile in return. "And from now on, I promise that we will try to do our best, too!"
THE retired Principal, Mr. Satyen Sen, becomes emotional as he reminiscences. His eyes become moist at the memory of his school where he had served for thirty long years. The school was nothing less than a home to this bachelor, where he had started his career in his youth and the students were like his own children. How could he snap all bonds overnight? Yet, his retirement is a bitter reality which he has to accept calmly and gracefully.

He goes over the past, and the bright faces of his students flash through his mind which gives him immense pleasure. He clearly sees the tall pillars and glass windowpanes of the prayer room, the multipurpose hall, the library, the classrooms, the canteen, the long corridors and even the small room of the gatekeeper. In a flash, many faces cross his mind—the firm but friendly face of the Vice-Principal, the encouraging faces of the teachers, the strict eyes of the librarian, the pot-bellied canteen owner counting money, the bushy moustache of the gatekeeper and the fresh, blooming smiles of his students—all appear in his mind.
Satyen Babu particularly remembers the faces of his three favourite students—Samsher, Alok and Klint who were better known as 'Trimurti'. God only knows the secret behind the special bond with which these three boys from three different religious communities were bound together.

Samsher, the boy with dreamy eyes, never used to prepare his lessons and was always scolded or punished. So many wonderful ideas came to his mind and took him to an unknown world where the dry, boring sums, taught as part of the school curriculum, could not haunt him. He liked to be lost in his thoughts and fantasies. But he reckoned that he had to go back to his studies. He could not make out why he was not able to remember anything. Though he tried hard to learn, he was not able to retain anything. The aftermath was always the same—getting impositions or made to stand in front of the whole class holding his ears. The simple fact that the boring subjects were difficult for him to remember was neither understood by his parents nor his teachers. On top of that his elder sister, who was a very good student, never missed an opportunity to lecture him about his duties and responsibilities. Samsher had no other option but to keep his mouth shut and listen quietly as he could not ignore the important position cherished by his elder sister at home. His brother too had a special place, as he was a rising football player who was a hero among his friends.

Samsher was neither good in sports nor in games. He had a weak physique. If ever he tried to play any game compelled by his friends, he was sure to hit the bed early. Samsher used to wonder, was there nothing important in the world other than English, Hindi, Mathematics, History, Geography, Science, Football or Cricket?

Satyen Babu remembers how a drastic change had come
over Samsher when he was in Class IX. A new subject had been introduced in their school curriculum called Basic Computer Education. Samsher was highly fascinated by that subject. Twice a week the students were taken to the air-conditioned Computer Laboratory. On a very big table four or five monitors which looked like TV sets were placed in square boxes. In front of them were the keyboards and at the back were the printers. Whatever was typed with the keyboard could be seen on the monitor. Everything was stored in the computer hard disc, which could be printed very quickly if required, by giving one command.

On the first day Samsher was confused and remained
disinterested as usual. Miss Sharma, the Computer teacher, introduced them to the CPU, the \textit{VDU} and the printer. She instructed the students to type something. Each one of them typed something which appeared on the screen. It seemed magical. When Samsher's turn came, he felt shy and could not type anything. His doubts, fears and lack of confidence prevented him from making an attempt.

At last Miss Sharma took hold of his fingers and typed on the keyboard—\textit{SAMSHER, COMPUTER LOVES YOU}. When Samsher saw the words on the screen of the computer, he immediately felt a great attraction towards the machine as if he had an age-long relationship with it. Not only that, he suddenly realized that he could remember each and every word told by Miss Sharma about the computer.

That was the turning point in his life. He overcame his shyness. He mastered different computer applications. He was ahead of his classmates and naturally he became the favourite of his computer teacher. She taught him to do sums quickly and correctly with the help of the computer. Surprisingly, Samsher did not find difficulty in solving them any more. Gradually, he gained confidence and it had a bearing on his performance in other subjects as well.

Thus encouraged by Miss Sharma, he started dreaming about becoming a software engineer and making useful software packages which would be used worldwide.

Satyen Babu remembers that Samsher has become a software engineer in America and a smile touched his lips.

Satyen Babu remembers the face of Alok also. Alok was the terror of the school and neighbourhood. Alok was tall for his age and had impish, mischievous eyes which always twinkled. Nobody was wrong in suspecting Alok if the fruits or vegetables of someone's garden went missing. Nobody
was to be blamed when the food vanished from the tiffin boxes. People used to wonder whether it was possible for the cats to make neat punctures in their milk packets but very soon they discovered the culprit to be Alok. The pet cats wailing piteously were, however, discovered from the dustbins. His acts of vandalism continued to grow alarmingly causing a nightmare to his parents, his schoolmates and neighbours. No amount of punishment or advice had any effect on the devil. His parents had a tough time both with the school authorities as well as their neighbours who were eager to teach Alok a lesson at any cost.

However, much to the chagrin of the teachers and the neighbours, Alok was accepted by the other two members of 'Trimurti' and surprisingly, the Principal also had a soft corner for the boy.

Alok had one more close confidant—the P.T. teacher, Rahul Sihha. This teacher had taken an instant liking to this bright, spirited boy ever since he had joined the primary class. While his parents and teachers had long since given up any hope of reforming him, it was only Rahul Sihha who firmly believed that Alok would change one day, and he did.

Every year the school organized a picnic. That year the seashore was the chosen spot for picnic. And all the senior school members had gone to the seashore. Although Alok's parents had tried to dissuade him from joining the picnic, as usual he had his way. Everything was fine that day. The students as well as the teachers were enjoying a nice time with plenty to eat and chat, basking on the sand under the sun or simply playing in the water.

Alok was just planning to do some prank when he heard a loud shriek from the seaside. As he rushed forward, he saw the head of a boy bobbing quite a distance away amidst the high waves. Without a second thought, Alok jumped...
into the sea and the next moment he was neck deep in waters as he hurtled himself into the angry waters. He had to put up a tough fight with the waves before he could reach the drowning boy. Throwing out his arms, Alok clutched the boy and started swimming back towards the shore.

As he reached the shore, the other students helped him to pull the unconscious boy to safety. Everyone became so busy with the boy that they failed to notice how tired Alok was. He was totally exhausted and could not move. In the mid afternoon, everything became dark before his eyes.

At last when he opened his eyes he was dumbfounded to see many faces staring at him. Each face had a smile as if expressing gratitude and praising him for his noble act. Alok’s face turned red with embarrassment as he was not used to receiving words of praise. He could not decide how to react. To his great relief Rahul Sir came near him and asked the crowd to disperse.

Alok turned to him and said, "Sir, I don't think I have done anything great to deserve all this praise and admiration. Under the circumstances anyone would have done the same thing."

"Yes. But how many of them did actually dare to act?" Rahul Sir asked. "All were waiting for somebody else to do.
You should feel proud that you have done something which others could not do. You are feeling shy because you have become too used to complaints and punishments. Start believing in yourself and feel proud that you have earned applause by your act of bravery."

Alok looked up at Rahul Sir with tears in his eyes. There was a silent assurance of not deviating from the right track again.

Satyen Babu remembers the most attractive boy of the Trimurti' group—the robust and healthy Klint who was always full of life, very enthusiastic, and a very bright boy. He was always ready to help others and had never taken a back seat whenever the service of the students was required. Be it the arrangement of blood-donation camps or some relief work to be provided to the unfortunate victims of any natural disaster, Klint was always the first person to take the lead and inspire others.

Once there was a drive by the municipality to catch the stray dogs. Klint had come to know that the dogs were being killed cruelly. He had become restless and had started thinking about how to save the lives of the dogs.

He got the opportunity when the van in which the dogs
were caged, was parked outside their school gate and the
dogcatchers had gone for tea and snacks from a local
restaurant. Unnoticed by the gatekeeper, he had gone rear
the van stealthily and had opened the door of the van.
Much to his amusement the dogs fled in different directions.
The gatekeeper had seen him and had become furious.
In the meantime, the dog catchers also had come to know
about his pranks and had complained to school authorities.

Satyen Babu remembers that although he had punished
Klint that day, he realized how kindhearted and broad-
minded that boy was. On another occasion, he had
purchased cages full of birds from a bird-seller with his
pocket money and had set them free. During Christmas
he used to make greeting cards and sell them and donate
the money to a nearby orphanage.

As Satyen Sen continues to reminisce he feels proud to
have been possessing precious gems and jewels the value
of which could not be estimated. These students are his
covetous possessions, the richest wealth of his bachelor
life. And their memory which is so alive and fresh in his
mind, he would cherish throughout the rest of his life.
M A H A R A J A P A L A Y A M  Gopalakrishnaswamy
Nandakumar was a big name for a small fellow. His eyes were usually as mischievous as that of the lovable Lord Krishna he was named after. When he was cute (which was very often), everybody was wont to call him Krishnakutty. And when he was naughty (which too was very often), everybody went "Nanduuu!!" Either way, he hardly ever bothered to hear.

Nandu was all of eight years old but still the baby of the house. The rambling old house where he stayed, was home to his one great-granny, one tatha (grandfather), two pattis (grandmothers), two uncles, two aunts, three cousins, one mother, one father, one sister, one gardener, one cook, five cows, one goat and last but definitely not the least, the one and only himself.

Nandu had arrived rather late, quite like his heavenly namesake. The closest in age to him at home was his sister Radha and she was all of fifteen years old. She was more his foster mother than friend. His other cousins were even more grown up—Ram was in college, Anand was working
in the city and Suja had got married a year back. Nandu was the *kadakutty*, the last little one. And so he was the last to do any work, the last to be scolded, the last to listen but he had many firsts to his credit, too. He was the first to get every goody, the first to be hugged and the first to throw a tantrum as well. Through Nandu, the grown-ups were reliving their childhood. They all knew he was a bit of a spoilt brat but they indulged him anyway. His family and friends loved the mischievous twinkle in his eyes. Which was why they could not bear how dreadfully dull he looked on that bright and busy morning.

"Has someone upset my Nandu?" wondered his great-granny, knowing as always that nobody had.

"Come along, Nandu, you are a good boy, aren't you?" asked his uncle, knowing as always that he wasn't.

His aunt was too busy in the kitchen so she just came out, opened his mouth and dropped a glob of freshly-churned butter in his mouth.

"There, you are feeling better now, right?" she winked, quite aware from her long experience that, as usual, it would take more than her delicious efforts to persuade her stubborn nephew.

"What is the matter, Nandu?" chorused his *pattis*.

"Cheer up, Krishnakutty!" urged *tatha*.

"Hey, he is big boy now. Just leave him alone," intoned Ram, doing just the opposite with a quick hug.

"Okay, brother! You are all grown up, uh!" cheered Radha.

"Nanduuu!" cried *amma*, "you haven't had your milk yet!"

"But he loves milk," cajoled *appa*. "He is just finishing it, right?"

But Nandu was not. He just sulked and sulked silently till the hot drink had gone cold.

"Gopalakrishna!" warned *appa*. 

50
"Krishna!" threatened amma. 
"Tch, child, what is the matter with you?" worried the pattis and tatha, trying desperately to save him from the trouble ahead.
"Say something!" said Radha, trying to shake some answer out of him.
"I don't want to go to the new school!" said Nandu, finally.
"Say something I haven't heard before!" laughed Radha
as she waved goodbye, picked up her heavy bag and left for her school.

Everybody knew Nandu would have nothing else to say. He had not had anything else to say ever since his parents had got him admission to the Shishya Primary. This was not because Nandu had never been to school before but precisely because he was in school already—he just didn't want to leave his old one! But amma and appa had heard so much about Shishya and its superlative education that they had actually stood in a queue one whole morning just to get an admission form for Nandu.

Nandu could not believe it. Why leave his good old place, his good old friends and his good old teachers? And yet, amma and appa and everyone else expected him to be dancing with joy that he had got admission in the new school.

Starting this new year, he was now a student of the Shishya’s! As if he cared.

It was not a bad looking place. It looked like a rambling mansion which was surrounded by mango trees. It was always cheerfully noisy, and it was down the road to the market. However, Nandu did not want to leave everybody and go away like Radha for a long time every day. He had tried crying and yelling, pleading and shouting. But nothing had worked. And today was the first day at his new school.

Appa was willing to drop him on his way to work and amma was willing to show him the way. But even that did not cheer him. Time was ticking terribly. A bath and breakfast later, he was all set to go. He spoke not a word and got ready only because he was a little afraid of amma’s anger which seemed all ready to bubble and burst.

When he got to school, he found out none of the kids
seemed to be feeling like him at all. Some of them greeted each other, some seemed busy with their own work and some chattered in groups. Their sunny spirits only upset him more. He was all alone. And friendless. A tear dropped down Nandu's cheek as he tried to hide behind his mother. But she neither noticed nor had the time to console him, for the bell had rung and it was time for her to go.

Nandu found himself an empty bench. And soon enough, it was not empty. Next to him sat a girl taller than him, all smartly dressed with two neat, long plaits. She was Nivedita, she said.
"But you can call me Nivi, like everyone else," she grinned. There was a big hole where her tooth might have been and Nandu had to smile too.

They got chatting and soon some more were by their side. They were talking about things that Nandu knew nothing about but it was all very interesting anyway.

They were hoping Priya Ma'am would be their English teacher again. As it turned out, she was. They were hoping they would have PT that day. That wish came true as well. They were hoping that during the year they would make more friends. For Nandu it certainly turned out to be so. They were hoping for a lot of fun. And they turned out to be a lot of fun to be with.

When Nandu got home that evening, his family was waiting for him with a lot of sympathy and worry. But when they saw he was not talking and complaining, they kept quiet too. A lot of things were said, as it always is when there are over a dozen people in the house, but the subject of Nandu's new school was studiously avoided. Nobody wanted to cross an unhappy Nandu.

The next morning went off peacefully at home and boisterously at school. It was a peculiar experience for Nandu.

The teachers were openly friendly, there was more thinking and less writing to do and the lessons were more like discoveries. It was all terribly serious though. When Nandu talked in spite of the pin-drop silence instructions, he was asked to stay back and clear the board while everyone went for games. He would have howled but for the fear that he would be held back for the rest of the week. He had no choice but to grow up if he wanted to be treated like all the other kids.

Days flew by and things only got better. Nandu was
enjoying his school. He had never imagined studies could be such fun. All he ever did at home was talk about his new experiences. It became a big bore for Radha but she still found it better than having a whining baby for a brother.

Then on that bright and sunny Sunday, Nandu was gloomy again.

"Has someone upset my Nandu?" wondered his great-granny, as usual.

"What is the matter, Nandu?" asked patti, as usual.
"Cheer up, Krishnakutty!" urged tatha, as usual.

"Hey, he is big boy now. Just leave him alone," intoned Ram, doing just the opposite, as usual. "Want to come with me for a ride on my bike? I am free today," he offered.

"Nanduuu!" cried amma, "you haven't had your milk yet!"

"But he loves milk," cajoled appa. "He is just finishing it, right?" But Nandu wasn't, again.

"Gopalakrishna!" warned appa.
"Krishna!" warned amma.

"Tch, tch, child, what is the matter with you?" worried the pattis and the tatha, trying as usual to save him from the trouble ahead.

"Say something!" said Radha, trying to shake some answer out of him.

"I want to go to school!" said Nandu, finally.

"Ah, I finally heard something I haven't heard before!" laughed Radha, along with everyone else.
THE entire computer lab was bustling with whiz-kids of my class. Everybody was busy with the programs on their machines, yet the silence was broken by hushed tones and whispers.

The school was bristling with enthusiasm that comes with the re-opening day and our class was no exception. As if the duration before the assembly or the lunch break was not enough for our endless vacation chatter, the students chattered along through the PT class and the ongoing computer period. While some of them had finished their tasks and had now switched to full time whispers and murmurs, I too was eagerly waiting to finish my program and rewind my vacation along with the others.

Just when I thought that I had finished executing it, there came an error message flashing on the screen, 'Error executing the program. Abort? Retry? Cancel?'

I had no will left to retry the program, nor could I abort it. Choosing to 'Cancel' the program and deciding to try it some other time, I joined my classmates.

In the entire school ours was probably the most
computer-sawy class and why not? Being in Class IX, at this stage itself we had decided on computer-related profession. Computer was the common thread that ran through us with each one of us wanting to pursue software, hardware, graphic designing, or web authoring in future. For that matter, a good part of our vacation was spent exploring the Internet, the new bug that had smitten us.

Presently, we were all exchanging the net jokes whenSheetal had a brainwave and the target was Ms. Verma. She was our Sanskrit teacher and had a wild reputation for giving us all kinds of punishments. Also, she had a peculiar habit of declaring a result or a verdict on the
blackboard. Some power of pen...errr...chalk this!

She was actually harmless and to use the cliche she would never even think of hurting even a fly and that is why she was an easy target for the plan. We decided to have some fun with our computer and net fundas.

The next day during the Sanskrit period, everything went on well until she was enquiring about our vacation and the like. Next, she asked us to recite some shlokas (verses) that we were asked to memorize during the holidays.

After a couple of us had recited, it was Rahul's turn to recite one of the toughest verses and pop came the reply! "Error down-loading the file. Unable to recite!"

The entire class burst into peals of laughter and our teacher also seemed to enjoy the humour.

Thereafter, it became a routine affair. We started using what is known as keyboard shortcuts. So when we had to start a new chapter we would shout 'Control N' in one voice! 'Control N' in computer
parlance means opening a new file and soon we started uttering many more such control commands to pep up our Sanskrit period.

One day when Pooja was asked to translate some sentences from Hindi to Sanskrit on the blackboard, all of us uttered Control Z in chorus asking her to 'Undo' the entire sentence that was filled with grammatical errors.

As all good things come to an end, it was the day when Ms. Verma had given us an assignment to write a few essays. A week later, when it was time for submission, a few boys had not done it. Since they had all been busy with a football match practice, they were unable to finish the assignment on time.

Instead of explaining it thus to Ms. Verma, what they uttered proved to be the last straw.

On being asked the reason, the entire group said, "Server too busy, will try again later!"
A server, being an important component of the Internet to access a website, is sometimes referred to as the brain of the entire network. And when a server is too busy accessing more such web pages, it usually prompts us with this line. But the group had acted too smart this time by comparing themselves to an overburdened server. For, our teacher failed to see any humour in it. She sure was irked and the next day she returned with a vengeance.

Next morning when she entered our classroom, she announced a surprise test. We were to write a Sanskrit essay on (hold your horns!) 'The Internet and the Technological Revolution'!

Forget framing the essay, we could not even translate the title. We shook our heads in resignation. The whole class was being punished.

The next period was PT, but none of us were in a mood to play or have any fun. All of us hardly managed a few lines of the essay and were now thinking of the consequences. We had certainly carried the fun too far and now we were to pay a heavy price for it.

Gloomy faced, we walked back to the classroom awaiting the verdict and the punishment on the blackboard.

Sure enough, the expected results greeted our sight on the blackboard. The entire Class IX-C has failed in the test.'

There was something else written underneath, which surprised us:

'Results Abort? Test Retry? Punishment Cancel?'

With a smile on our lips, and twinkling eyes, we gaped at each other. Ms. Verma was at the door and all we could do was look apologetically at her with a sheepish grin.

We all managed to utter, "Thank you, Ma'am!" loudly. And we dare not think of any shortcuts for that!
Ir WAS Ruma's first day in school. The thought gave her fear of the unknown. She was a shy little eight-year-old and the thought of going to a big school full of new girls and nuns in black gowns for teachers terrified her.

"I won't go to school," she said mutinously in the morning.

"Why not?" enquired Mrs. Mehra who could not understand her daughter's fears though she knew the cause.

"I have a stomachache," Ruma said triumphantly.

Her mother sighed. Ruma's stomachaches were well-known. In the beginning they had worried her mother and confused the doctor as well. But all tests had proved normal and the doctor had been forced to conclude that Ruma's stomachaches were a convenient way to miss school.

"Get dressed," said her mother, "we are going to see the doctor."

"What for?" asked Ruma. "Why don't you give me medicine and let me stay at home?"

"Dr. Batra has informed me that there is a new injection which cures stomachaches immediately. He shall give you one then I shall drop you to school," said Mrs. Mehra.
Ruma was indeed close to tears. Her lips trembled. How she disliked injections. She would do anything to avoid them.

She sat quietly for a while and then said, "I feel better already."

"Good," said her mother, "come, child, and have your milk and cheese sandwich fast, we are getting late for school."

Ruma wore her smart blue skirt and white blouse. She brushed her hair, wore her shoes and was soon ready for school.

"Have you not forgotten something, Ruma?" asked Mrs. Mehra gently.

"What, Mummy?" Ruma tried to look at her with wide-eyed innocence.

"Your glasses, darling," said her mother as she stretched her hand, picked up the glasses and positioned them on Ruma's nose.

Ruma's face crumpled. God, she hated her glasses, she had begun wearing them a year ago and had been mercilessly teased by her classmates as "four-eyed, half-blind!"

No amount of admonishing by the teacher had helped, And the teachers had not been very sensitive either.
"How can I make you Sita in the play?" the class teacher had told Ruma. "You wear spectacles," as though wearing spectacles was a crime.

When the school had a fancy dress competition, Ruma had expressed her desire to come dressed as a doll. Her classmates had laughed loudly. "Have you heard of a four-eyed doll?" someone chirped and they all had giggled.

Ultimately she had gone dressed as a teacher, wearing a sari, pepper-grey hair done up tightly in a bun and a pair of glasses perched on her nose. She had won the first prize. But the prize had been a small consolation. She would have much preferred to be a Japanese doll.

Ruma had then begun to learn to hide her glasses in school. She had preferred to peer shortsightedly at the blackboard rather than wear her glasses. She had preferred to let her grades slip rather than wear spectacles. Even when copying the sums from the blackboard, she got confused between the numbers and the signs, yet she refused to wear the glasses which remained packed in her schoolbag.
When the family had left Allahabad and come to Delhi after Vaas Saftier was transferred, her mother hoped that she would overcome her inhibitions. She hoped that the school would be more sensitive.

SurHk amf/irx efavie. thmr new. can school. shall pick you up at one o' clock, darling," she said cheerily, "until then, have fun."

'Have fun,' thought Ruma, 'how little does Mummy know!' Within minutes she had slipped her glasses into her bag.

The school bell rang and Ruma looked around hesitantly as she saw the children heading towards the Assembly. The children stood in the rows according to their classes and Ruma had to ask quite a few children before she could find Class IV-A, which was her class.

Soon the prayers were over and the children went back to their classes.

The class teacher entered Class IV-A and smiled at them. "Children, we have two new girls this year," she said, beaming at them. "One is Ruma," and smilingly she asked Ruma to raise her hand, "and the other is Anita." All eyes then turned to Anita, and Ruma almost gasped. For Anita was sitting in a wheelchair.

A little later the class teacher, Mrs. Behl, went out and came back with a lady who looked like an older version of Anita.

"This is Mrs. Mehta, Anita's mother," she said by way of introduction. "And Anita, as you can see, is a very special child—a child with special needs. Anita will need a special friend who can be with her, help her with the homework and notes especially if she misses school. And someone who can take her around to the library, the school canteen and the dispensary. Now tell me who will offer to be her special friend?"
There was absolute silence in the class. The girls who had been jumping around and prancing about a few minutes ago all sat still. They were all so healthy and normal that they found it difficult to accept that one of their classmates could not walk, that she was on a wheelchair.

Ruma saw Anita's lips tremble slightly. Her heart went
out to her. She did not know how she gathered courage and instinctively she raised her hand.

"You?" asked Mrs. Behl, a little surprised. "Well, you yourself are new here."

"Yes, Miss, that is true, but all the girls in the class have their own friends. Anita and I are new so we can be friends as well. And we can discover the school together, it should be a lot of fun." She trembled a little after she finished speaking, because for her this was a pretty long speech. She wondered how she gathered the courage to say all this. But she turned around in surprise to see Mrs. Behl, Anita and her mother clapping away. Her classmates too joined in applauding Ruma.

Ruma turned crimson with pleasure.

"Girls," Mrs. Behl said, "this is what I expect from my students. Ruma, I am proud of you, my dear."

That afternoon Anita and Ruma sat under a tree and shared their lunch. Ruma had brought peanut butter sandwiches and Anita had brought aloo parathas.

"It is really yummy," said Ruma as she bit into the aloo paratha.

"Peanut butter sandwiches are my favourite," said Anita as she eagerly dug her teeth into them.

During lunch Anita explained that she had been crippled after a car accident. "My dad was driving the car," she said sadly, "he died in the accident."

"How awful!" said Ruma as she thought of the enormity of Anita and her mother’s loss. And yet Anita and her mother smiled and laughed all through. They were the courageous ones; they were the true survivors.

"I wish I were as courageous as you," said Anita wistfully.

"Me? Courageous?" laughed Ruma. "I am a real coward."

"Coward? How?" Anita looked perplexed.
"Anita, you are willing to face the world in a wheelchair, while I am not even ready to face it wearing glasses," she confessed.

"You wear glasses?" asked Anita wide-eyed. "Let me see how you look in them."

Shyly Ruma took out her spectacles and perched them on her nose. "Don't laugh," she warned.

Anita smiled.

"You look intelligent, I hope you get grades to match."

Ruma turned around in surprise. It was not Anita who had spoken, but Mrs. Behl who had come to check on Anita. Shy, Ruma instinctively put out her hands to remove her spectacles.

"No, Ruma, don't," the teacher warned, "your eyes are the most precious gift of god, you cannot spoil them just because girls tease you."

In the afternoon a pleasant surprise awaited Ruma.

"Girls," said Mrs. Behl, "I have to choose a class monitor and I have decided that Ruma is a responsible child and with her glasses she looks both intelligent and studious. So I have decided to make her the class monitor."

Once again the class broke into an applause.

Ruma stood shyly as the teacher pinned the badge of class monitor on her.

"How was school?" asked Ruma's mother anxiously.

"Oh, Mummy, I simply love this school," said Ruma to her mother's delight.
GET UP," Jaya felt Vasu poke him as he lay sleeping on his straw mat. "It is time to fetch the firewood," Vasu said.

Jaya tried to continue sleeping.
"The birds are chirping," Vasu urged.
"So let them chirp, sakhe (friend)," Jaya muttered sleepily.
"What is your problem?"

"Don't you remember, sakhe," Vasu's tone was urgent, "it is our turn to gather the firewood? The birds are up. That means it is daybreak. Unless we set out now, we are going to be late in doing our chores."

"And so what?" said Jaya defiantly, making no move to get up from the floor of the hut.

"Come on, you know that," laughed Vasu. "The rishi may change us into a mouse or a cat or anything he likes. And even if he does not put a curse on us, he can certainly make us collect firewood for the rest of our stay in the ashrama, and that may be for years."

By now the realization seeped into Jaya who immediately got up and started rolling up his mat.
Together the two boys, both about fourteen, went out of the hut for daily ablutions and then to get wood from the forest beyond.

It was ushakal (dawn). The eastern horizon had just begun to redden, and the birds had already begun to sing.

Vasu and Jaya were princes from neighbouring kingdoms. As was the custom around that time, the young princes had been sent to the ashrama in order to get disciplined or schooled. In the hermitage, set in the Vindhya forest, they were under the supervision and care of Rishi Utathya, a most learned sage.

There were several other boys in the hermitage, mostly older than them, and set in the ways of the hermitage. They were students and took lessons in grammar and philosophy from the sage. They plucked fruits and collected herbs, looked after the cows, goats and deer in the hermitage, and helped the sage run it. There were ashrama-valikas or girls, who helped in picking flowers, stringing garlands, making sandalwood paste, and so on. Older ones were in charge of distributing fruits, honey and other eatables among the members of the hermitage.

Everyone had his duties defined, and had to do them well. Rishi Utathya was a strict disciplinarian.

Vasu and Jaya were new arrivals. Brought up in the luxury of palaces, they found the life at ashrama harsh. Used to rich food, gorgeous clothes, and the constant attendance of servants and maids, they had difficulties in adjusting to the stark simplicity of the hermitage.

Their duties included the collection of firewood needed for the hermitage. This meant getting up even earlier than the others, getting the wood, and getting back to the hermitage in time for the lessons and other duties.

Today, in spite of Vasu's efforts, the boys were late in
reaching the forest, and, as it so happened, dry, broken sticks were also difficult to come by.

Even though they tried, Jaya and Vasu could hardly collect anything. Jaya got more and more worried.

Suddenly Jaya and Vasu heard the sound of running hooves. They turned and
saw a rider on horseback speeding through the forest. The morning sun, up by now, made the rider’s sword and armour dazzle.

"Who are you? You look familiar," the rider enquired.

"Where do you come from? Answer that first," said Jaya.

It turned out that he was a soldier from Jaya’s kingdom, passing that way with a royal message for a distant kingdom to the south. When he realized who Jaya was, he got down from his horse and stood with folded hands before him.

"I never thought I will see you like this," he clucked his tongue sympathetically. "The last time I saw you, you were at the palace, sitting beside the king. How splendid you had looked then! And now barefoot, only a bark around your waist, out in the forest at this early hour!"

"This is the dress we wear while at the ashrama, it is part of school life here," Vasu began to explain. "It is just a stage of life. Once our schooling is over, we will go back to our palaces."

But Jaya was lapping up the sympathy the man offered. "I hate it out here. The life is just too tough!" He went on.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" the man asked finally. "Can I help you somehow? I am on my way, but I do have some time to spare."

"Well, then, get some firewood for us," Jaya ordered. "We have hardly got together a good pile, and we have to be back soon. You get firewood for us."

The soldier obliged. He took out the sword hanging at his side and, sitting on horseback, slashed at high branches of trees.

"Let us have a go at those berries," Jaya pointed to a nearby bush laden with wild berries. The rule was that you could only eat after you finish what had been allotted to you at the hermitage. But both boys cast the rule to the
winds, and gorged themselves on the berries while the soldier got together a huge pile of firewood for them. He even carried it some distance for them.

When he finally left them, he told Jaya, "I will be passing this way again as I return. You can give me your message for the king, your father. Anything you would like me to tell your father."

When Jaya and Vasu returned to the hermitage, they found the other students quite worried about them.

"What took you long? We were wondering if you had come face to face with some wild animal," said one of them.

"Or if both of you had been bitten by a snake," said another student.

"You must be tired carrying that load," said one of the older boys, as another hastened to relieve them of it.

"You must be hungry," said the rishi himself.

Jaya and Vasu found rules being broken to offer them fruits and milk even before they had done any of their other chores. Jaya and Vasu felt a surprising sense of warmth wash over them.

The firewood was taken to the shrine where the sacred fire was kept burning. The fire was burning rather low then. Rishi Utathya sat before it, chanting hymns, and looking around a bit impatiently for the day's firewood.

As Jaya and Vasu added some of the wood to the fire, however, the flames did not leap up as usual. The fire did not brighten. Instead there was a lot of smoke and a strange, musty smell.

Rishi Utathya looked surprised and poured some ghrita or clarified butter into the fire. The smoke became denser, the smell mustier.

"Let me have a look at the firewood you are putting in," he said, and moved to the pile Jaya and Vasu had brought
in. By then several students had sensed something odd and had moved closer. Jaya and Vasu stood there looking foolish. What had happened? What was wrong? Why was the fire not getting fully kindled? Why was the old sage raging like thunder?
query, everyone was dumbfounded. 'How does he know that a sword was used? Does he really have special powers?' Jaya wondered. Vasu looked ready to cry.

"This wood was not picked up from the forest floor as it should be. This is not old wood that has dried and withered and fallen down as firewood should be. This is wood brutally dismembered from the tree. This is young wood full of juice and sap."

He pointed a long, thin finger at the slashes and streaks in the wood. "One just has to look at those marks to see this. There is no second sight needed," he said.

Jaya and Vasu felt silly and small. They were also a little scared. They had heard tales of sages like Durvasa and Gautama reducing people to ashes and stones when angry. Suppose Rishi Utathya decided to deal with them in a similar manner?

"Which of my boys had gone and collected this wood?" The sage roared. "It must be one of those new boys. Anyone who has been around for some time knows that this wood is useless as firewood. And that the sacred fire does not accept offerings that involve acts of violence. Where are those boys who brought in this lot of firewood?"

No one said a word. But Jaya and Vasu knew that they were the only new boys, and it was a matter of time before the sage remembered that.

Just after a moment’s hesitation, Jaya and Vasu drew up courage and spoke out at the same time, "It was I."

"You are good friends at least," said the sage, "although silly and spoilt fellows. Now tell me the whole story and I will forgive you this once."

There was no punishment, no penalty once the whole
story was told. But everyone, including Rishi Utathya, looked so sad at the end that it couldn't have been worse.

Life went on as usual. There was no change in the routine. Every morning, the birds chirped and the students went out to collect firewood and fruit and flowers and honey. They fed the deer and milked the cattle and prepared the clarified butter.

They sat at the sage's feet and learnt to chant the hymns. And one morning, when Jaya and Vasu were again out in the forest (collecting honey this time), there was again the sound of running hooves.

The soldier got down and stood before them. "I am on my way back to the king, your father," he said to Jaya. "What message shall I carry? Shall I tell him you are miserable at the ashrama and that he should get you back home? What do you want me to say?"

"Tell him I am learning my lessons well," answered Jaya. "And I have a lot to learn."

"Just that?" The soldier looked astonished. "Well, what are you doing today, collecting honey? Shall I help?"

"No," said Jaya and Vasu at once, "we will do it ourselves."
AMONG the high mountains and thick green forests stood our school building. A building which had been home for many girls for so many years. From its majestic height, the building looked down on lush green valleys, and winding roads leading to the plains, interrupted by many a beautiful, though noisy, waterfall.

This was a boarding school, and year after year small, unsure little girls arrived, grew up and became senior girls—bold, brazen and adventurous. The rigid rules and regulations of the school were often stifling yet the girls found ways to break the monotony and to have some fun with unusual pranks and breaking of school rules.

The junior classes were divided into small groups for nature study class. Each group was allotted a patch in the garden, where the students used to sow vegetable seeds of beans, tomatoes, cucumbers, etc. Every week we were taken there to see how the plants grew and to observe them in their different stages of growth.

One evening, as our group sat down with nothing to do and our stomachs rumbled with perpetual hunger, we got
the idea of going to the garden to steal some cucumbers. The rear doors of the teachers' rooms opened on to the garden from a higher level. We sneaked out there and were looking for the biggest cucumbers before plucking them, when our class teacher opened the door and in a flash, all of us hid behind the bushes.

The teacher saw some movement among the plants and thought that a cow or a goat had strayed into the cucumber patch. She clapped her hands and said, "Shoo, shoo! Out...out you go." She waited for some time and said, "Tut, tut. Shoo, shoo! Out...out you go." But still there was no movement and no one in sight, so she said, "Wait till I get my stick," and turned her back to go in for her stick. In that moment, all of us ran as fast as our legs could carry us, back to our old haunt to sit and lament over our loss!

Another time, Nina, a daring and adventurous girl in our group, said, "Come on, let us go out and take a walk down the road." Of course, we all opposed it for the fear of being caught. "We will come back soon," she pleaded. "Come on, no one will even know that we had been out."

We did not encourage Nina, as our teachers seemed to have superhuman powers and that we knew for sure that they would catch us breaking rules at the most unexpected times!

Nina went on talking convincingly till Minnie, who was generally a very docile girl, agreed.

Both Nina and Minnie crept out of the school premises and, once outside, they stood up erect, with heads held high, their hands in their pockets, swaggering down the road cheekily, while the rest of us waited for their return, feeling jittery and tense.

They had barely walked for a few minutes down the slope of the road, when suddenly, from behind them, they
heard what sounded like footsteps and rustling of dry leaves.

They looked at each other. They didn’t say anything and, quick as lightning, both the girls hid themselves behind the bushes.

"Put your heads down, it must be one of the teachers," said Nina. "Oh! Why has she to take a stroll at this time?"

"Quiet," said Minnie, as both of them stood frozen, hardly daring to breathe for fear of being caught.

The sound came nearer and clearer and soon went past them, down the slope. Slowly, they dared to peep out to see who it was. They got a real shock when they saw, not a teacher, but two big black bears sauntering down the road!

The girls waited till the bears were out of earshot, leapt out from their hiding, and raced back to the safety of the school building.

The girls were surprised to see them back so soon, and pounced on them with a flood of questions. But Nina and
Minnie sat down, unable to speak, their faces drained of colour and hearts thumping, till someone gave them water to drink. It took them quite some time to regain their breath and tell the others, their tale of adventure.

On many occasions, we were served whole raw carrots for dinner, which no one really relished, but we were innovative enough to put them to good use! We hid them, and took them out of the dining room to our dormitories, which accommodated about forty beds in one hall.

The dining room was on the ground floor, the toilets and bathrooms on the first and the dormitories on the second floor. So preparatory to bed we had to go down one floor—to brush our teeth. Most of the girls preferred to make their beds first as the weather was cold, so that they could on return, quickly crawl into the warmth of their beds.

The senior girls often picked up one of the junior girls as their target. They removed the top sheets and blankets from the bed, folded the sheets in half, placed a carrot (ice-cold to the touch) in the centre of the bed, put back the covers and run to their own beds to watch the fun!

When the unsuspecting girl got into her bed, she would
scream in fright as her feet touched the carrot. And if our matron happened to hear the scream, out she would come from her room, bang her ruler on the wooden cupboards and ask, "Now, who was that? Who screamed just now?"

Of course, there would be no answer, and when the lights were switched on, the girls would look around at each other and the matron, with their angelic faces, feigning ignorance.

The matron would again shout, "Who screamed?" Then the culprit would own up and got a whack with the ruler on her backside, even before any reason was given. When the reason was given, no one owned up, so the matron said, "Some ghost must have done it, so all of you stand at the foot of your beds for half an hour."

One thing was there in our boarding school—solidarity. No one ever squealed on another, no matter what the punishment.

After the matron left, the girl would throw the carrot out and later when she tried getting into bed, least suspecting further mischief, she would stretch her legs which got stuck halfway due to the folded sheet. Out she would jump again, cursing the girls before finally making the bed, and going off to sleep. On another day; if the mood prevailed, and there were no carrots, well, a hairbrush would be used instead!

Another, very enjoyable sport which we had devised was taking rides on our mattresses. Our two dormitories were joined by a wide corridor, so we would sprinkle plenty of talcum powder on the floor and place a few mattresses in a line. Two girls would hold the two corners of each mattress to pull it and about four girls sat on each of them to take a ride. Then the ride began full speed, with others cheering on, and without us realizing. The noise and excitement would reach a pitch. In the midst of this the matron would
come banging her ruler on the wooden cupboards. It took some time for the girls to hear anything and then suddenly, as realization dawned, everything would come to a halt!

"Go back to your beds, make them properly and stand at the foot of your beds till I get there. Put out your hands!" she would shout as she walked down each line and her ruler cracked down on each upturned palm. "Now stand there till I tell you to get into bed," and then she would march back to her room.

On one occasion, she fell asleep and quite forgot about us still standing. Of course the girls enjoyed themselves laughing and talking in hushed tones and after about one hour, one girl went to call the matron. "Please," she pleaded, "can we go to bed now? Our legs are paining."

"Oh, my God!" said the matron, following her hurriedly to the dormitory, "I am so sorry, I quite forgot that I had punished you. My poor dears, jump into bed and don't be naughty again."

The girls sure jumped in winking at each other, having the last laugh!
AN ORDINARY BOY
Ramendra Kumar

"TELL, boys, today I am going to give you a very interesting assignment," announced Mr. Chandra to the students of Class VI of Aryan High School.

Mr. Chandrashekhar or Mr. Chandra, as he was popularly known, was the English teacher. He had a booming voice and a jolly nature. He had a great sense of humour and with his inventive ideas he made the lessons interesting. So all the boys liked him very much. In fact, his was one class they all looked forward to.

As the boys stared at him expectantly, he said, "You have been writing essays and compositions on every imaginable topic. Today, for your homework, I am going to give you a different kind of assignment. Today you will write about yourself. The title of your piece is 'About Me'. You can write an essay, a poem or even a short story. But it should be essentially about yourself. On reading it I should get a glimpse of the real you."

After Mr. Chandra left there was a lot of discussion in the class regarding the assignment.
"If I have to write about the real me, my essay will run into several pages...after all, my achievements are so many," declared the class snob, Vinay.

"Then I think you should use musical notations," suggested David, the class wit.

"Why?" asked Vinay.

"Because you will be blowing your own trumpet," David replied and everyone burst out laughing.

Vinay’s face turned red and he lunged at David who scampered away howling with laughter.

That evening sitting in his house, Sanjay kept thinking about the assignment. What could he write about himself? He was neither good in studies like Mihir, who always stood first in class, nor in sports like Sartaj, who was terrific at athletics as well as football and hockey. He could not paint like Khadeer nor sing like Harjeet. In fact, he was good at nothing. He was an average sort of fellow. He was neither tall nor short, neither thin nor fat, neither good looking nor ugly. In a class of thirty his rank was fifteenth. He
participated in all the games but never made it even to the class team. He was an ordinary fellow who never stood out in a crowd. In his entire school career, he had never won a single prize in any event, nor had he ever gone on the stage to perform.

Though he was shy in offering help, he was never shy in helping. His classmates would often come to him for help and he would never let them down. In bad times Sanjay was the person his classmates reached out to. In good times, alas, he was ignored.

Sanjay didn't have strong likes and dislikes. The only thing he was crazy about was reading. He loved the English language and words fascinated him. Every time he came across a new word, he would promptly look it up in the dictionary not only for its meaning but also its origin. Stories behind words and phrases interested him and he would note them down in his scrapbook.

Except for this interest he was just an ordinary boy whom no one seemed to notice.

Now then, what could he write about himself?

He wrote a page in his English homework copy. He then opened his scrapbook and sat in deep thought. After some time he started writing...

Next day the second period was English. At the end of the class, Mr. Chandra collected the notebooks.

During the break Sanjay was rummaging through his bag looking for his scrapbook. The History teacher had used the words 'phoenix' and 'nemesis' and Sanjay wanted to note them down and look them up in the dictionary later. He found the English homework copy but not his scrapbook. It was then that he realized that by mistake he had given the scrapbook to Mr. Chandra, in place of his English copy. He got up and almost ran to the staff room.
He did not want anyone to go through his scrapbook.
When he reached the staff room, he found Mr. Chandra poring over the notebooks.
"Excuse me, Sir," Sanjay mustered courage to speak.
Mr. Chandra looked up. "Yes, young man."
"Sir, I am Sanjay from Class VI-A. By mistake I gave you my scrapbook instead of my homework copy," Sanjay said and handed over the copy to Mr. Chandra.
Mr. Chandra looked at him with a strange expression on his face but did not say a word.
Sanjay stood for there for a few seconds more.
"Yes?" Mr. Chandra looked up.
"C...can I have my scrapbook back, Sir?" Sanjay asked hesitantly.
"No," Mr. Chandra said firmly and went back to his work.
Sanjay walked back a little worried.

"Well friends, the responses I got to the assignment were very interesting. We have quite a creative bunch out here," Mr. Chandra said the next day.
"There was one individual who was so full of himself that he wrote six pages describing his virtues," Mr. Chandra said, his eyes resting for brief moment on Vinay, and David barely managed to suppress a giggle.
"There were a few others who thought that this assignment was meant mainly to enable them to write their biographies. Then there were some statistically-conscious boys too, who flooded me with data about their height, weight, identification marks, hobbies and other such trivia. Most of you, I think, missed the point altogether. I wanted you to look within yourself and try to really understand the fellow inside you. I wanted you to explore your own feelings, your hopes, your dreams and assess your place in the
whole, wide world. But almost all of you were wide off the mark," said the teacher shaking his head in disappointment.

"Now, let me read out a poem written by one of you which touched me with its honesty, simplicity and yes, also its poignancy."

Mr. Chandra cleared his throat and began to read in his loud, clear voice:

**About Me**

_I have not one but two names,  
'Hey you!' And 'What's your name?'  
That is how I am known  
And I have no one else to blame._

_Who would remember someone  
Who is good at nothing?  
Who has, can or ever will  
Excel even in a single thing?_

_Some are good in studies  
Others in many a game.  
Some paint a pretty picture  
And earn for themselves a name._

_But what about me?  
I have nothing that can impress a single soul,  
Neither talent nor looks, nor ability  
To achieve a solitary goal._

_But wait, am I really useless?  
Only some flesh and bones?  
Or do I have something inside me  
A quality that is truly my own?_
A heart that beats for others
And joys and sorrows it shares
A mind that looks beyond
A soul that truly cares.

In this world today
If a loving heart is a treasure
Then I pray to everyone
To judge me using a new measure.

Don’t judge me by how many prizes I never win
But by how many sorrows I share.
Not by the number of claps I don’t earn
But by my ready stock of compassion and care.

Don’t ignore me, don’t look through
Pay me a little heed.
A little nod, a friendly smile,
That is all I need.

I am an average and ordinary boy
Treat me at least like a person.
Give me a name, anything that you like
But please, at least, make me feel human.
After Mr. Chandra had finished the poem there was pin-
drop silence. Then slowly Sartaj started clapping. He was
joined by Khadeer and Harpreet and soon the whole class
was clapping with enthusiasm.

After a few moments, when all was quiet, Mr. Chandra
asked, "Can you guess the name of the poet?"

The boys looked at each other.
"Sir, is it by any chance Mihir?" asked Khadeer looking
at the class topper.
Mr. Chandra shook his head.
"I think it is David."
"No, no chance, it must be Prateek." Prateek was good
in debates.
"I feel it must be Sandip, Sir," Sandip usually topped
in English.
And so on and on the guessing game went.
"All of you are wrong," Mr. Chandra said and finally
announced, "the creator of this lovely piece of verse
is Sanjay."
"Sanjay!"
"What?"
"Of all people!"
"I can't believe it!"
"It seems impossible!"
"How come!"

There was a chorus of voices as everyone turned to look
at Sanjay who turned red with embarrassment.

"Yes, boys, it is Sanjay. He is the budding poet we should
all be proud of. One more thing, when I gave you this idea
of writing about yourself I was hoping it would help you
look within. I had no idea that this exercise would tell us
not only how we view ourselves but also how we treat others.
Sanjay's poem was a real eye-opener. A shy, sensitive boy
who is harbouring so much of talent is simply ignored by us simply because he is quiet and modest. None of us has the patience to reach out to the lovely and creative person behind the shy exterior," Mr. Chandra paused, looked directly at Sanjay and said, "I thank you, Sanjay, for teaching me to look beyond myself."

Later, after the class, Sanjay was mobbed by his classmates. That day, for the first time, Sanjay felt he was someone special.
HORRID BEGINNING, NASTY END!

Hema Rao

SILENCE prevailed in the Chemistry lab. Thirty girls were busy conducting experiments. Mrs. Vohra kept a strict eye on each girl. And each girl knew if she uttered a single word, she faced the threat of being thrown out of the lab!

Suddenly there was a shriek. Ambika nearly dropped her test tube in fright! Renu inhaled too much of the pungent gas emanating from her tube which triggered off a coughing fit. Anjali accidentally sipped a bit of her solution in her pipette! Monica was perched on top of her stool. She was sure that the horrid lizard had crept back into the lab! And Mrs. Vohra was furious, ready to throw girls out of the lab!

Aruna had spilt acid on her skirt—her starched green school skirt. A big hole now adorned it.
"She poked me with her compass!" said Aruna, pointing a finger accusingly at Nikita.
"She...she...dared me to!" said Nikita.
"Both of you leave my class and write a hundred times that 'I will not behave like a juvenile delinquent!'"
"But..." protested Aruna.

"Out, I say!" the teacher shouted on top of her voice.

Aruna and Nikita left the lab immediately.

"How many times have I told you to just take a whiff at the gas? Not gulp it in as if it was oxygen?" Mrs. Vohra sternly glared at Renu.

"Hey, my cough has gone!" whispered Renu to Arpita.

"Took fright, I suppose!" grinned Arpita.

Class XI-A was glad when the practical class was over.

Mrs. Vohra was in a very bad mood!

"Beware!" said Monica to Class XI-B as they trooped
into the lab. "The lioness is out of her den and is roaring like mad!"

Mathematics was the next period for Class XI-A. Not their favourite class. Mrs. Roy was very strict! The girls were puzzled by the fragrant smell emanating from their classroom. But they had no time to figure out its source as their mathematics teacher rushed into the classroom.

"Page 45, exercise III A," she announced as soon as she entered the classroom.

She picked up a chalk piece and went to the blackboard. She wrote an algebraic formula. But nothing appeared on the blackboard! Mrs. Roy was amazed. She threw away the chalk and picked up another. The blackboard still showed nothing. Amazing!

"Yippee! It too hates Maths!" muttered Aruna.
"Maybe it is so bored that it has gone to sleep!" giggled Nikita softly.
"Or...ouch!" whimpered Arpita, as Aruna pinched her really hard.

Mrs. Roy glared at the class. There was pin-drop silence.
"Atishoo! Aaaaa...ti...shooo!" sneezed Sushma.
"What have you done to the blackboard?"
"Nothing, ma'am!" said class in unison.
"But it smells nice!" volunteered Nikita bravely, her heart quaking in fright!
"Atishoooo!"
"Sushma!"
"Sorry, Ma'am!" gasped Sushma. "It is that smell! Aaaaaaa...tishooo!"
"Talcum powder," said the teacher grimly surveying her class.
"Atishooooo!"
"Go to the clinic, Sushma," ordered Mrs. Roy.
The girls watched enviously as Sushma happily went out. "My nose always lets me down!" whispered Nikita sadly. "Since I can't write a thing," said the teacher, "I will check your homework in class itself."

"Homework! What homework?" squealed Nikita. "I told you we had to do those sums!" said Aruna smugly. "Call the ambulance, I am feeling very sick!" gasped Arpita in a weak voice.

Benita prayed fervently, "Bee, lizard, flood, earthquake! Strike fast!"

"Ma'am, I was absent yesterday!" said Anjali. "Ma'am! I have a hole in my skirt!" said Aruna sadly. "May I go to the clinic, Ma'am?" asked Arpita. "I feel very sick!"

"Your homework!" said Mrs. Roy firmly. "Ma'am! Ma'am!"

"Kavita?"

"Yesterday you said the work was for next Tuesday, ma'am," said Kavita, fingers crossed. "Yes, ma'am!" shouted Class XI-A.

"I said Tuesday and then asked for the next exercise book, Kavita!"

"But, Ma'am, we thought it was for the next Tuesday!" insisted Kavita. "No one has done the homework."

The teacher looked at the class. Twenty-nine girls looked hopefully at her, ready to clutch at any straw that would prevent that dreaded march to the Principal's office. "Well?"

"No one, Ma'am!" said Kavita firmly.

Mrs. Roy insisted on teaching them the next chapter on algebraic formulae and their applications, sans the blackboard. The result? Each girl had a different answer for the same sum as each had her own formula! Their teacher
was furious. She said she already knew that they had buttons instead of eyes but now was horrified to discover they had only sand in their heads!

"So is that the reason why we cannot remember anything?" asked Monica.

"We have no brains!" whispered Aruna sadly.

Class XI-A was glad when that class too got over. But Mrs. Roy had her revenge. She gave them twenty more sums for homework!

"Ma'am!" protested the class.

But the teacher had already left the classroom. Dismay turned to joy when Arpita suddenly realized they had no mathematics class the next day and that the following day was a holiday. Then came Saturday and Sunday!

"Yippee!" shouted the girls happily.

"Girls! Girls! Is this a classroom or a bull arena?"

Pin-drop silence prevailed. The class teacher surveyed her class grimly.

"Who powdered the blackboard?"

"Not me, ma'am!" protested Nikita as her teacher looked at her.

"Difficult to believe, Nikita," said the class teacher.

"Maybe it wanted to be all spruced up," suggested Aruna.

Everyone stared at her.

"So many pretty females, Ma'am!"

The class guffawed.

"That witty answer wins you the honour of inking your beau!" said the teacher.

"Ma'am!"

"Your Physics teacher has gone on a week's leave..."

"Yippee!"

"Girls! You have a new teacher. Any more complaints about your behaviour..."
"Ma'am, I have a hole in my skirt!" said Aruna.
"Is this Class XI-A?"

It was their new Physics teacher. Their class teacher told her to inform her of any misbehaviour on the part of her students and looked at the girls, a steely glint in her eyes. Then she left the classroom.

"I was told you had begun the chapter on Friction," said the new teacher.
"Ma'am, could you start all over again? I didn't understand what was taught that day," said Nikita.
"Did you understand Newton's Laws of Motion?"
"Yes, Ma'am!"
"Class?"
"Yes, Ma'am!"
"Then I think it is best to revise what has been taught before we go on to a new topic!"

Ms. Prabha suppressed a smile as she looked at her class. Horror was written on the faces! For once the girls were bereft of words!

"Let us start with you," said Ms. Prabha, pointing at Nikita. "You said you knew everything about Newton's Laws of Motion!"

'Dear God, please let this be a bad dream!' prayed Nikita desperately.

"Well?"

"N...not ever...rything, Ma'am. A little bit!" replied Nikita shakily.

No one grinned. Two solid periods of Physics; a new ruthless teacher—Class XI-A was having a really nasty day!

"Do you think tears will help?" whispered Aruna as she bent to pick up her pencil on the floor.

"Bawl!" advised Ambika softly.

"Your name?" asked Ms. Prabha, her gaze still on Nikita.
"Nikita, Ma'am."
"State the First Law of Motion."
"Ma'am, force alters motion!"
"What sort of motion? You!" said the teacher pointing her finger at Aruna.
"Ma'am, I have a hole in my skirt!"
The class grinned. But not their teacher. She frowned at Aruna. Turning to Ambika, she said, "Maybe you can help your friend!"
There was silence as the two girls frantically racked their brains for a reply.
"Perhaps you know the Second Law!" said the teacher sarcastically. "Or is it possible you know no law? I thought you all said you knew Newton very well!"
"A little, Ma'am!" said Kavita. "It is difficult to explain..."
"Try it. Take out a piece of paper and write it down. Ten minutes to hand in your answers. Any one of the Laws of Motion!"
The girls gazed at their notebooks. Not a single girl could remember any of Newton's Laws properly! Fifteen minutes later the girls were kneeling on the floor. Each prayed fervently for the bell to ring. But they remembered
that the next period was again Physics! The bell did ring.
"Ma'am!" It was the school peon.
'Let it be a summon from the Principall' prayed Nikita.
But it was just a note that the teacher had to sign.
"Sorry, Ma'am!" said Nikita.
"Sorry, Ma'am!" echoed Ambika.
"Sorry, Ma'am!" said Class XI-A.
"Get up. Memorize the First Law of Motion in fifteen minutes. Then close your textbooks and write it down. Anyone who doesn't get it right will go back to what will soon be her favourite pastime. Kneeling!"
By the end of the period the class knew Newton's Laws of Motion backwards and forwards!
Ms. Prabha swept out of the classroom. Left behind were Class XI-A girls rubbing sore knees.
"Now I have a hole in my skirt and a sore knee!" grumbled Aruna.
The last two classes were P.T. Class XI-A again got punished. Their crime? Charging down the stairs like wild elephants! So by the end of that horrid school day, Class XI-A yearned for one and only one thing.
Home, sweet home!
REALIZATION
Ramendra Kumar

MHIR," a sharp voice rang out.
"Y...yes, Sir," Mihir jumped up.
Ravi Sir was standing in front of him, his sharp
eyes boring into Mihir.
"You are again daydreaming? And it is because of this
habit your performance is slipping," he thundered.
Mihir looked down.
"Can you guess how much you have got in Maths?"
Mihir did not reply. He knew when Ravi Sir was in a bad
mood the safest option was to keep quiet.
"Just 62 marks out of 100. Mihir Pradhan, who I used
to go around telling, is brilliant in Maths getting 62! See
this paper," Ravi Sir shouted thrusting the paper under
Mihir's nose. "It is full of mistakes, silly mistakes, which
a Class III child would be ashamed to commit. And you
are in Class VI. I am ashamed of you. Come on, get out of
my class and kneel down in the corridor. That is the only
punishment for boys like you," Ravi Sir said and turned
around and went back to the blackboard.
"But, Sir, there are so many who have got less marks
than me," Mihir mumbled. And as soon as he uttered these words he realized his folly.

Ravi Sir strode back to where Mihir was standing, his face red with anger. "You shameless fool! Instead of admitting your mistake, you are comparing yourself with others. You get out of my class," he thundered, his eyes bulging out and his moustache bristling with anger.

When Mihir did not move Ravi Sir took two steps towards Mihir's desk. The class froze. Mihir felt scared. What was Ravi Sir going to do? Ravi Sir then raised his left hand pointing towards the door and shouted on top of his voice, "Get out, this moment."

Mihir walked out of the class without a word. His face red with shame and anger.

He felt hot and angry tears in his eyes. Mihir was really puzzled. Why did Ravi Sir pick on him. He knew there were many students who had scored much less than him, then why only he was punished this way.
In his entire school career he had never been humiliated like the way he was today. Yes, he had been punished many times. But being thrown out of the class, this was entirely a new and most painful experience.

During the break when Mihir stood leaning against a tree not in a mood to join his friends for a game of football, Piyush and his gang surrounded him. Piyush was the class bully who hated Mihir.

"Hey, man, it was cool, wasn't it, the way good old Ravi Sir dealt with our Maths wizard," Piyush said.

"I wonder what was more painful—Ravi Sir's scolding or his throwing Mihir out like a waste paper?" sniggered Ranjit.

"Anyway, I liked both. It has been a long time since we had some fun in the Maths class," Piyush said and burst out laughing.

Mihir clenched his fist and was about to sock it to Piyush when the bell rang and his tormentors scampered back to the class.

Mihir just could not concentrate in the class. He sat in his place cursing Ravi Sir. He had never hated any teacher as much as he now hated Ravi Sir. It was true that in the last two weekly tests he had not done well in Maths and in the terminal exam too he had got only 62. It was also a fact that he had made silly mistakes. But did that mean he deserved to be treated in front of the entire class so badly? After all there were others who had even failed. But Ravi Sir, apart from calling them 'silly donkeys', had done nothing. He had not even scolded them. It was really unfair. God alone knew what Ravi Sir had against him. But he would not allow him to get away with it. He would teach him a lesson he would never forget. But what could he do?

Mihir sat in deep thought thinking of plans to get even with Ravi Sir without, at the same time, getting into trouble.
himself. Finally, just before the lunch break, an idea struck him. A really cool idea that would make things sticky for Ravi Sir without landing Mihir in any trouble.

After lunch was the History period. He took permission to go to the toilet and went to the parking lot where the scooters were parked. He had no difficulty in locating Ravi Sir’s scooter. Mihir looked around. The parking lot was deserted. He quickly bent down and took out an old, rusted nail, from his pocket, and let the air out from both the tyres.

After accomplishing his task he quietly slipped back to his class.
During the sports period a football match was going on between his house, Jhelum House, and the Ganga House. Since he had some reading to catch up with, he went to the library. There he was busy scanning the rows of books when he heard his name being mentioned. He stopped to listen. He recognized the voice immediately. It was Ravi Sir's. He was sitting on the table a few feet away. From where he was seated Ravi Sir could not see Mihir who was standing between two book shelves.

"I think I went a bit too far with Mihir today," he said.

"Why? What happened?" It was the voice of Mike Sir who taught English.

"That boy is brilliant. He has got a terrific head for Maths. But he is terribly careless and also quite lazy. You know, Mike, he reminds me of my kid brother Raghu. He too was great at Maths and Physics. He had tremendous potential. We were sure he would make it to the IITs. But he lacked discipline and wouldn't study. My father and I tried our best to tame him. But he refused to mend his ways. And do you know where he ended up?"

"Didn't he make it to the IIT?" Mike Sir asked.

"No way. He couldn't even get into any of the other engineering colleges. He dropped out of college and now he takes tuitions for a living. Mihir has the same spark but I also see in him the same kind of carelessness. I am scared he might go the same way," Ravi Sir said sadly.

"Have you tried to counsel him?"

"Not exactly. In the last few tests he has not been doing well and I have been telling him quite sternly. But today was the limit. He got poor marks and when I shouted at him he made an impertinent remark. I could not control myself and threw him out of my class. Mihir was shocked and so was the entire class."
"Don't get upset. Mihir is a good fellow. I think he needs a little bit of counselling." Mike Sir consoled Ravi Sir.

"Yes, you are right. But, Mike, believe me, I see so much of Raghu in him that I can't be objective. I don't want Mihir's brilliance wasted like it happened with Raghu."

Mihir heard this conversation in silence. After sometime the teachers walked away. Mihir went and sat down, a book in his hand, but his mind on what he had heard. So, it was Ravi Sir's concern and affection for him which had made him act so tough. Yes, Ravi Sir was right, he had been
becoming careless. A day before the Maths exam he had watched an India-Sri Lanka cricket match till late in the night. And today by messing up Ravi Sir’s scooter, he had committed the worst sin. What was he to do now? He sat in his place brooding.

The ringing of the school bell brought him to life. He ran to his class, picked up the school bag and went to the parking lot.

Ravi Sir was standing looking glumly at his scooter. Mihir went up to him.

"See, Mihir, both the tyres of my scooter are flat. You must be thinking I deserve this," he looked at Mihir with a wry smile on his face.

Mihir felt very guilty. "Sir, I will go on my cycle and get the mechanic."

He was back in ten minutes with a fifteen-year-old boy sitting behind him. The mechanic took the tyres and went back with Mihir. They returned forty minutes later. And in another ten minutes, Ravi Sir’s scooter was once again road-worthy.

"Mihir, after the way I treated you this morning I think it was very nice of you to help me out. I owe you a thanks as well as an apology."

"No, Sir, I owe you a apology," said Mihir sheepishly.

"How come?" asked Ravi Sir puzzled.

"Sir, it was...it was I who...who did this."

"What?"

"Yes, Sir. After this morning’s incident, I was wild with anger. I decided to take it out on you and so I let the air out from the tyres. Then later in the library I heard you talking to Mike Sir about Raghu...it was only then that I realized my blunder. I...I am really sorry, Sir," Mihir said his head bent low.
Ravi Sir's eyes had gone red and his face was gradually matching his eyes.

Mihir knew he was in for it once again. And this time Ravi Sir might report to the Principal and the Principal might suspend Mihir for a few days. He looked down not daring to look up. After what seemed an unending wait he felt a heavy hand on his shoulders.

Mihir looked up. "I think both of us deserved a little bit of what we got. So let us forgive and forget," Ravi Sir said finally with a smile.

"Thank you, Sir," Mihir said, relief sweeping over him.
"But you must promise me something."
"What is that, Sir?"
"You will not let your brilliance go a waste."
"Don't worry, Sir, I will not let you down. I will prove that I am indeed different from Raghu," Mihir said with determination.
££ y yELLO! Hello! Hello!" shouted Arplt, hurrying towards Aniket and Abhinav, his best friends.

He surveyed the room with interest. They had been promoted to Class IX and it was the first day of the new session.

"Smashing room, isn't it?" he asked depositing his bag on a bench, by the window.

"I liked our previous classroom much better," Abhinav said a little wistfully, "this one doesn't overlook the pool."

"True, but the garden is just in front," Aniket said. "And it is far away from the Principal's room!" he added with a twinkle in his mischievous eyes.

The three grinned at each other. "Perhaps now we will spend more time inside the class than outside it!" Arpit put their thoughts into words.

The trio was always getting into trouble with the Principal. Mr. Shrivastava, who always chose to enter the class just when one of them was either drawing a caricature on the board (generally Arpit), or flying a paper plane or indulging in a chalk fight, with the inevitable result that they were
sent out of the class. Not that any of them really minded! In fact, when it was the boring History period, they actually preferred to stand out discussing more important things in life rather than to yawn at the exploits of one or the other courageous monarchs.
Aniket would say seriously, "We should learn the importance of peace. Imagine if those silly rulers of yester-years had understood this, we wouldn't have had to learn History at all!"

The prayer marked the end of their discussion and they filed out of the room into the impressive new auditorium.

It felt so good to be back that Arpit even smiled at his old enemy Richa Mathur, the pesky girl in section B, who lived in his colony and seemed to derive the only pleasure in her life by carrying tales to his mother!

She also had the nerve to give them a nickname—The Outstanding Guys! The name they preferred to be called as was The Three Aces'. However, Richa had found out about it and habitually mispronounced it as The Three Asses' whenever they were within earshot!

She herself was one of those teacher's pet types, the goody-goody girl, 'With just the halo missing!' Arpit thought gritting his teeth, whenever he saw her. The worst thing about her was that she made it a point to trot in with that maddening holier than thou expression just when they were made to stand outside the class, which was almost thrice a week. How the three longed to teach her a lesson!

The first day of a new session is always exciting. There are so many new things to look forward to—new books and new timetable for one—which gives a fresh chance of grumbling once more about the stinginess with which 'Games' and 'Library' periods are allotted.

"Education is supposed to be for all-round development," said Shashi, the class wit, in a serious voice, "how can we become good sports people and well-read individuals, if they give us just five games periods and two miserly library periods against..." he stopped, rolled his eyes for
greater impact and added, "...thirty-nine periods of studies in a week? What kind of an education is this, I say?"

"Hear! Hear!" chanted the class, much moved.

"And," began Arpit, who had nimbly jumped onto the teacher's dais, "how in the world can they encourage various talents if they keep punishing the future artist for drawing caricatures, or the combat pilot who practices between two periods and, for that matter, the soldier who sharpens his skills in marksmanship by throwing otherwise useless bits of chalk?"
The whole class burst into giggles as the trio took a bow!
"Hey, Sudha Ma'am is coming. Shhh! Shhh!" hissed Varun who had been posted at the door as a lookout for any dangers.

When the much-loved Maths teacher entered the class, followed by a tousle-haired boy, there was pin-drop silence and all the thirty children appeared to be concentrating fiercely in their Mathematics books.

"Well! Well! Well!" she remarked in a suspicious tone, "what a change from the notorious VIII-A, the rowdiest class in the school! I do hope you continue like this throughout this year."

"Yes, Ma'am," no one could have sounded more sincere than Class IX!

"All right, let me introduce Shishir Mishra, the only new student this term. He has come from Nainital," she turned to the boy, "I hope you will like being here..."

"I already do!" Shishir gave an impish grin to the class and instantly won their hearts.

The only other new person to be introduced that day was the new Science teacher, Ms. Mukta Saxena, an extremely stern looking individual, who made it amply clear on the first day itself that she wouldn’t tolerate any nonsense in the class.

* * *

Within a month, the The Three Aces' were renamed The Four Aces', as Shishir became an inseparable part of the group. Very much like Arpit, Aniket and Abhinav, he too delighted in designing new mischief every day. He also recounted with evident glee the various tricks he had been up to in his previous school. Soon he had won their confidence and they shared with him their wish to teach Richa a lesson.
"Do you think you can help?" Aniket asked hopefully.
"Sure, I can, Aniket, just let me think for a while," Shishir answered gravely. All of them put their heads together. And when such brilliant minds joined forces, a spectacular idea was certain to evolve. Shishir soon came up with a brainwave!

During the next few days, The Four Aces could be seen whispering and giggling at all hours. And finally, the great day arrived.

It was the second-last period; Richa was hurrying to her class, as she knew too well how much Mukta Ma'am disliked latecomers, when she collided with Arpit, who was coming at a top speed from the office.

"Ooh!" she cried rubbing her forehead, "why can't you look where you are going?"

Expecting a sarcastic retort, she was taken aback when she heard a meek "Sorry, Richa..."

"Are you all right?" she couldn't help asking, even as she started towards her class.

"Oh, yes, I am fine. By the way, is Mukta Ma'am in your class?" he asked, knowing perfectly well that she was.

"Yes, why?"

"Will you give her a message?" Richa nodded.

"Well, Richa, tell Mukta Ma'am that her mother who was expected tomorrow, has arrived today instead. She has called the office, ask Mukta Ma'am to take the call, it is very urgent."

Arpit disappeared in the class before Richa could change her mind.

Fortunately, the teacher was still to arrive in their class. The Four Aces stood peeping from the spy-hole, grinning from ear to ear and shaking hands time to time.
Class IX-B was just opposite their class and presently they saw Ms. Mukta striding towards it, looking a little annoyed as she was full two minutes late for her class.

"She has had it today, boys!" jumped Aniket when he saw Richa meeting the teacher at the door.

"Let me see, let me see, you beasts!" yelled Abhinav, the smallest ace, who barely reached the spy-hole.

They could hardly control their excitement when they saw the frown deepening on Ms. Mukta's face.
Then she turned abruptly and marched back towards the office.

The enormous figure of Mr. Prasad, the Chemistry teacher loomed in front and the four just managed to sprint back to their seats in the nick of time.

Soon all of them were enmeshed in the atomic structure, when Laxman, the peon, knocked.

"What is it?" asked Prasad Sir in an irritated voice.

Laxman murmured something inaudibly as the class looked on.

"What?" ejaculated Mr. Prasad as he peered round the class through his thick glasses, till his eyes fell on Arpit.

"So," he began, "what have you been up to this time?"

"Me? Nothing, Sir..." Arpit stood up shakily.

"Oho?" No one could be more scathing than Mr. Prasad.

"Then I guess, the Principal Sir is just missing you!" he said sarcastically. "Go to the office and shut the door behind you!"

"This is how Arpit tried to disrupt the class..."

Arpit heard Mukta Ma'am complaining about him when he entered the Principal’s office.

Mr. Shrivastava glared, "You can’t stay out of trouble for long, can you? And I guess you were aided in this by those three as well?"

It was no good offering explanations, Arpit knew by experience, so he just nodded miserably. How in the world had they got on to this?

"And, Sir," Mukta Ma’am said accusingly, "they were trying to get back at poor Richa, who, otherwise would have been severely punished, had she not been my niece and known quite well that my mother wasn’t expected... at all"
SMITHA was late today. It was all because she was late in getting up in the morning. This itself was a result of having slept after watching a movie late into the night. Everything, as a result, was delayed. And as she donned her uniform and combed her hair fast, she knew she would have to hurry. She stuffed all her books into her bag and on the way, took a few seconds to gulp down a bit of her breakfast along with a glass of milk. She hated hurrying; she would rather be steady and organized as she was on most days, but today was an exception. Her house was close to the school, and normally it took her about ten minutes to reach the school. Today, she ran and reached in five minutes. The school gates were about to close when she reached panting and perspiring, but just in time.

She was tired; the run had made her a little dizzy. She was unable to concentrate on what the teacher was saying. She lazily brought out the textbook and the notebook for the subject. As she glanced at the girl sitting next to her, Smitha was taken aback. Sujatha was opening her homework notes. Smitha anxiously searched in her school
bag. Her apprehension was proved right—she had forgotten to bring her homework notebook.

It came as a shock. What would happen if it were known that she, of all people, had not brought her homework? She had been the most serious student in the class and her reputation was at stake.
Smitha looked around the classroom anxiously. So far, nobody had noticed that she had not brought her homework copy. She began to listen to what the teacher was saying, with more concentration. No, the teacher was not saying anything about the homework, but Smitha felt that she would soon do so. Today the teacher was teaching about the solar system; part of this had been taught before but Smitha listened carefully.

Smitha glanced again at Sujatha's homework. 'Why was the girl keeping it open,' thought Smitha angrily. Then she remembered that she too had a habit of keeping out the homework in the hope that the teacher would ask for it, and that she would get credit for doing the homework properly while those who had not done it, would get punished. Today, she could empathize with all the others who did not do their homework.

Smitha was thinking of what she could do, if the teacher asked her. She decided that she would tell the truth—that she had done the homework, but had forgotten to bring it to the class. But would the teacher believe her? This was the excuse most students gave, when they would not do their homework. The teacher would not believe her and think that she was lying. No, there was no way to escape punishment today.

The teacher seemed intent on teaching, but Smitha knew that she was capable of stopping suddenly and asking for the homework.

Smitha looked at the small clock hanging over the blackboard. She realized that more than half the duration of the class was still left. She lost all hopes of escape. She began to pray. If the teacher forgot to ask about the homework, she would make an offering to God. What could she offer? Yes, she would give half of her weekly pocket
money of Rs. 10 to the beggar who sat near the temple. She had crossed him several times and had not given him anything. She looked at the clock. It seemed to have stopped—but one could hear the 'tick-tick' of the clock. The sound meant that it was still working, but it was difficult to pass time. Why did the teacher have to teach everything so fast?

Smitha was afraid that the teacher would complete all details about the solar system and broach the topic of the homework. She tried to concentrate on the rapid way the teacher was speaking. Smitha tried to count the number of flowers on the teacher's sari. After twenty, she lost count; her mind was wandering.

Next, she tried counting the number of times, the teacher said, 'the'. This was more fascinating. She had already reached ninety-eight when she heard the teacher say, "Now Smitha will tell us, which is the largest planet in the solar system. Come on, Smitha."

"Hundred," counted Smitha, who suddenly realized that the teacher was looking at her. She recalled that she had been asked a question probably about the largest planet, but she wasn't sure. She didn't dare to ask the teacher to repeat the question.

Smitha who had always been eager to answer any question thrown at the class, now hesitatingly said, "Jupiter" in a very low voice, which was barely audible.

"A bit loudly, my dear," said the teacher. "What happened to you today? Yes, you are right; just speak up."

Smitha felt relieved that she knew the answer to the question that the teacher had asked. Now, she felt she had to listen carefully just in case the teacher asked her another question.

However, after a while, her attention again wavered,
as the lecture seemed to be too boring. She tried to follow the progress of an ant across the room. 'Yes,' she thought, 'if the ant goes straight across the room, it means that the teacher is going to ask me for the homework and if the ant turns before that, I am saved.'

The ant went slowly and purposefully across the room. It stopped mid-way and seemed to be thinking about turning back, but then decided to go ahead and cross the room. All was lost; the ant had crossed the room, the teacher wouldn't be catching her any moment now. After a few seconds, she realized that the teacher was showing no interest in the homework. There was still hope left. She may have been wrong about the omen of the ant crossing the room. This time she decided that if the teacher would go and sit on her chair in the next five minutes, she would ask for the homework. Now the time seemed to be crawling. The teacher reached very close to the chair and Smitha was sure that the teacher was going to sit down. However, the teacher moved to the board to draw a diagram. Soon Smitha heaved a sigh of relief. Five minutes were over, the teacher had not sat on the chair. This meant that she was saved, or was she?

In the next half an hour, she had thought of several omens, some of which had favoured her, while others had gone against her. The sound of the bell indicating the end
of the class came like a bell of victory to her. She looked triumphantly at Sujatha, who seemed to be a bit dejected that the teacher had not asked for the homework.

When the class got over, Smitha felt very happy. She wanted to shout and dance, but the others couldn't understand the reason for her joy. It was a strange behaviour on her part as she was generally very calm and serious.

"I didn't bring the homework today," she told Sujatha triumphantly making Sujatha feel worse. "I didn't bring the homework today," she told the rest of the class; but many of them didn't find anything strange about the news. They were used to coming to school without the homework. Not so for Smitha. For her it was an unforgettable experience.
Those carefree, playful days when life revolves around homework, assignments, exams, house rivalries, sports days, annual days, open days; when friends are more important than family; when everybody in class is united in playing pranks, and in facing punishment, too; when everyone aims to be the teachers’ pet, and the teachers—Well, they become the extended family!

Indeed, it is a fun-filled period of everyone’s life.