SOME MORE SHORT STORIES

Children's Book Trust, New Delhi
The stories are a collection made by the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children from among those written by its members.

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Bent over a stream of muddy rain water, Ana gently launched a paper boat. Like the two earlier ones, this boat, too, sailed down the stream swiftly and proudly.

And each time that happened Ana would shriek with delight. But this time something horrible happened. A big boy pounced on her boat and pulled it out. He wiped off the water and turned the boat upside down.

Ana stared at the boy. He was huge and dirty. And so engrossed was he in inspecting the boat that he did not notice Ana’s angry stare. She turned and ran into the house.

Aunt Avanti was sitting in an armchair watching the newly washed trees and the beautiful sky, when Ana barged in, her face red and lips pouting. "That awful boy, he snatched away my boat," she said.

"Don’t worry. I will make another one for you," Aunt Avanti tried to console her.

"What if he takes that one also?"

"Then ... I will make some more boats."

"And supposing he takes all of them?"

"No. He won’t because I will make two for him as well."

"But why should you make any for him?"
"Because I don't think he has an Aunt Avanti who will make boats for him."
"Then ... can't he make them himself? He is so big."
"Yes, Ana, but may be no one has taught him how to make boats."
"Why, didn't he go to school? He is so bad, he could not have."

Aunt Avanti just smiled. She had cut some papers into squares and was already folding one. In no time a boat was ready. Then she made a few more. Finally, she gave all the boats to Ana and said, "Here, now run along and have fun."

Ana did not move. She was still sulking. She did not want to have anything to do with that boy. But there was no choice. The rain had just stopped and the gurgling and swirling muddy rain water flowing through the open drain looked so inviting.

Clutching the boats tight, Ana started walking hesitantly towards the stream. The boy was still there. He looked at her curiously.

Ana took out two not-so-good boats and held them out for the boy.

He could hardly believe that this pretty girl in the blue frock was calling him. He almost ran to her. "Take," she said without the trace of a smile.

The boy took them and just stood there quietly. He did not know what to say.

Chin up in the air, Ana turned her back and gently launched her boat.

Swiftly the boat sailed down the stream. The boy stood there watching it, a faint smile dancing on his lips. Ana knew that he had no intention of pulling it out of the water. Happily she watched the swiftly moving boat as it sailed beautifully!
Ana was about to shriek with delight once again when, to her horror, she saw the boat getting caught in a lump of mud and stones. Water splashed against it and slowly flooded the boat. In a flash, the boy dashed right through the stream and pulled the boat out of the water.

He turned the boat upside down to drain off the water and without a word held it out to Ana.

Ana took the boat and smiled. The boy smiled back a beautiful smile. Ana turned round and gently left the boat in the stream. It sailed swiftly and drifted past the big lump of stones, mud, and grass. Soon it was out of sight.

Ana and the boy looked at each other and smiled.
Stranger By The Window

'How is that?' thought Ruby. That was her book - her new book. She had not even finished reading it. How was it with the man at the window?

The window berth was just opposite their cubicle. Ruby and her mother were sharing with the lady on the bunk. It was one of the old second class sleeper compartments. Ruby liked it. She liked the corridor that separated the cubicles from the window berth. One could have a stroll along it. Ruby had been enjoying - chit-chatting with her friend Mithu in the other cubicle. While coming back, just at the entrance of the cubicle she looked back and spotted the book.

"How come my book is lying with you, sir, here?" Ruby cried out. The man did not stir. He was busy reading a newspaper that covered his face sideways. He did not reply. That enraged Ruby.

"Excuse me," she asked earnestly.
"Yes?" the man replied, without looking up.

"Busy reading, eh? Listen, can I take my book?" Ruby was angry.
"Your book? Which one?" The man looked around.
"My book, yes. This one - Panchatantra."
Ruby pointed out to the book lying among a host of
other books and magazines kept by his side.

"Are you sure, this is your book?" the man asked. His face lit up with a faint smile. He kept on looking at her. "This could be mine too," he quipped without waiting for an answer.

'Is he kidding? A book for children? His? Coming on to mischief?" she thought to herself.

"Ma, look, the book Manu uncle gave me at the station - he has taken it."

Ruby called her mother. Mother did not hear instantly. The train was moving fast and there was the noise. Ruby could not control herself. She ran to Ma picking up the book in haste. "Mom, did not Manu uncle give me this book?" Ruby asked holding the book up.

"Yes, of course. What is it?" Mother was curious.

"He has taken away my book - now he wonders if the book belongs to me at all?" Ruby's voice was full of emotion.

"But where did you keep it?" Ma wanted to gauge the situation.

"There, in my bag over there," Ruby pointed to the corner of her berth.

Ma was not sure if the man at the window had been to their side, in the cubicle at any time during Ruby's absence. She did not remember to have noticed any such move on his part. On the other hand he had been there all along. Completely occupied with reading - could be an ardent book lover like Ruby, mother thought. But the book was a gift to Ruby from Manu, which was a fact. There was no doubt about it.

"You should know how to look after your things while on a journey. Now sit down and read, if you like."

Ruby's mother did not like any kind of commotion. The lady on the bunk was not satisfied. "You meet all sorts of
people in trains!" She commented putting an extra force on 'all sorts'

The man at the window did not seem to mind it. He was friendly. He said, "If you think the book is yours, you..." He was interrupted with vehemence.

"This is mine, of course, this is my Panchatantra, a book for children." Ruby held the book up showing the cover, as if to prove that children's books should remain only with children.

"But..." the man fumbled, as he watched Ruby fuming, "well, you can keep it, baby." He quietly stood up, walked out of the compartment leaving all his books, magazines - all belongings unguarded on his berth.

"You can keep it! You can keep it, baby?" What does he mean? Ruby is no longer a baby! Ruby is full eleven years old. She is not a careless little girl. Ruby sat down on her berth, opened the book but was unable to concentrate. Her little mind was disturbed.

The train meanwhile built up speed. Some passengers began moving, and arranging their luggage. The destination was close. Ruby caressed the book on her lap. She could not afford to lose it! The lady on the bunk watched her and threw a consolation commenting, "you cannot do a thing. These days all such people move about freely in gentleman's attire! No manners!"

The man returned, caught up half the comment. He waited for a minute, bundled up his things and left the compartment, perhaps to wait at the exit door. What was the hurry? He could not jump out of a running train. Most disagreeable man! Ruby pondered.

The train was pulling in the station. Daddy would be in any moment. Ruby should be ready to get off. She picked up her bag and started putting her little things in.

"Mom, look, please!"
"What is it?" Mother asked. She stood up. "What is it, dear?" she repeated.

"Look, my book is here! My copy of Panchatantra is here in my bag!" The copy in her hand was not actually hers.

"Did you not check it before, girl? What an awful thing to do! This copy may be for his own children at home." The lady on the bunk was ready to get down. She eyed Ruby with disdain.

"The man should have talked to her, should have told her clearly. He should have been frank with the child," Mother intervened.

"What a man!" Ruby added in support of her mother's argument.

Ruby was dazed. Holding two copies of Panchatantra in two hands, she tried to hold back her tears. She was sorry that she could not say 'sorry' to the man at the window.
A Man's Job

While playing in the lawn, Rahul saw Sunil coming out of the house with his bat, wickets and ball. He ran towards him and asked, "Sunil Dada, are you going to play cricket?"

"Yes."

"Can I come with you?" asked Rahul eagerly.

"Oh, no, you are small and we, grown-up boys, play a very rough game."

"Please, Dada, even if I can't play, at least I can do something. I can collect the ball for you people."

Rahul insisted. He was not ready to give up easily.

"No. We play with a cork ball and it is very hard. You may get hurt," said Sunil as he put his cricket gear on his bicycle and rode off at top speed.

Rahul watched him with admiration, 'Oh, how fast he can cycle!' he thought.

Sunil was his hero and he adored him. His sour point was that Sunil always treated him as a kid and that he hated. He talked to himself, 'I am no more a child. I am going to be nine next month. I walk alone from the bus stop to the house. Mother sends me to Mother Dairy booth to fetch milk sometimes and, above all, I can climb a tree which even Sunil Dada cannot.'
Rahul lived on the first floor while Sunil lived on the ground floor of the same bungalow. Rahul lived with his parents and grandmother. Sunil, who was fourteen, lived with his parents, grandparents and a grown-up brother. His father owned a big jewellery shop in the city.

As both Rahul's parents worked he spent most of the day with his grandmother. There were not many children of Rahul's age in the neighbourhood. Sunil played with Rahul sometimes.

One day Sunil said in confidence to Rahul, "I won a tennis ball in the school fete yesterday. I have kept it for you. It is safe enough for you to play cricket with it."

"But Dada, I am no more a small child," blurted out Rahul indignantly.

"O.K., O.K., don't get so worked up."

Sunil looked amused at the outburst.

"I am free in the afternoon. Come, we will play Monopoly. You can have lunch with me."

"Oh, good. I will just go upstairs and change my clothes."

Rahul dashed up the stairs, threw the school bag off and changed his clothes.

As he was putting on his T-shirt and shorts, he shouted, "Dadi, I am going to Sunil Dada's house to play Monopoly. I will have my lunch there."

The whole exercise took a few minutes and soon he was at the front door of Sunil's house. He pressed the bell and waited but no one opened the door. He again pressed the bell for a longer period. He pressed his ear against the door and heard footsteps behind the closed door. The door was still closed. 'Strange,' thought Rahul, 'only five minutes earlier Sunil Dada had invited me and now he is not opening the door.'
He ran to the back and found that door also bolted from inside. Then he ran towards the left side of Sunil's room. He went to the window, which was closed, its panes covered with black paper. Suddenly he heard a voice, "Who, who is there?" It was Sunil's voice but he was speaking in whispers.

"It is me, Rahul, you invited me and now..."

"Shshsh..." interrupted Sunil quickly. "Rahul, you will have to help us. Robbers are here inside."

"Robbers, have they got pistols?"

"Yes, they have. They were here when I came. As soon as I entered, they overpowered me and locked me in this room with my grandmother. Are you scared?"

"Oh, no, not at all," said Rahul.

"Then inform the police. Can you manage?"

"Oh, certainly."

Keeping to the hedge, Rahul quietly walked out of the gate, then ran with all his might. He was breathless when he reached the Police Assistance Booth. He found the policemen and started speaking at once.

"Sir, please come with me. My house is being robbed, I mean my friend's. I mean Sunil Dada's house..."

"What are you blabbering, child? Don't waste our time, we are too busy for your pranks. Instead of roaming around in this heat, go back to your house," said one of the policemen and started writing in his register. Another policeman was talking on the telephone.

'Every minute is precious,' thought Rahul desperately. He looked around and noticed a watch lying at the counter. He grabbed the watch and started running. The policemen were bewildered for a minute. Two policemen ran after Rahul shouting, "Hey, you thief. Give back the watch or we will lock you in the jail."

The road was empty, therefore, no one else joined the
chase. By the time Rahul reached the gate of the house, the policemen caught him.

"Please, sirs, don't get angry. I never intended to steal your watch. I only played this trick to bring you here," said Rahul.

Now the policemen looked less hostile. One took out the notebook and pen from his pocket and wrote something. Then he tore the page from the notebook and gave it to Rahul and said, "Son, run back to the booth again as fast as you can and give this to the policeman there. Tell me, which is the house?"

"Go straight to the left side of the house and knock on the window there. Sunil Dada is there," Rahul spoke and ran back to the Police Booth at top speed. Within minutes he was there again.

The policeman shouted as he saw Rahul, "You naughty boy, where is the watch?"

"Oh, believe me, I am not a thief. Read this quickly. Your friend has sent it."

Rahul handed the note to the policeman and waited impatiently. As soon as the policeman read the note, he swung into action. He gave some message on the walkie-talkie. Soon a flying-squad arrived. Rahul and the other policeman also climbed into the jeep. When they reached Sunil's house, the policemen who were already joined them and informed, "Robbers are still inside, two of them are armed with pistols. In all there are four."

The police quietly surrounded the house.

After a while the front door opened and a man holding a pistol came out. Cautiously he looked around and finding no one he signalled to his friends to come out. Three more persons came out. One was holding a canvas bag, the other a pistol, and the third was empty-handed. As
they started moving towards the gate, the inspector shouted "Catch!" and the police party attacked.

Thoroughly unprepared for this sudden attack, the robbers lost their wits. They were soon overpowered and disarmed. The police arrested them and herded them into the jeep. The policemen accompanying the robbers left in the jeep, and the rest of the men went inside. They untied Sunil and his grandmother. Then they went into the other bedroom where they untied Sunil's mother and grandfather. His grandfather was badly injured in the scuffle with the robbers. The ambulance was called through wireless since the robbers had cut the telephone line at Sunil's house.

Meanwhile they all assembled in the drawing room. Rahul narrated the whole story. Gaps were filled by Sunil and Sunil's mother. The police inspector patted Rahul and said, "You all must thank this small boy for your rescue. It was his presence of mind which saved you."

Sunil came to Rahul and said, "Hey, I always treated you as a small kid. But you are a very brave boy. You really did a man's job."

For Rahul this was the happiest moment. He was no more a small child for Sunil Dada. His face beamed with joy. "Sunil Dada, can I come to play cricket with you now?" he asked shyly.

Sunil nodded with a smile.
Raju's Pet

'Bah! bah!' the soft call of Tulsi, the cow, came from a distance. But Raju did not stir. It grew louder, and it seemed Tulsi was approaching the farmhouse. Raju turned on one side and pulled the patch-work quilt over his head.

"You are late for school," shouted his mother.

She gave Raju a gentle shake and continued, "All nature is up on such a fine spring morning. Come on, get up!" The milk was about to boil, so she rushed to the kitchen, and Raju covered his head, once more, with his quilt.

Raju's father, Sham Singh had returned from the farm. He was sitting, on a low stool, with his elbows resting on his knees. He held his head in his palms.

"What is wrong with you today?" Raju's mother asked him.

"I am sick, very sick, I have not slept a wink last night." Saying this, he rose to his feet, walked to the adjoining room, then stamping his foot on the wooden floor, almost screaming with rage, he said aloud, "I am simply fed up with that cow's 'bah, bah' the whole night. I am getting rid of her, I shall give her away to Ramji, when he comes here today."
Raju felt that the earth had slipped from under his feet. "What did you say, Babuji?" he asked.

"I am giving Tulsi to your uncle without fail," replied his father.

"But why?" he asked.

"Simply cannot put up with her 'bah, bah' any longer. She is such a nuisance," said his father firmly.

Raju looked stupefied. Then he mustered some courage and pleaded, "But Babuji! she is very young, she is just a year and a half. She will soon learn to behave like the other cows." His father picked up a small bag of corn and stepped out into the verandah. Raju ran after him shouting, "But Babuji..." and before he could complete his sentence, his father turned round and gave a dirty look as he walked towards the pond.

Filled with rage, depressed and dejected, Raju dressed himself. He took his bag, and walked out of the wooden gate hurriedly. He avoided his mother holding a glass of milk in one hand and his tiffin-box in the other. His mother shouted at him, "Wait, Raju, wait! I have packed some sweets for you." He did not pay any attention to her.

Once on the road, Raju slowed down and he felt as if his body was too heavy for his legs to carry. So he sat down on a projecting trunk of a pine tree; feeling blank, he started throwing little pebbles in the stream.

All of a sudden, he sprang to his feet. He threw his fist in the air, and shouted loudly, "I have got it, I have got it," and briskly walked away to his school.

He slipped into his seat quietly, his teacher was busy writing on the blackboard. Once again he was lost in deep thought, when a voice called out, "What is wrong with you, Raju? You are so absent-minded today!" Raju jumped to his feet with a jerk and replied, "Nothing, sir"
"Why are you not working then?" Raju stood silent for a moment and then replied softly, "I am sorry, sir," and he sat down to do his sums half-heartedly.

As soon as the last bell rang, Raju left the class, and strode home hurriedly almost running at times. On reaching the gate of the farm, he found Tulsi. He threw his bag in the hedge, rushed forward, throwing his arms round Tulsi's neck, kissed her forehead again and again and said, "So you are still here, my love! Don't leave me, never leave your Raju." Tulsi was gentle and docile, she stood motionless, with half-shut eyes, enjoying the sweet taste of love.

Raju ran towards the kitchen, shouting, "Amma, Amma, so Babuji has changed his mind?"

"No, Ramji had some work. He will take her tomorrow." Raju stepped back speechless. With anguish, he picked up his bag and slowly disappeared into his bedroom. He sat with a book and kept reading it.

It was nightfall already and all on the farm were fast asleep except Raju. All of a sudden he heard, 'bah, bah' of Tulsi. Soon he jumped out of the bed, rushed with a candle and a match box.

Raju lit the candle and opened the door of the shed. As his eyes fell on Tulsi, the candle dropped from his hand, and he was about to yell. Then suddenly he ran up the rickety stair-case into his father's bed room. He shook his father violently.

"What is it? What is it?" Sham Singh stammered.

"Babuji, my Tulsi, my Tulsi, save her," said Raju and he ran back towards the shed. His father followed him with his loaded gun and a lantern.

"Wait, Raju, stop, the tiger will get you," called out his father in a roaring voice.

"Please do not make noise," replied Raju.
As soon as Sham Singh reached the door of the shed, he moved back. In the dim light of the lantern, he could see Tulsi clearly. He was horrified and cried in subdued tone, "Oh, it is dhamin snake. It is this thief of a snake. No wonder you asked me not to shout," and he suddenly pointed his gun towards it. Raju jumped and caught hold of the gun with both his hands, "No, Babuji, please don't, Tulsi will be hurt or dhamin will bite her."

"You are right, my son, let us move out of here," whispered his father.

The huge dhamin snake, which had coiled round the hind legs of Tulsi and was sucking the milk from her udders, slipped down quietly and disappeared in a hole in the shed.

Sham Singh shut the door of the shed and said, "No wonder the cow was growing thinner and weaker day by day."

"Yes, Babuji, and out of sheer fright cried 'bah, bah' the whole night. How wrong we were," added Raju. Both retired to bed, discussing and decided to call the snake-charmer the next day to get rid of the snake.

Raju was up early the next morning. His mother gave him some bread with cottage cheese and hot green tea, and Raju gulped it down burning his tongue. He then accompanied his father to call the snake-charmer, who lived in a shabby hut round a small hill about two miles away.

The charmer agreed to go with them without any hesitation or bargaining. Clad in a green cloth, dirty-looking white long-sleeved shirt, a black jacket and red turban, the snake-charmer put his wicker-basket in his cloth sling, flung it on his wide shoulder and, taking his forked stick, walked down the hill with them bare-footed.

The way back home, an excited Raju showered his
father with hundreds of questions in his Pahari language and his father did not feel annoyed with him even once. "This man did not bargain with you, Babuji?" asked Raju.

"No, son, it is a happy day for him today," replied his father.

"Why?"

"Because he will get a new addition in his family of snakes, and he will earn well both in cash and kind."

"Babuji, why has he taken the wicker-basket instead of a trunk?"

"A wicker-basket is made of twigs or cane and the small holes allow the air to get in for the captive reptiles," explained his father.

"The stick is very funny, Babuji."

"Yes, it is a forked stick. Indian snake-charmers generally catch snakes with their hands, but in case of a big cobra or king cobra they sometimes use the stick to pin it down."

"Are the dhamins dangerous?"

"No. No. The dhamins are huge but non-poisonous snakes and seldom bite unless provoked. It is a thief, and it loves to steal milk. It also catches birds, hens, steals the eggs from the bushes and are very fond of frogs and rats. That is why perhaps people call it a rat-snake," replied his father.

The snake-charmer who was listening to their talks, added, "Sahib, poisonous snakes are sly, hide in bushes, grass and under stones. They have an urge to bite anything they find, but the non-poisonous snakes run straight and seldom bite. Even if they bite, one does not die."

The talk continued and soon they reached the farm. As the news travelled fast to the neighbouring farms, a
big crowd had collected there. The snake-charmer put the basket and his pipe down. He squatted on the ground and began to mutter some charms. Then rising to his feet, he opened the door of the shed. There were many rat-holes inside, but he pin-pointed the dust-covered hole.

He poked his stick once or twice and removed the dust there. He pulled the snake out holding its tail with his left hand. Soon he began to play on his pipe. The snake raised its head and tried to bite the pipe. It looked irritated.

The snake-charmer jumped about like a mongoose, then of a sudden, grabbed the snake by its neck with his right hand, pressed hard and lifted it up straight like a rope. He took it round in the circle of the crowd, to show them and then pushed it in his wicker-basket. Everyone gave him something, in cash and kind, and he soon walked away smiling.

Raju ran across the yard to Tulsi, and holding her neck in his arms said affectionately, "Tulsi, you will stay with me for ever."
All Hands On Deck

I pressed my nose against the porthole. The lights of Port Suez blinked in the distance, growing brighter and bigger as we approached the harbour. Our container ship, the 'Crystal', made her way carefully through the buoys that lit our path. She went past sailing boats, outstretched fishing nets and ships at anchor. Finally she dropped anchor and shuddered to a halt.

I heaved a sigh of relief, the queasy feeling in the pit of my tummy fast disappearing. It would have never done to be seasick and get laid up in the very first week of my vacation! Just as I was getting my sea-legs too!

The cabin door burst open, and my father, Captain Soni, walked briskly in, loosening his tie and throwing off his coat.

"What, Ajay, still up?"

He shook his head impatiently. "A full day's stop here before we go tomorrow evening. Just when we are running behind schedule already!"

I grinned happily, "Oh, good, Dad! Everyone seems to have time for a change!" Video shows, bingo, and yes - barbecues on deck floated through my mind.

But Dad was in a bad mood. "Lights off now, son ... it is eleven o'clock and we have a long day ahead..."

He was tired and fell asleep almost immediately. I lay
wide awake on my bunk (bed) in the corner, thinking of pyramids and pharaohs. After all, we would be going through the Suez Canal tomorrow.

I tossed restlessly and kicked off my blanket. It was getting warm. And the faint rumble in my tummy did not help matters. Dinner had been served early and I had not eaten much because boiled cabbage and spinach had been exceptionally ghastly.

I sat up and groped for my slippers. Perhaps the apple I had saved up from lunch yesterday was still on the ledge. I crept out into the dayroom.

A delicious smell wafted in from the alleyway. I sniffed appreciatively and opened the cabin door a little. Somebody was frying noodles in the Officers' Pantry. Suddenly I felt as though I had never wanted noodles more! I tiptoed back to the bedroom and looked across at Dad guiltily. He let out a gentle snore. Closing the door silently behind me, I scampered towards the pantry.

It was Sparks, the Radio Officer, furiously stirring a delicious mixture of noodles and scrambled eggs and generously dousing it with soya sauce.

I liked Sparks. He was always game for anything and I often pottered around his room in the afternoons. He was long and thin, rather like a noodle himself, with a drooping moustache and ears that stuck out.

He raised an eyebrow as I entered. "Here comes another moon-gazer! Like to join me, Sonny, for a midnight feast...?"

"I would not mind," I said, trying not to sound too eager, and took a generous helping. "Wow, you are a fantastic cook, Sparks!" I exclaimed with my mouth full. You could give Chief Cook a lesson or two. I never tasted noodles like these..."
"Like to eat out on deck?" Sparks suggested. "We can look at the lights of Port Suez and all the ships around."

We carried our bowls and two cans of 7-Up out to the lifeboat deck and perched on the ladder. It was a dark night but the deck lights were on. The sea shimmered a dull silver. The hills enclosed the saucer-shaped harbour. The smoky outline of the city's minarets, domes and newly-built skyscrapers, rose above these, their lights twinkling faintly.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" murmured Sparks as he sipped his drink. "Especially after our rough passage these last two days."

I nodded. "All that pitching and rolling - I just can't get used to it. It is like living on a rocking horse!"

"Oh, you will get used to it pretty soon."

I leaned over the side and threw my empty can into the water. It floated away slowly. I noticed a thick rope hanging down into the water. It was tied firmly to a railing below the life-boat on the lower deck. Sparks followed my gaze and leaned down with me.

"Strange," he mused. "Never seen it here before. It must be the Bosun's (head of crew) — was he painting the shipside today?"

I didn't know.

"Anyway," said Sparks, looking at his watch, "time to turn in. The Captain will throw a fit if he knows you have been wandering around by yourself."

"Come on, Sparks, you won't tell him," I begged.

"You bet," he winked back taking my arm, moving towards the door we had come through. "Let us go!"

Whatever was that! I started, my senses suddenly alert. "I heard something, Sparks, - something like a hammer knocking."

"Now, now, Sonny boy! You are not looking for a
midnight stroll on deck, are you? Surely you don't mean Bosun is working overtime at this unearthly hour! Wouldn't put it past him though - he is a crazy sort of chap!"

There was a dull metallic sound followed by a long creak. I shook my head, puzzled. Surely I wasn't imagining things. After all everybody was fast asleep except us and the Duty Officer who would be up on the Bridge (topmost room on ship from where navigators work and where navigational equipment is located) on anchor watch.

Then Sparks heard something too.
"Funny," he frowned uneasily. "I will go around and have a look. It is probably nothing though. You had better go in anyway before your Dad skins me alive."

I certainly wasn't going to be left behind. In any case I wasn't sleepy, so I followed Sparks down the ladder to the lower deck.

It was slippery with the spray of salt water. I held his hand tightly and we made our way around the accommodation to the stern of the ship. It was stacked high with rows of twenty-foot containers (steel boxes that carry cargo). It was dark here and I stubbed my toe painfully on a metal projection.

"Ouch!" I yelped, rubbing my big toe.
"Careful, careful, boy," warned Sparks. "Well, I don't see anything here at all."

As we stood there uncertainly, the same hammering sound was unmistakably repeated. It was much nearer now. Yes, it came from inside the narrow passage between the two last rows of containers.

Sparks' usually placid face now looked distinctly worried. He advanced cautiously into the shadows as I stood back hesitantly.
"By Jove! Pilferers!" he darted back, exclaiming under his breath. "Opening up the containers they are!" I gasped.

"Yes, they must have climbed up the shipside somehow. If I am not mistaken, a boat or two will be waiting alongside for them. Look here, Ajay-you got to act fast before they get away. Run and wake up your Dad. He will do the rest. I think these containers are stuffed with expensive electronics from Japan - I will wait here and keep watch-now, fast!"

I nodded impatiently and ran hard - all the way down the deck and up the stairs breathlessly to our cabin on the top deck.

Dad thought that I was frankly delirious when I shook him awake urgently and incoherently spat out the story.

"What on earth, son - you have been dreaming! Go back to sleep for God's sake!"

It took him a few minutes to realize that I was serious - and that this was no dream at all.

He sprang out of bed for the telephone and began barking orders crisply to the Bridge. "Get me the Duty Officer fast... Call up the Port... Sound the emergency alarm ... Get the crew out ... Deck lights ... and for God's sake keep your distance. They might be armed."

It was a matter of moments before I led the way to Sparks. He hissed urgently as we approached. "There are three of them, hefty locals. They have two boats behind and they have been throwing in heavy packages. There they are inside that container now."

I gazed below into the sea. In the shadow of the ship's stern lurked two small boats. Dad swore under his breath.

Suddenly a loud whistle pierced the silent night air.
The men in the boats had seen us and were warning their accomplices on board.

Three men appeared out of the shadows. As they saw the ship's officers and crew, they dropped their bulky packages and began to run desperately towards the life-boat, shouting in a foreign tongue. The boats below moved quickly in the same direction.

"The get-away rope! Cut it fast," I yelled to the Chief Officer who was nearest the life-boats, as I pointed to the thick rope dangling down the sides. In a flash he pulled out his pocket knife and cut through the fibre. The rope fell heavily into the sea.

As the thieves saw this, they exchanged angry words roughly and darted towards the side of the ship.

"Oh no, you don't, my good men-where do you think you are going?" The heavy hands of Bosun, Fitter and AB (able-bodied seamen) overpowered them as the three made a desperate attempt to jump into the sea over the railings. "Easy does it-the game is up. And this is to make sure you, rascals, play no more tricks ..."

I giggled. Bosun and his crew were trussing them up like chickens with strong rope. There was no way they could move.

A wailing siren announced the arrival of the Port Police Boat. The crew lowered the gangway and a team of armed policemen came on board, led by their Inspector.

"Captain! Inspector Sharif," he shook hands with Dad. "Thank you, sir, for your urgent summons over the VHF (very high frequency radio set used for shore/local communication). This is a very valuable catch for us. This gang has been operating for months in the harbour area, robbing ships at anchor."

He turned to look at them, shaking his head sternly.
"So far these rogues have been very wily - always, slipped through our hands. Usually even before a theft is discovered on the ship, it has crossed the Suez Canal for its next port, and here we have nothing at all to go by, not even a first-hand report! All we know is that this gang keeps hawk-like watch over new arrivals... Well, they have met their match tonight! So gentlemen, with your permission," moving closer to the three who stood before him, "we will now deal with them... Thank you. Captain. Thank you, everybody. We will see you in the morning and let you sleep now!"

Dad turned towards me with a wide smile as he ruffled my hair proudly. "It just beats me how you were sleep-walking on deck, son, but - well, boys! This actually calls for a celebration tomorrow. Bingo? Barbecue on deck!"

I nodded happily. I couldn't have asked for more.
"Ouch! Who is it?" cried Tara as she bumped into somebody. Quickly she regained her balance and gazed into the dark. A pair of big eyes stared back.

"Who are you?" she said again.

"Vasanthi," said a soft voice.

"Oh, I am sorry. I was looking for my tent," explained Tara.

The electric power came back and in the fluorescent light she looked at Vasanthi, a slim girl dressed in a green, short-silk skirt and a loose mustard blouse. She had a glowing brown complexion, fine features and attractive dark eyes. Vasanthi looked at Tara and smiled. Tara smiled back.

"Er... I was only looking for my tent," Tara repeated. Obviously Vasanthi did not understand what Tara was saying. Quickly she uttered, "Yen per Vasanthi" (My name is Vasanthi).

Tara nodded with a weak smile. She understood only the word 'Vasanthi'. Both giggled as they took different paths to join their groups. They had come to participate in the Inter-State School Cultural Festival.

Tara was from Bulandshahr, a small town of U.P. which she was representing in the light music competition. At the district level as well as the State level she had
won hands down. For her age, Tara sang with utmost ease. Singing came to her as naturally as walking to a child. Going all the way to Madras city to participate in the grand event had been an exciting experience. The only thing she missed was a companion of her age.

The next day all the participants got together for the preliminary music session in the auditorium. Once again Tara encountered Vasanthi who stood with her group, near the stage. They exchanged smiles.

Vasanthi pointed to herself and grinned.
"Yen per Vasanthi," she said.
"Me, Tara."
"Nee Delhi-wallah (you are from Delhi)?" she asked.
"No. From Bulandshahr. Where do you come from?" asked Tara.

Vasanthi looked confused and blurted out 'Warayoor'. It was the name of her home town.

Tara tried to repeat it, but her tongue refused to twist accordingly. Vasanthi laughed aloud exposing an even row of teeth. Tara asked again, "Do you speak Hindi?"

"Ille," Vasanthi shook both her thumbs and her head.

"English?" asked Tara although she herself was not very fluent with the language.

"Ille," Vasanthi repeated the gestures.

Each participant sang a folk song from her or his state. When Tara burst out with a full-throated 'kajri' of eastern U.P., the hall resounded with applause. A little while later Vasanthi's 'kummi pattu'—a folk song from Tamil Nadu enraptured the audience. She sang effortlessly at a high pitch and filled the hall with her singing. Everyone applauded vigorously.

Meera, another participant from U.P. and a classical music expert, whispered, "Tara, watch out, you have stiff competition."
"Yes, Meera-di," admitted Tara, "she sings very well, but I will practise hard. We must win."

"I am quite sure you will," Meera patted her shoulders reassuringly.

Vasanthi, for her part, had realised that her chief rival was Tara with whom she had sincerely wanted to be friends only a short while ago. Outside the auditorium Tara stood with her group. Vasanthi came away but the minute their eyes met Tara turned her face and Vasanthi too moved away hurriedly. They were now potential rivals contesting for the same award.

All day long Tara practised for the final performance while Vasanthi spent longer hours on the Veena in the privacy of her tent. They met in the dining hall at mealtime, but avoided each other the rest of the time.

The day before the grand finale, all the participants went on an excursion to Mahabalipuram. The silver sands, the glittering blue water of the sea and the cool breeze were almost bewitching and Tara quite forgot about the next day's contest. She walked towards the far edge of the temple precincts where gentle waves lapped the walls. She left Meera-di, Bahenji - her teacher, and others behind. She turned and looked up at the glorious structure of the temple against the blue sky. Slowly she walked backward staring up at the pinnacle. All of a sudden she heard a scream. Tara shrieked and stumbled. She fell into someone's strong grip. The roaring waves sent a light spray on her face. She was very close to the edge.

"Oh God! I would have fallen if..." she realised as she looked up.

It was Vasanthi, and she was still holding her. Tara regained her composure. She smiled weakly. "Thank you," she muttered softly.
"Un?" Vasanthi raised one eyebrow, then shook her head vigorously. "Thank you," she beamed. Tara reciprocated as both Meera-di and Bahenji came running. 

"Thank God, if Vasanthi wasn't sitting here, you...," Meera-di gasped but Bahenji interrupted her, "you should be careful, Tara," Bahenji patted Vasanthi's head and said, "Thank you."

Colour rose to Vasanthi's cheeks and she ran away waving her hand. "Thank you," she turned and shouted from a distance and laughed aloud. Her laughter sounded like temple bells. It erased all feelings of rivalry in Tara's heart. Once again Tara wanted to be friends with her. But how could she repay Vasanthi for saving her life?

Tara was quiet and aloof that day. 

"I will not sing for the contest tomorrow," she confided to Meera-di. 

"Don't be silly," Meera-di sounded shocked. 

"If I don't sing, Vasanthi will win. After all she saved my life," Tara pleaded. 

"Hmm!" Meera-di peered at Tara's face. "I understand. But remember a true artist will not like to accept charity even if it is the title of 'Best Singer'," she explained. 

Tara thought for a moment. "Yes, you are right," she agreed. 

"But... then what shall I do?" Tara banged her fist against the window pane of the bus. 

"I will stammer, I will go out of tune, Meera-di," Tara said in desperation. 


"Then...?" wondered Tara. A minute later she yelled
with excitement. Calming down, she whispered in Meera-di's ear.

"Think again. Don't be rash. It means forsaking your prestige not only for yourself but for your school and your State too."

Tara was determined. After all she would remain second only to her friend.

At long last the competition began. A glance at Meera-di's face and Tara knew she wanted her to be the first.

Tara sang a bhajan set in Raag Kalyan. When she stepped down amidst loud cheers, Meera-di hugged her. One by one all the participants gave their best performances. The atmosphere turned tense as the eager audience awaited the results.

Vasanthi and Tara had tied for the top position.

"The trophy is one and there are two equally good contenders. I request them now to sing a song each for a final decision. Tara from Uttar Pradesh," one of the judges announced clapping all the while to welcome Tara on the stage.

"Good luck, Tara," Meera-di clasped Tara's hand.

Tara climbed up the stage confidently and she was completely at ease as the audience gave her a hearty welcome. Once in front of the mike, Tara looked sideways at Vasanthi. Vasanthi smiled at her. She raised her folded palms and waved them high in the air to say 'good luck'.

Tara acknowledged the gesture with a nod. For a while she was silent, creating a suspense in the auditorium. Then in a soft whispering melody Tara burst into a Tamil song she had learnt in school...

"Odi vilayad papa, nee oirdirikkalagath papa..."

(Child, you must be active, you should not be lazy)
She sang gradually building up the tempo into vigorous beats. The stunned audience broke into thunderous applause when Tara finished.

On her way down Tara crossed Vasanthi. Vasanthi's large dark eyes smiled at Tara with great affection.

Meera-di rushed towards Tara. Disappointment was writ large on her face. Her set smile soon froze into a frown. "Why a Tamil song? You know you can sing better in your mother tongue," she whispered angrily.

"I know that very well," replied Tara with a 'you-know-why' look in her eyes. Quickly she took her place in the audience, Vasanthi was ready at the mike. With a slight gesture of her hand she requested the musicians to start playing. Vasanthi sang loud and clear in her high-pitched voice a Hindi song she had learnt at school...

"Hum honge kamiyab, hum honge kamiyab ek din..."
(We will be successful, one day...)

Once again the audience was dumb-struck, specially Tara. She began to hum softly along with Vasanthi. The audience broke into loud cheers. A long burst of clapping followed. The compere ran out to the judges. They seemed to have come to a decision. Finally, one of them walked up to the stage and announced, "Tara and Vasanthi." Both went up slowly and stood on either side of him. He took their hands in his and held them up together. "Both sang beautifully and both - Tara and Vasanthi, are the winners."

Tara and Vasanthi smiled at each other holding their hands as a deafening applause resounded.

In the doorway stood the compere with a trophy in his hand identical to the one on the table.
"Hey, you little goblin!" my father's friend beckoned me, "do it... but mind you, don't touch anything else..."

His booming voice burst out. All I could gather was a long list of 'do's' and 'don'ts' issued to me. Lastly, he pointed to a big old timepiece and said, "Don't even touch it. Understand!" He left, locking the door.

To ensure that I should turn an ideal boy, father had left me in the care of his friend, my Uncle-Guardian, a haughty disciplinarian. For the present, however, I vowed to do as I was bid. But the small black bird, neatly etched on the white dial between the two hands of the timepiece, stole my attention again. For a while I paced up and down trying vainly to look at something else. But... but in this locked room I was free as a bird. My eyes again wandered to the timepiece.

This antique possession of my Uncle-Guardian was notorious for remaining out of order well over twenty days in a month. For the rest, it adorned the show-cases of one or the other watch-repairer of the town.

The bird on the timepiece seemed as though inviting me. I turned my face and started fiddling with other things though he had forbidden me to do so. But left alone, it was a rare chance! I thought, and I opened one
of his voluminous books. I found it more boring than my textbooks and left it disgusted.

I chanced upon his golden pen.

"Oh, here it is!" I held the pen and kissed it. It was enchanting. I sat in the big chair and started scribbling nonsense on his glazy letter-head.

I kept on scribbling lines and circles and threw down the sheets one after another. Soon a heap of crumpled papers piled up on the floor. Of a sudden the pen stopped writing!

I felt chary. A new idea flashed. I said to myself, 'This is the opportune moment to fill the fountain-pen." How the fountain-pen attains its fount was a sort of mystery to me. So I filled the pen and emptied it through the feeder and did it several times. Verily the spotless white tablecloth was dabbed with deep blue blots. The inkpot was empty and the pen lay on the ground. I lifted it and found the point of the nib twisted. Scared, I acted fast; I put the tip of the nib between my teeth and pressed it. My hurried effort was successful. The nib became pointed again. I also managed to find another tablecloth, and wiped the ink off from the remaining letter heads. I made sure that no trace of my encounter with the pen and ink would remain visible. I finished the job; I found I was free again.

As soon as I turned my head I found the little black bird of the timepiece staring invitingly at me. Yet the thought of the hard slaps, which I had received from my mentor for doing earlier experiments, checked me. His words of warning 'Don't touch that' echoed in my ears.

To divert my mind, I thought of making a cup of coffee. Coffee too was prohibited for me. I went to the kitchen and prepared coffee. As I took the first sip, I felt as if a bee stung my tongue - so bitter was its taste. Its
burning smell put me off completely. I quickly mixed a few spoons of sugar, and poured all the available milk. It thickened, becoming a paste! I swallowed it with great difficulty.

I heaved a sigh of relief. The glittering timepiece, the bird sitting on its dial, attracted my sight again. I couldn't resist anymore; I tiptoed towards it. With trembling hands and thumping heart I touched its glittering steel body. I lifted it at long last. With a throbbing heart I started with my experiment. First I wound its key - and lo! the two hands of the watch started chasing each other. One moved slowly and the other quicker. I was thrilled.

I wound another key. This time the third small hand near the tiny bird started moving fast. All of a sudden the alarm rang with a loud 'tin-tin'. I jumped on my feet uneasily. After some time, I tried to stop the ringing. If it did not stop, I was sure, I would be caught. Beads of sweat gathered on my brow. I felt uneasy. After some time the ringing slowed down and stopped. I thanked God a hundred times.

I whiled away some more time. Again, I was drawn towards the clock. This time I moved another key. I kept winding it till it refused to wind any further. Soon I heard a funny 'tick-tick' sound. The machine continued ticking in a rhythmic manner. I did not know what to do. 'Tick-tick' would be a sure witness against me ... and I should stop it.

This time, I started winding the hands' key in reverse direction. I moved them on and on. The key came out in my hand! Yet the clock ticked on!

I tried to fix the key back into the hole. But it would not fit. I tried hard but failed. 'Tick-tick, tick-tick' it kept going.
I cursed myself. I closed my eyes and prayed in despair. I promised, 'I will never touch this imp again if the key fixes into the hole now!'

Hoping against hope, I opened my eyes. Alas! the key still lay beside the clock. The noise 'tick-tick', 'tick-tick'... continued hammering my ears.

I felt desperate, but only for a short while. Soon an idea flashed in my mind - 'Hammer the key into the hole!'

The paperweight came handy. I could use it as a hammer. I lifted it confidently and hammered the key, steadily, into the hole. 'Thuk, thuk, thuk'.

There was a miracle! The key had fitted into the hole!

But the machine went on hallooing 'tick-tick', 'tick-tick'.

I heard the dreadful footfall. My heart missed a beat. The door was flung open and my Uncle-Guardian, with a few guests, entered the room. How happy I was to see the guests with him! This would surely postpone his thrashing me for a few hours.

Next day, I overheard my Uncle-Guardian telling my father, "...this goblin of yours is a wonderful chap. You see, every repairer in the town had refused to touch this old machine. I am so fond of it, you know. I wonder what this young chap has done to it. The watch is not only going all right but giving second-to-second correct time now."

How it all happened? Nobody knew. But it has surely changed my impression of the devil. I now believe that the devil is not always after the children; it sometimes helps also - the innocent children, like me.
Benji's Christmas

It was Christmas Eve. The streets looked like a fairy-land. 'Twinkle, Twinkle', went the red, blue, green and yellow lights which had been strung up all around the market place. How exciting it looked! The shops were also brightly lit. There were three shops selling Christmas trees. What a variety of sizes! There were real ones and toy ones. The trees were beautifully decorated, all aglitter with silver and gold ribbons, streamers, shiny coloured balls, holly and mistletoe.

Benji stood in front of one of the windows, gazing longingly at one of those toy trees. 'Oh, if only I could get a tree somehow! How happy Sammy and Ruth would be. It would be a perfect Christmas for them.'

He remembered once again the tree he had seen in the biggest of the three shops. 'That is the one I am going to buy.' As soon as he had decided, he dashed in and asked the owner. "Sahib, what is the price of this one?" pointing hopefully. The shopkeeper, a fat, balding man named Mr. Abraham, had looked Benji up and down, pointedly staring at the big hole on the upper right side of Benji's shirt. Benji stopped his hand midway as it automatically went up to cover the hole. 'After all', he thought, 'I have got full twenty-eight rupees in my
pocket. So what if I have a hole in my shirt!"

But the shopkeeper’s words shattered his confidence. "It is for thirty-five rupees. Do you want to buy it?"
Benji’s face fell as he realised that he could not afford the tree that he had liked so much. Twenty-eight rupees were not enough! It was his hard-earned money which he had got by working for seven days in the 'dhaba' down the road. For long hours he had waited on the customers, and carried countless plates of food to and from the rickety wooden tables.

Now he wanted to buy a Christmas tree for his younger sisters, Sammy and Ruth. He had thought the tree would cost twenty-five rupees and with the remaining money he could buy some decorations!

"But...but Sahib," he said hesitantly, "I remember that last year such a toy tree cost twenty-five exactly."

"Look here, boy, those were last year's prices. Now the prices have gone up. All the trees in my shop cost nothing less than thirty-five rupees. Are you buying one or aren't you?" and he puffed out his huge chest and glared at Benji.

Benji’s face became red with embarrassment. 'What a rude man!' he thought to himself, as he dejectedly walked out of the shop, almost tripping over the bucket of sand which was lying near the door. 'Indeed, I suppose he does not need to bother with me when people are buying up all his trees.' The shop was crowded as parents and children shouted to one another, talking about the trees they liked best.

'Oh, where will I get another seven rupees from?' Benji thought. He felt terrible at the thought that there would be no Christmas tree in his little home. Sammy and Ruth were at home just waiting eagerly for him to come back so that they could start decorating it with all
the beautiful ornaments he had confidently promised them. He had invited his friends to his house tonight to join in the food and fun. Oh! How embarrassing it would be to face them without a tree after he had talked so much about it!

Benji's home was a small two-roomed hut at the other end of town. It was so different from this market place with all its fancy shops. Benji wandered around, hands in his pockets, kicking at a stone with the scuffed toes of his shoes. A half-constructed building stood at one end of the market. As it was evening, the site was deserted. Benji sat for a while on a mound of sand, shivering a little in the cold. He then went back to the shops. 'Maybe they made a mistake and told me the wrong price the first time.'

But no! There was no mistake. Even the smallest tree cost thirty-five rupees. 'Just seven rupees short! Oh, why didn't I earn this extra money also over the past few weeks? I could easily have got it by working at the 'dhaba' for a few more days,' he cried to himself for the hundredth time in despair.

After wandering around aimlessly for a while, Benji found himself standing directly in front of Mr. Abraham's shop. Through the brightly lit window he saw that the tree he had set his mind on was still there.

Suddenly, he saw Mr. Abraham come out of the shop, rubbing his hands gleefully, and looking very pleased with himself. He stood outside the shop, surveying the people rushing to and fro. As Benji watched, the large neon sign above the shop, which merrily twinkled red and green, saying, "Christmas trees for sale," began to slip down.

Benji leapt across the road, pushing Mr. Abraham backwards with such force that they both tumbled to the
ground. At the same instant, the neon sign crashed loudly and shattered.

"What... what...?" the shop-owner was bewildered. "Oh," cried Benji, "sparks are coming from the wires." Just as he jumped up, the wires touched a small cardboard box lying there and a flame immediately started up. "Oh, Oh, Fire! Help! Fire." Mr. Abraham shouted in fright, still sitting on the ground.

At the word "fire", as if by magic, a large crowd gathered in a few seconds. Benji rushed into the shop. He remembered the bucket of sand in the shop over which he had almost tripped when he had gone in earlier. He rushed out and poured it over the flaming cardboard box. By now a few people were also rushing up with buckets of sand, while many others were shouting. "Call the Fire Engine. Hurry! Hurry! There is a fire."

After a lot of chaos and confusion the danger was averted. And the onlookers slowly drifted away, talking excitedly.

"That boy saved Mr. Abraham. Oh, what a clever boy!"

"How quickly he put out the fire!"

Mr. Abraham turned to Benji. "Oh, thank you, thank you very very much. You have probably saved my life," he exclaimed, his voice choked with emotion, putting a heavy hand on Benji's shoulder.

"It was nothing, sir, I am glad that you are safe now," said Benji, looking down at his feet, feeling embarrassed. "I must go home," he muttered and was turning away when Mr. Abraham said quietly, "I remember you. You had come in here a few hours ago. This was the tree you wanted, wasn't it?", he pointed to the same tree that Benji had longed to buy.
Benji was silent. "I would like to make you a gift of the tree. Please accept it," said Mr. Abraham. "It would make me very happy indeed." Benji couldn't believe it! He pinched himself to make sure that he was not dreaming. His eyes shone with happiness, "Oh, thank you, sir. But you must take this money and I will pay you the rest in a few days' time."

"No, no," Mr. Abraham protested. "Please don't insult me by mentioning money. I want to give this as a gift. I know it is nothing in return for your saving my life, but since you liked it, I thought..." and he stopped, looking troubled.

Benji replied, "Oh, thank you, sir, it is most kind of you. My younger sisters will be so thrilled. You see, I promised to go home with a Christmas tree tonight."

"Then you shall certainly not disappoint them, dear boy," said Mr. Abraham, smiling broadly, "wait here a moment," and he disappeared into a small room at the back of the shop. A moment later he returned with a large cardboard box. "Please take this with the tree. They are a few decorations to put on it. And now, my delivery van will take you home with the tree. Otherwise you will have another problem on your hands."

As Benji went home, it seemed to him that the street, which only hours ago had seemed such a cold and lonely place, now appeared warm and gay. The warm glow from the red and green lights seemed to be touching the glow in his heart. After unloading the Christmas tree, Benji asked the delivery man to wait for a moment. "There is something I want to send to Mr. Abraham."

Dashing inside his house, Benji looked around for some paper and pencil. He chewed the end of the pencil thoughtfully, and wrote a note. Coming out, he handed a closed envelope to the man and requested him to give
it to Mr. Abraham. He breathed a sigh of relief!

That night, when Amar and Rahul had reluctantly left, and both the girls had gone to sleep after the excitement of the evening, Benji sat looking at the Christmas tree which lit up the whole room. So many decorations! Holly and mistletoe, gaily-coloured streamers, gold and silver glass balls and the red, blue, green and yellow lights. But what they had all loved the best was the lovely silver star which they had found in the cardboard box. Benji had placed it on top of the tree. As he gazed at it twinkling in the darkness, it seemed to say, 'I'm happy to be here.'

When Mr. Abraham opened the envelope he found some money and a note. "Please accept these twenty-five rupees. This was the price of a tree last year. I did not work for more, I thank you. With Season's Greetings. Benji."
"It will be a fantastic birthday this year," I said in a mocking tone. "All I will get is a pair of shoes and a hand-knitted pullover. I had asked for a table tennis set, but my mother said, 'It is totally out of the question this year'."

My friend, Muk, looked at me thoughtfully. He drew a bit closer and said, "Well, Rohan, I don't say I believe in it, but my cousin said it works. And there is no harm trying, don't you think?"

"Trying what?" I asked.

"Well," my cousin said, "if you really want something badly, all you have to do is to run around a banyan tree at midnight and chant seventeen times: Unke, Munke, Timpetoo."

I desperately wanted my wish to come true. Still I asked, "Why seventeen times and why at midnight?"

"Don't ask me," replied Muk, who was my best friend. "That is how it is done, I suppose. Why not try it? It would not do any harm."

I thought it was all nonsense. Besides, I couldn't think of any banyan tree in our neighbourhood. There was one in old Mrs. Groover's garden. But who dared to enter her garden? Not me! And not at midnight! Mrs. Groover
had been the principal of our school till last year. One look from her piercing pale green eyes was enough to silence bullies like Rinkoo Lai of Class X. I had seen it happen with my own eyes.

"Forget it," I said. However, the thought kept haunting me till the day before my birthday and I just could not think of anything else.

"Okay," I said to Muk, "if you come along with me, I will go to Mrs. Groover's garden tonight and do it."

"Why should I come along?" asked Muk, "I have no secret wish."

"Come on, let us go and wish for my table tennis set."

So, at ten minutes to twelve Muk and I met at the back of old Mrs. Groover's garden. We climbed and sat on the boundary wall. We looked down into the garden, which lay dark and silent in the dim light of the moon. And there was a banyan tree, its branches swaying in the gentle breeze of the night. We jumped down, reached the tree and looked around carefully.

"Imagine, if she is awake!" I whispered and pointed at Mrs. Groover's house.

"Nobody is awake at this ghostly hour of the night," hissed Muk. "Now get going. Run!"

I ran. I ran as fast as I could, chanting "Unke, Munke, Timpetoo, I wish my wish is coming true" over and over again. I felt a bit scared. That was why I tried to get it over quickly and increased my speed. I increased the chanting too! And all the while I went on listening to the sounds of the night, a crackle here, a swish there.

Suddenly a ferocious bark tore the stillness of the night! I froze. Inside Mrs. Groover's house, lights flashed on and the backdoor was pushed open.

"Who is there?" called Mrs. Groover. "Answer, or I will send the dog at you."
"Muk, Muk," I mumbled, "say something." But Muk was climbing up the tree. When I saw Mrs. Groover bend down to unleash the dog, I pleaded, "Please don't send the dog at us. I will explain everything, if you let me.

"Speak out soon," Mrs. Groover shouted.

I told her everything. I feared, she might not believe me. But she listened to me without interruption. She just looked at me with the hard, light green eyes of hers as if she was trying to see right into my heart.

"So?" she asked finally, "and you believe in Unke, Munke, Timpetoo? Do you think it will help?" I dropped my head and said softly, "I hope it will!"

"Well," she returned, "if you believe so, go and finish your rounds." She turned saying, "and while leaving, would you mind using the front gate?"

I did finish the remaining six rounds and left her garden using the front gate. I swore that I would never return.

And then the great moment came. I opened my gifts, rejoiced over my new pair of shoes and the hand-knitted pullover! And then my eyes fell on a parcel. A big parcel!

I had never received such a big parcel earlier.

"To Rohan Khanna," I read, "From Unke, Munke, Timpetoo!"

I stared at Muk, and he looked as surprised as I was. My mother asked, "Who is Unke, Munke, Timpetoo? Isn't that an unusual name?"

"Yes," I said, "very unusual indeed."

I bent over the parcel and began to unpack it. I removed the strings and the paper impatiently. Finally I removed the colourful gift wrapping and found a table tennis set! It was not a brand new table tennis set, but it
was a fabulous one. "Wow," I whispered, just "Wow!"

Till today Muk swears he has nothing to do with it. And so do my parents. I wonder if old Mrs. Groover was responsible for the surprise. I wondered for a very long time. One day I gathered up all the courage I possessed and went to meet Mrs. Groover. I used the front gate and rang the bell. I had gone over my lines a hundred times, but when she looked down on me with her pale green eyes, I felt my heart sink, and my courage vanish and all I could do was stutter like an idiot. "Good afternoon, madam, do you, I mean...did you, have you...sorry, but...do you believe in...Unke, Munke, Timpetoo?"

Mrs. Groover continued to look at me with a strange look in her eyes. She replied softly but seriously, "Yes, I do believe in Unke, Munke, Timpetoo. I had wished to have somebody over for tea today. And here you are! Now isn't it a perfect example of Unke, Munke, Timpetoo?"

She smiled, and she looked so different, almost human!

From that day onwards Muk and I went to see old Mrs. Groover quite often. Not only because she made the best tea and had the best cookies. No! we went because we liked her. And then we had one thing in common. We all believed in Unke, Munke, Timpetoo!
The Victory

Alexander the Great had won many battles. His desire was to conquer the world.
"Proceed to the Golden Bird," he ordered his brave generals.
India was known as the Golden Bird in the world at that time. With Alexander's command, the generals consulted the map and the army turned towards India. It crossed the mighty Himalayas through the long terrain in the cold, entered the country and reached the river Sindhu. There was a battle between Alexander's army and the army of King Puru of India. King Puru was defeated, and was made captive. With the first victory in India, Alexander was very happy.

After the day's battle when Alexander's army was resting, he mounted his horse Bucephalus and quietly slipped out of the tent to see more of the Indian countryside. Alexander moved on the streets and drove his horse on and on. The houses remained dark, without lights. The women were wailing, children were crying. Alexander felt no pity. Instead he felt proud of his own victory.

Soon he turned his horse on the other side, towards the jungle. As he moved further, he noticed a bonfire at
a distance. He went closer and found some Indian saints performing the yagya (religious ritual) on the bank of the Sindhu. He stood quietly behind the thick trunk of a tree.

It was winter time. The wind was blowing and it was extremely cold. The saints wore no clothing on the upper parts of their bodies. Alexander said to himself, 'Oh, they are poor and they do not have anything to cover their bodies.' He felt sorry for the saints, 'I must do something for these naked fakirs.' It was night already. He went back to his tent, woke up his chief general and said, "Bring thick woollen blankets and woollen clothes immediately. I need them urgently."

Heaps of thick blankets and woollen clothes were brought. In no time they were loaded on horses and Alexander himself led them, riding back to the jungle. The caravan stopped where the saints were performing the yagya. Alexander found the saints were still busy chanting hymns. He moved his horse closer but the saints took no notice of the presence of Alexander and his caravan. In order to get their attention, Alexander patted his horse, and coughed. Still no one paid any attention. Alexander got irritated now. He dismounted and proceeded towards the oldest saint. The saint did not notice and Alexander felt totally ignored. Then he approached one of the saints and called, "Fakir, listen, I am the famous Alexander the Great."

The saint looked up and asked coolly and very sweetly, "What do you want, young man? What can I do for you?"

Alexander was taken aback with the question. He paused. "Well...well, I don't want anything from you. I am Alexander the Great, I have conquered your Hindustan," Alexander announced proudly. He con-
continued, "When I saw you people naked in this cold weather, I brought woollen blankets and clothes for all of you."

The saint threw a sharp glance at Alexander. He came closer and put his hand on Alexander's shoulder.

"Young man, so you are the famous Alexander, who conquers the countries by robbing them?" The saint gave a loud laugh and asked, "Tell me, my child, how can a robber be a conqueror and a giver?" And the saint looked deep into Alexander's eyes.

Alexander turned pale, not knowing what to say. He stood still like a statue. The saint continued, "Well, my child, if you really want to conquer the world, first win the hearts of the countrymen with love. As for us, we have renounced the world and we do not need anything. Whatever is left with us now, we can give that too. Now tell me, what do you want?"

Alexander could not believe his ears. He had never seen or heard things like this. The feeling of guilt made him sad suddenly. He saluted the saint. Without saying a word, he mounted his horse and went back to his camp. The caravan followed the master.

It was dawn and Alexander could hear the chattering of birds. He had come to his decision, and, he stopped his forward march. He released King Puru and put off his future plans to conquer other parts of India.
Jasma

Dusk was falling fast.

Tikam walked faster, eager to be back with his noble wife, Jasma. He wiped the beads of sweat on his upper lip with the end of a cloth he had wound round his head to form a turban. The copper rays of the setting sun fell almost parallel to the ground, lighting up corners which had stayed out of the light during the day.

Tikam hummed a tune as he turned the corner and saw the silhouette of Jasma.

There she was leaning against the doorpost, the mellow rays of the sun giving her complexion a rosy tint. To Tikam, she looked like a fine statue carved by a master sculptor. 'Indeed, she is,' he thought to himself. 'She is perhaps the most perfect woman that God created. Beautiful. Gentle. Loyal. Humble. Never a harsh word escapes her. Ah! I am lucky. Lucky to have her as my wife. What more can I ask for! Jasma is the best gift that God could have given me.'

Jasma smiled at Tikam as soon as he walked up the steps leading to the house. She moved slightly, making way for him. Then she followed him in. She removed his turban, helped him undress and brought him a jug of water to wash himself with. When Tikam returned after
a good wash, Jasma brought him a hot cup of milk.

"Jasma," said Tikam taking the milk, "I have received a message from Raja Siddharaj of Patannagar. He wants me to lead a group of a thousand workers. The Raja is digging a large tank there. Shall I accept the offer? We will get more money than what we get here in Malwa."

"You should decide these things. I will follow you wherever you go. And I shall be happy, whether you earn more or bring in less. Money is not everything. Happiness is," Jasma said in her honey-sweet voice.

Tikam was a common labourer. He was known for his honesty, his hard work and his gentleness. His fame had reached distant Patannagar, which had brought him the offer.

Work on the tank began. Tikam coordinated the work team. The thousand men and women whom Tikam brought with him to Patannagar worked hard. There was nothing casual about their work. For, if there was one thing that Tikam did not tolerate, it was laziness. Jasma too worked at the site. Tikam had told her, several times, that there was no need for her to work. It pained him to see her move, carrying heavy baskets of earth, while beads of sweat trickled down her cheeks. He had tried to keep her at home, but she argued, "What will I do all day, sitting at home? Here I am with you. That is the best thing that could happen to me." Tikam had no answer. So she continued to work along with others.

One day, while the digging of the tank was on, Raja Siddharaj came to see its progress. He stood at one corner of the pit and surveyed the workers. They were covered with mud and sweat, ambling up and down, going about their duties. There were a large number of women workers too. The Raja spotted Jasma. He could not see her face, but there was something exotic about
her. Watching her, the way she moved, lifting the heavy load of mud in the basket and carrying it, he realized he was looking on a girl of rare grace and beauty. 'If only I could marry her and have her as one of my wives,' he thought. But he knew that Jasma was married. Yet, he must get her, no matter by what means. He had resolved.

The next day the Raja sent a messenger to Jasma.
"Jasma," the messenger greeted her.
"Yes, panditji."

"Why does Tikam make you work like this? You are very beautiful, fair. Why should you ruin your health by working like a common labourer's wife? Listen, Jasma. You will turn coarse and uncouth if you continue to work like this. Tikam should not do this to you."

"Now, leave me and Tikam alone. Tikam is my husband. And I will do what he wants me to. I don't think beauty gets spoilt by hard work. In fact, I keep myself trim by hard work. So don't worry about me. And, then, my beauty should only concern my husband. Not you," Jasma replied firmly and moved away without letting the messenger to further dwell on the matter.

"Listen, Jasma," the messenger called her back.
"Now, I have work to do. So, let me go," she tried to shake herself free.

"Well, any time you feel like seeing the royal palace of Siddharaj, I can take you. Then you will know what it is to be rich. You can have everything-jewels, maid servants, leisure, music, perfumes, scents - yes, in the palace, a woman can have anything she wants. The palace is the place for you. Come once, see how the women live there. Any time, you feel like," he continued, leaving no doubt in Jasma's mind the meaning of the message.
"I don't think I will come to the palace. Not as long as there is life in me."

"You are intelligent. You should make a wise choice..." the messenger tried to warn her.

"Tikam and I will be together in life. We will be together in death too..." Jasma strode off calmly.

That evening, Jasma was upset. She buried her face in Tikam's shoulders and cried out her tale of misery. "Let us get out of here. We must go. Tonight itself. I am getting jittery."

Tikam's eyes glowed like burning coal. He reached out for the dagger which he hid in his cloak. He told her, "The scoundrel. The Raja is the protector of people and their honour. And he wants another man's wife! I will kill him for casting his eyes on you."

"Don't be foolish, my dear. The Raja is powerful. You won't be able to get to his presence even. The sentries will catch you. No, we must leave this place. We must leave this night. I won't stay here. Not even for a second," Jasma let her sobs drain out the pain within.

"All right, Jasma," Tikam consoled her. "I will get hold of a dozen men who are my close friends. We will take them with us so that if the Raja's men chase us, we can at least give a good fight."

"Oh! If only we had not left Malwa! If only we had stayed on there!" Jasma was in tears.

It was pitch dark when Jasma, Tikam and a dozen others took to the street. They moved quietly, till they were out of the town. Then they moved along the footpath, which was clearly etched on the ground. Stars blinked as the group shuffled along, eager to get as far as possible from Patannagar.

They walked all night. And continued their trek even after sunrise. Their feet were aching. Their legs were
getting blisters. Yet they kept moving. They wanted to reach safely before their escape became known to the Raja.

They were still straggling along when they heard the clatter of hooves. The sound was faint, coming from a distance. It became louder. Tikam looked at his friends. "I think the Raja and his men are after us. What shall we do now?"

"There is only one option. We fight. Fight to the last," said one of his friends.

"I feel guilty. Why should you die for my sake? You get away. I shall stand and fight with the Raja..." Tikam argued.

Before the argument could be settled, the Raja and his men riding their horses crashed through the thickets. They encircled the group, menacingly swirling their swords, asking the men to surrender. Tikam pulled out his dagger and dodged and ducked and delivered a few deft blows. But he could not fight for long. Soon, he was mowed down by a stinging blow. Tikam rolled on the ground, moaning, "Jasma...oh, Jasma, what will happen to you now?"

The Raja, who was engrossed in the scuffle, turned to Jasma. He felt happy. He waited, with a smug smile.

Jasma wanted to rush to Tikam, to take his head in her lap, to give him solace in his last moments. But she knew that there was a more urgent task at hand. In a trice, she pulled out a dagger, which she had kept concealed in the folds of her dress. She moved closer to where Tikam was stretched and stabbed herself with one mighty drive of the dagger. Blood flowed out as she drew the dagger out of the wound. She crumbled and fell on Tikam. For a second, she lifted her face, stared angrily at the Raja and said, "You won't get me. Never. I am off, off with my
husband. Go, accursed one. Go, go back to your riches. But, I know... I know the tank you are digging... there will never be water in that tank. Never..."

The Raja watched with bated breath. He hung his head in shame. Then he turned his horse and rode off to some distance craning his neck once to cast a last look on the gory scene. Tikam and Jasma were dead, lying side by side. They had been together in life. They were together in death too.
The Secret Path

Balu placed a mat on the floor, filled a glass of water and sat down to eat.
"Just a few more minutes," smiled his mother as she stirred the vegetables in the pot. Balu missed the tinkle of her bangles. Her hands looked bare without them. He looked at his own fine clothes and recalled how his mother had sold her last bangle to buy these for him on Diwali. She had not bought anything for herself.
"Feed yourself," said his mother placing a fluffy chapati and some hot vegetables in front of him.
"Mmm, delicious!" exclaimed Balu. "Mother, you know I would never let you work if I had a lot of money."
"And what else would you do if you had a lot of money?" she asked ruffling his hair affectionately.
"I would buy you an armful of bangles."
His mother smiled as her eyes became moist. "It is sweet of you to say this but I really don't want any bangles," she said.
But Balu knew how she loved wearing bangles.
After lunch, he told his mother that he would be going to the Rairi fort on the hill.
His mother was surprised. She had heard that the brave Maratha hero, Shivaji, and his family would be
moving into the fort and that no one but the workers were allowed to enter the fort. "Won't the guard stop you at the gate?" asked his mother. "Well, they won't see me entering," he replied.

She gave him a questioning look. There was another question on her mind; she knew that it took a long time to go up the hill because it was steep and the climb was difficult. But Balu managed to go up and return in less time than it took most people just to go up to the Maha Darwaza or the main gate of the fort. "Tell me, how do you manage to go up to the fort and come down so fast?" she asked Balu.

"That is another secret," grinned her son and ran away.

Balu stood for a long time looking up at the majestic fort perched on top of the hill. This hill was part of the Sahyadri mountain range. It was higher than all the surrounding hills; and Shivaji had decided to make this his headquarters. He had now changed the name of Rairi to Raigarh. But the local people continued to call it Rairi. Immediately after taking the decision, Shivaji had appointed Abaji Sonda, his minister, to fortify Raigarh and have buildings and palaces constructed in it. Balu used to love going inside the fort and watch the construction work. He was amazed how fast the sleepy little place had grown into a bustling township.

Balu looked around to see that no one was watching him and then quietly he began to climb, following the secret path that led to a hidden entrance in the fort. He had discovered this path by chance when he was much younger but he had never talked about it to anyone. It did not take him long to reach the top of the hill.

He looked down at the rows and rows of mountain around him and thought how clever Shivaji had been in
selecting this fort as his headquarters. For, it was positioned in such a way that no enemy troop would be able to make a surprise attack on this fort.

Quietly, Balu slipped into the fort through the secret opening. It was like getting into another world. So much was happening all around; and there were so many different sounds. Balu could hear the sound of conchshells and cymbals coming from the Jagadishwara temple, the tinkle of anklets from the dancing girls' quarters, the chanting of mantras to the accompaniment of bells from the Brahmins' quarters, elephants trumpeting and horses neighing in the stables. The noisiest place was the market. There were twenty shops selling everything one could think of. The shops were laid out in two neat rows and the traders were calling out their wares. Suddenly, Balu overheard a conversation between two shopkeepers.

"Shivaji will soon be shifting here with his family," one shopkeeper said to another.
"That is only expected, now that Vyankoji has completed the fortifications," replied the other.

Balu was about to leave when the shopkeeper's words made him stop in his track.
"Shivaji is not completely satisfied with the fortifications, you know. He thinks there still might be a secret doorway through which some enemy can sneak in."
Balu stood still, almost not daring to breathe.
"How do you know?"
"Haven't you heard? Shivaji has announced a big prize for any one who can enter the fort through any path except the main gates of the fort."
Balu walked away, his brain in a turmoil. "A big prize!" the words echoing in his head.
Here was a chance to get rich! But that would mean
giving up a secret he had hugged to himself for so long!

He did not want to tell anyone his precious secret - not for all the money in the world.

He was still thinking about it when he reached home.

"Have you heard Shivaji's proclamation?" his mother asked as soon as she saw him. Word had spread fast and everyone in the village now knew about it.

"The prize is a bag of gold coins and a heavy gold bracelet," she was saying. "Do you think any one will win the prize?"

He heard the longing in his mother's voice, looked again at her bare arms, and made up his mind; he would get the bracelet for his mother even if it meant sacrificing his secret.

In the evening he sat up and made a big colourful banner. The next morning with the flag in his hand he presented himself to Shivaji.

Shivaji was amused when Balu claimed that he knew a hidden route to the fort. Even at that moment hundreds of Maratha soldiers were combing the mountainside unsuccessfully and Shivaji was almost certain now that there was no hidden path. But he did not want to disappoint the boy. So, Shivaji gave him permission to try and Balu scampered off with the flag in his hand and disappeared among the trees.

Shivaji asked one of his men, "Who is the young fellow?" "My Lord, the boy is a Mahar by caste and he lives with his mother in the village."

They soon forgot about the boy and began to discuss state matters. A little later, one of the ministers looked up and cried, "Impossible!" Everyone including Shivaji turned to look and what they saw made them gasp in amazement. For, right up on the summit they saw a figure waving a flag - the flag of the Mahar boy!
Balu was called, and Shivaji with his own hands gave him the promised prize.

In the evening when Balu gave his mother the bag of gold and slipped the gold bracelet round her wrist, she was so overwhelmed that she burst into tears. Balu looked at his mother's face and realised that the risk he had taken was nothing compared to the happiness he had given his mother.

That very day Shivaji had the path closed by a gate.

The gate still stands in the Raigarh fort and is called the Chor Darwaza.
"How did you do your paper, Vinni?" asked Amma.

"Oh, wonderful," I replied, throwing my bag on the bed. "So far I have done all my papers well. By all means I will top in the selection tests for the Board exams."

"But, don't you have a paper tomorrow?" inquired Amma.

"Maths! You know, that is my favourite subject. Everything is on my fingertips."

"Tomorrow morning you will have to start a little early. I want you to break a coconut at the Ganesh temple on your way. It is your birthday and an auspicious Friday. Also take..."

"But, I will get late for my exam..."

"That is why I am asking you to start early. You can take some *kheer* for your Mama (Uncle) and Mami (Aunty) also. It is all on the way," Amma said and hurried back to the kitchen.

"All right, Amma, but where is Appa? He was supposed to be back this morning; was he not?"

"He has not finished his work. He rang up to say he is coming only tomorrow evening by train."

"Oh!" I said, disappointed, "he had promised to take us all to see a movie this evening."
As there was nothing to study in Arithmetic, and as my sister Uma's and brother Hari's examinations were still three weeks away, we spent the evening playing carom.

In the morning, I had an early bath and tried the new silk skirt and blouse mother had got stitched for my birthday. It was in my favourite colour and combination - bottle green with a yellow zari border. I stuck a green bindi on my forehead, went to the puja (prayer) room, lit the diyas (earthen lamps) and the scented sticks and chanted my prayers. Mother came in for a moment to see if I was ready. I touched her feet.

"Happy Birthday, didi (elder sister)!" Uma and Hari cried and hugged me. "You are looking gorgeous."

Hari pulled out a card from his pocket and gave it to me.

"Fantastic!" I said, gazing at their lovely handiwork. "Did you paint it all by yourselves?"

"Amma helped a little, but very little," Uma said. "Do you like it?"

"Of course! It is superb! Thank you!" I said, holding them close. "And now go and get your bags, quick."

Quickly I changed into my uniform and swallowed my breakfast. We got into the car. Mother put the coconut and container with badam-kheer (a sweet drink made of almond and milk) on the seat beside me.

"Best of luck, Vinni. Do your paper well," she said.

"Bye," we sang as the driver started the car.

At the temple, I broke the coconut as directed by mother and stood fervently saying my prayers. The 'purohit' (priest) performed the aarati (waving of lit lamps) in front of the deity and gave us prasad (items such as flowers, sandal-paste and sweets after they were offered to the deity). I put a rupee coin on the aarati
plate and looked at my watch.

"Hurry up! It is getting late," I told the driver, as we all got into the car. "We will leave these two at school, and then drop in at Mami's for a minute."

The minute I saw Mami's house from a distance I got alert, and as the car braked to a halt, I jumped out, ran to the door and pressed the doorbell. No answer. Not a sound of hurrying footsteps from inside. I pressed the bell again. Trring, it rang. There was no response. I looked around, nobody was there. Good Lord, further delay! I glanced at my watch. Time was slipping away.

"Mami, Mami," I called and beat my fist on the door. To my horror, it slid open. The door was not locked at all. Hurriedly I stepped in, as my heart nearly missed a beat with yet another shock. There lay Mami, on the sofa with her hand clutching her chest, the basket of vegetables thrown on the carpet and potatoes and onions scattered around. Mami must have come back after buying the vegetables, that is why the door was left ajar. Then she must have fainted.

Mami's breathing was strained and her pulse felt weak. Remembering the first-aid lectures at school, I massaged her heart vigorously. Must be one of her attacks. I knew Mami was a heart patient. She looked pale and her body was cold and clammy. Drops of sweat glistened on her forehead, face and down the neckline. I knew she always carried her pain pills wherever she went.

"Solomon!" I shouted for the driver, running to the door. "Solomon, quick. Mami is very sick. Call Mama," I directed and ran back to the bedroom. There on the table lay the white plastic container with a big Red Cross on it. Opening it, I found a few common household remedies and a bottle of tablets. A quick glance at the
label, it read Sublingual Tablets. I recalled my Girl Guide Instructor telling us that 'sublingual' meant 'under the tongue', and that the tablets were for heart patients. I grabbed the bottle and ran back to Aunty. I gave her a gentle shake and as she stirred, I told her to open her mouth, and I placed a tablet under her tongue. The effect was almost immediate. As it dissolved and got absorbed, colour began to return to Aunty's face. Her eyes slowly opened and she gradually moved into a sitting position.

I stroked her forehead and said, "Mami, you are all right. Mama will just be coming."

Mami's lips parted to speak, but again her eyes shut drowsily.

"Oh, my God, she is sinking," I muttered under my breath. "Solomon," I called in panic. Almost instantly Solomon dashed into the drawing room and said, "Baby, Mama is not in his office.

"Oh, no. We can't wait for him. Look, Mami's condition is not improving," I paused for breath. And my exam, I thought. But immediately, I pushed the thought away. Mami's life was in danger. "Quick, Solomon, let us rush her to the hospital."

"Baby, your...exam..." he reminded. But to carry Mami to the hospital was the only problem that troubled me at the moment. "Hurry, Solomon," I shouted.

Together we carried Mami to the car and rested her on the back seat. I sat beside her. The car sped. All through the way I held Mami's wrist, searching for her pulse which sometimes throbbed against my inexperienced fingers. It was already nine o'clock.

My exams would have begun, I thought, but the next moment a faint hiccup from Mami made me concentrate all my attention on her. The car entered the hospital.
Immediately Mami was carried into the Intensive Care Unit. Once Mami was in expert hands, I rushed to phone Mama and Amma. Mama had returned to his seat. "I am on my way," he said tersely as soon as I gave him the information.

Just as Mama arrived in the lobby, the doctor came out smiling. "So you brought your Mami," he asked rather doubtfully.

"Yes," I murmured. "Brave girl," the doctor patted my shoulder, "her condition could have gone out of control had there been a delay. You just saved a life, my child."

My tension eased, a big burden was off my heart. I found Mama hugging me.

"Vinni, my pet," he said in a choked voice.

Now I thought of my exam and looked at my watch, it was 9.45 already. Suddenly Mama asked. "But what are you doing here, Vinni? I thought you have an exam in the morning. It is already 9.45 now!"

I nodded. "Yes, I have. I think I would make it to the school," I said getting panicky.

He put his hand round me and led me to the car. "Hurry up now. I will look after Mami. Good luck!"

"Faster, faster," I kept repeating as the car raced along the crowded roads. All through the mad drive, Solomon tried to console me. We had to cover nearly three kilometres and it seemed like a never-ending journey. When at last we did reach our destination, my watch showed 10 o'clock.

Visibly shaking, I strode towards the Hall Supervisor. "I am sorry I am late," I blurted out.

He looked at me sympathetically, and then at his watch, showing it to me.

As I stood dazed, I heard his voice, "I am sorry, my
dear. You are 31 minutes later than the half hour grace period allowed. I can't defy rules and permit you to sit for the exam, can I?"

I shook my head. "I am sorry," he said again.

Through misty eyes, I looked at my classmates busily writing. For a moment, I felt their pitying eyes on me. Then in utter humiliation, I walked out of the hall. I ran down the corridor to the Principal's office. Perhaps she might be considerate and allow me to sit for the exam as a special case. Miss Baker was gentle and loving, at the same time a strict disciplinarian. Yet, I thought it was worth a try, surely the Hall Supervisor would not defy Miss Baker's orders, that is, if she agreed to let me in. The Principal's office was closed. I knocked at the door. There was no response. The peon came.

"Where is Miss Baker?" I asked.

"She has gone for a meeting," he answered.

I muttered. My heart sank and my throat went dry. I swallowed and managed to ask, "When will she return?"

"Not till the school is over."

With heavy steps I walked down the corridor towards the car. I had missed my selection test! The next day the school would be closing down for the winter-break. The day it reopened, the results of the exams would be pinned on the notice board. Only my name would not be there, and then no Board exams for me this year! The thought tore me apart. Losing one year! The moving lamp posts and vehicles outside blurred as my eyes welled up.

At the hospital Amma rushed to me as I stepped in the corridor. "So soon, Vinni?" she asked looking puzzled.

"They didn't allow me to sit for the exam. I was late," I narrated the story briefly, then clung to her. "Amma, I have lost one year," I broke down.
"No, no, Vinni," I heard Mama's voice. He patted my head. "Don't cry. You can't lose a year like this."

"You don't know, Mama. Miss Baker is very strict. Only those who pass the selection tests will be allowed to appear for the Board exams." I sobbed.

"Everything will be all right. Now, wipe your tears, birthday girl," he comforted. His words relieved me as Amma wiped my tears.

Soon after Mama and Mami came to live with us, and we spent the vacation looking after her. The thought of being dropped from the Board exams often sent me into fits of depression. Everytime I mentioned my anxiety, Mama silenced me with "Don't worry, everything will be okay." The uncertainty added to my melancholy.

When I reached school after the vacation I spotted a crowd of students in front of the notice board. They were my classmates, surely the list of successful candidates must have been pasted. Miss Baker stood talking to them. Once again depression overcame me, my name would be missing from the list and my steps slowed down. "Oh, Vinni, congrats," cried Ritu, waving at me.

Surprised I looked up. Yes, Ritu meant it for me. Why congrats? I could not believe my ears. I ran and made my way to the notice board. Yes, my name was there among the successful candidates! I had passed. Before I could react, I felt a tap on my shoulder. Miss Baker! "Congrats, Vinni," she said. "But..." I hesitated.

"Yes, dear, it is true; your class averages were excellent, we could not possibly detain you from appearing for the Board exams especially after you had passed a real-life test," Miss Baker said in one breath.

Again I looked up with a questioning glance. Before I could open my mouth to ask, Miss Baker smiled and
explained, "Your Mama came the next day and gave me a full account."

Next Miss Baker clapped and silenced all my classmates. In brief she told them how I took my sick Mami to the hospital at the risk of losing one precious year of studies. My friends gave me admiring glances as she paused for breath. Miss Baker pulled me closer and announced, "Vinni has been awarded this year's title of 'The Brave One' which the school gives to the pupil who demonstrates exemplary courage. I am so proud of you, my child," she hugged me.

Ah! so that is why Mama always had that naughty smile whenever I showed my anxiety. Now I knew. All the tension of the past fortnight vanished in a puff of excitement, as I responded happily to felicitations from my friends.
The Ramayana That Went Wrong

Ours was the only school in that sleepy, small town of Bihar. And certainly the only one with boarding-houses. There were a hundred odd day-scholars and a dozen boarders, boys and girls. In fact, it was I who made up the lucky dozen - a fact that made me acceptable sooner than I would have otherwise been. We were around eight years old, with the exception of Roma, who was thirteen and ruled the roost.

It was Roma who decided that we should play football with the boys three days a week and that they should play dolls with us on the other three days. Though the boys made a show of being bored, they secretly enjoyed building our dolls' houses and fetching us leaves and flowers for 'cooking'. The girls (with the exception of Roma, who was tall) detested football but did not dare say so. On Sundays one of the nuns usually joined us during playtime. We either sang songs or went for a walk at that time.

The most enjoyable and longed-for occasion was the day of the 'Boarders' Feast'. It was a day for sweets, picnics, a bang-up supper and a concert to wind up. Normally, we recited some verses and sang a few action-songs. This time Roma suggested we enact a real play. "I
have thought it all out," she said. "We will do a scene from the Ramayana. But let us keep it a secret."

We stared at her in astonishment. It seemed a very ambitious thing to do—verging on the impossible. "Why are you gaping?" said Roma in a cross voice. "It is going to be perfectly simple. We will do the scene where Ravana comes in and captures Sita. Rama and Lakshmana can come in afterwards and cry a little. That is all. There is no need to do the entire Ramayana."

"But is there enough time to learn all that?" I asked doubtfully. "The feast is day after tomorrow."

"There is nothing to learn," said Roma, waving her hand impatiently. "We will make up the words ourselves. In any case, Ravana and I have to do the talking. Rama and Lakshmana only have to cry 'Sita! Sita!' That does not require any learning!"

"Are you going to be Sita, then?" I asked, trying to hide the pang of disappointment that surged up within.

"Of course!" said Roma in a matter-of-fact voice. "It is my idea, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course, it is," I admitted. "Who all are playing the other roles?"

"Kartik can be Ravana," said Roma, "he is the tallest among the boys although he is shorter than I. But that can't be helped."

"Kartik only comes up to your shoulders!" I protested. "And he is much thinner than you are! He can't possibly drag you off the stage!"

"Yes, he can, because I will run after him and he won't need to drag me at all," said Roma.

"That will look terribly unnatural," I said obstinately. "Sita was supposed to struggle all the way."

Roma gave me a scathing look. "Is this play yours or mine?" she asked in a cutting voice.
"Yours," I said promptly.
"Well then, leave me to manage things."
"Who is going to be Rama?" asked Pushpa, a placid seven-year-old.
"And Lakshmana?" asked Chandra who was of the same age.
"Naresh and Bipin," said Roma.
"But Naresh and Bipin are both shorter than Kartik," I said, "you cannot have a husband who only comes up to your elbows! It would look ridiculous!"
"What on earth is wrong with you?" asked Roma, her eyes flashing, "you keep on and on making the silliest objections! Have you forgotten that both Rama and Lakshmana come on to the stage after Ravana and I have gone out? No one is going to notice whether they are taller or shorter!"
"Why can't Ruby be Rama?" said Chandra, "at least she is taller than Naresh."
"It will look silly for a girl to play Rama when there are so many boys," said Roma in a crushing voice. "Now for goodness sake, hold your tongues and let us have a rehearsal. Don't stand there looking like a dying duck in the thunderstorm! Remember, you have to pull the curtains, so keep your eyes open and don't go off into a dreamland!" I was about to say that I wouldn't but Roma looked so formidable that I gulped and nodded instead.

Soon we got so involved in the play that we did not care who played which role. The rehearsal proceeded smoothly though the argument between Sita and Ravana seemed to change each time. It only made it all the more interesting.

"What are you going to wear, Roma?" asked Pushpa. Roma was stumped.
Roma frowned for a moment but she cheered up immediately. "It is perfectly simple," she said, "I will drape my bed cover over my frock."

"But what about the boys?" asked Chandra. "All of you can't wear bed covers!"

Roma frowned again. "The boys can wrap their towels around their shorts."

Sister Deirdre, our 'Boarders' Mistress', looked highly amused when we announced that we were doing a play. So did Rev. Mother and the rest of the audience. Father Donal, the parish priest, and some of the families nearby were there too. We already had a stage and curtains. We were soon through with the verses and action-songs. Our play was about to begin. I pulled the curtain.

Sita sat on a low stool, balancing a plate of biscuits on her knee. She had refused to sit on the floor because she was afraid of the bed cover coming undone. Ravana came in, wearing a peacock-blue towel and a mustache hurriedly drawn with green ink as there was no black ink around. Everyone roared. Ravana forgot his lines. "Go on, call Sita," I prompted.

"Come out, Sita," said Ravana in the tone of repeating tables.

"Ask for some food first," hissed Sita, turning her face the other way. "Give me ... give me ... give me that plate of biscuits," said Ravana, stammering in his nervousness.

"I won't give you anything. So just get lost," Sita said in an angry voice. "I will ... I will pull your hair if you don't!" said Ravana defiantly, clutching his towel with one hand and groping for Sita's plait with the other. The audience roared louder.

Sita gave Ravana a resounding slap on the cheek.
Ravana, astonished at this unexpected behaviour, stumbled against the stool, fell down with a crash and burst into a loud volley of howls. "Sissy!" said Sita making a face at him, "cry-baby!"

Rama, who was Ravana’s younger brother in real life, burst on to the stage with a cry of "Bhaiya" and stood sobbing with his arms round Ravana. Lakshmana quietly walked in too and grabbed the plate of biscuits. The audience was in hysterics by now. Sita stood up majestically, dragged the weeping Rama and Ravana apart and marched them firmly off the stage. "Catch me doing a play with you, cry-babies, again!" She muttered savagely, "Call yourselves boys! Pooh! Even Chandra and Pushpa would have done better!"

The audience cheered us. "I have never seen anything so amusing in my life!" said Father Donal laughing.

"But we wanted it to be so tragic and have you all in tears!" said Roma indignantly. "W&ll, you have succeeded admirably!" remarked Rev. Mother, mopping her eyes.
Well, Well

I hurried out of the pandal, where the kirtan was being held. Mummy and Mausi (maternal aunt) were singing bhajans with their eyes closed. Mummy had told me I could go home if I wanted, but I was not to disturb her.

Once outside the gate, I started running as fast as my legs could carry me. My knees felt weak and my heart was beating loudly. "Would Guddu, the watchman's son, be there in time? Suppose I should die or worse, that Guddu would - my God..." Better not to think about that. I had made up my mind, and Guddu had agreed - we had to save it, we had to.

As I turned the corner of 'Amrud Bagh', I could see Guddu straining his neck in the direction of the Inspection Bungalow where we were staying.

"Guddu," I panted out of breath, "is everything ready?" "We are well ahead of time, Vaiju Baby," he replied. "You remember they said they would come around twelve when everybody would rush to take prasad. There is plenty of time and I have got the rope and bucket. Come on, let us get there fast."

"Yes," I said, "but," I stopped in my tracks again. "But Guddu, you are smaller than I, and I can't let you take the risk. You lower me and then hide on the mango
tree. If anything goes wrong, you would be there to help. You could even try telling the others I am at the bottom. May be, they won't go ahead with their cruel joke."

"Look," Guddu said with pride, "I may be smaller than you, but I have lived in Jashpurnagar all my life. Drawing water from wells is the only way of getting water as far as I am concerned. Getting deep down into wells to repair them, rescuing people, is something I learnt when I began walking. We people know no other life. For you it is a risk. I know you have two wells in your house in Jabalpur but you don't have to draw water from them." He spread out his hands for me to see. "Are your hands rough and knobby like this? Have you ever been at the bottom of a well? No! So you climb the mango tree and I will go down."

"No, Guddu, no," I felt the tears stinging my eyes, but I was determined not to cry, because I was sure only I could do the rescue work. "No, Guddu, it was my idea and I won't change it even if I have to die."

"Very well, now let us go," Guddu said and we went ahead.

I meekly followed a few paces behind him. I don't know whether I was more afraid of what we were going to do, or what the elders would say when they got to know. But at that moment, I could only think of the deep, dark bottom of the well where Guddu and I were going to hide, and also the reason for it.

I really can't understand Didi (elder sister), I thought. She has become so strange and unlike my beloved and loving Didi. And even those cousin brothers of mine, they are so nice when each one is alone. But together they get such wicked, bad ideas that even Didi becomes a monster along with them.

That night again, as we lay on our camp cots under the
stars on the lawn at the Inspection Bungalow, I tried to reason with Didi. It was no use.

"Vaiju," she had said in her superior voice, "you don't understand, because you are still small, and in a much lower class. What Vishu and Nandu and I are going to do is a Scientific Experiment. She emphasised scientific experiment as though I would not understand.

"Yes," I said patiently. "But Didi, the chick could get killed, it would die, and how can you knowingly take such a risk?"

"Baby," interrupted the smug, over-smart Vishu Dada, in his irritating, big-brother voice. "Baby, you don't have a scientific mind..."

"I don't want one, if all you do is to kill..." I butted in, but he continued, "See kid, in the bio-lab, they get us live frogs. The Lab Assistant gives them chloroform. We stick pins in the unconscious frogs to make them stick to the tray, then we take scissors and forceps and cut them open. Our Bio teacher explains the frog's anatomy. And when the class is over, we don't stitch up the frogs and make them live again. The Lab Assistant chucks them in the incinerator. We wash our hands and go to our next class. We don't feel guilty, because it is part of our studies. If we keep fainting and protesting, how would we learn anything?"

"Yes, Dada," I said in my most obedient voice, "but please, Dada," I pleaded, "what scientific theory will you establish by throwing a little chick into the well, and seeing whether it can fly out again? It will die, Dada, I know it will die." I was weeping now.

"Fool!" exclaimed Nandu. "It is your fault, Vasanti, for telling this little sister of yours about our plans. Now she will sob the place down, she will go and sneak, and kaput goes our experiment."
"She won't sneak," hissed back Didi, "she is my sister, and I know she keeps her promises. You won't sneak, Vaiju, will you?" Didi pushed her head through the mosquito-net and asked me.

"No," I sobbed, "but all of you are meanies. God will punish you."

"Yes, yes, you saint! We are sinners, you go to the kirtan tomorrow and pray for our souls, while we carry out our scientific experiment," said Vishu Dada.

Didi tried to comfort me. "Nothing will happen, Vaiju, we know what we are doing. After all we have learnt some science, and after our experiment is over, I will ask Shanti to give the chick to you. I am sure Daddy will let you take it back to Jabalpur. Then, when it grows up, you can eat the eggs laid by it."

"No," I said stubbornly, "it is going to die. As if you don't know that the well is deep and dark. How can it live if it falls to the bottom?"

Didi gave up and went off to sleep. I made my plan. I used to get up very early and so did Guddu. He was one year younger than I, but did a lot of odd jobs around the Inspection Bungalow when we came for our annual summer holiday. He was a good friend to me and when I told him that my sister and brothers had become cruel enough to try a scientific experiment with one of Shanti's chicks, he agreed to help.

Shanti lived in one of the servants' quarters and raised chickens and supplied eggs to the Inspection Bungalow. Her fluffy little chicks were two months old and had just begun to look like hens. Their feathers were growing and wings were becoming stronger. We kids loved chasing them round the courtyard, seeing them flap their wings to get away. That was when Didi and Nandu had got this bright scientific idea.

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Shanti, as a rule, never counted any of her hens or chickens. She would not miss one little chick, but would believe it was eaten up by a jackal when it wandered away.

I had been so busy thinking these things, I had almost forgotten the dangerous step we were about to take. Again I felt scared but I was determined to go ahead. Guddu guessed my feelings, for he said, "Baby, I promise, I will do exactly what you would. Please let me go down alone."

"No," I screamed, "let me go down before they get here."

"Very well," he tied the long, thick rope to the bucket he had brought. Then he removed the old rope that was already on the wheel and cast the new one with the bucket on it. Holding it tight he told me to get into the bucket.

With a prayer on my lips, and heart thudding loudly, the blood rushing in my ears, I got into the bucket. Guddu pushed it down so that I was suspended in mid-air, and slowly with great effort, he lowered the rope, bit by bit... I had closed my eyes tight and only when I heard the scrunch and felt the bucket land on the ledge in the well did I dare look. It was absolutely dry. Getting up slowly, I looked up. Guddu's head appeared like a tiny speck way up there, peering down to see if I was O.K.; when I shook the rope, he started hoisting the bucket.

I glanced round the well to see the best place to hide in the darkness, so that when those great scientists came they wouldn't see me here, and after chucking the chick would go away as they had planned.

Then Guddu would come, lower the bucket, I would get into it with the rescued chick to be drawn up.

There were lots of sticks and stones lying around, all
those that we had thrown in, to hear the echo. So I de-
cided to get myself a good stick as support, for even
though I was pretending to be real brave to show Guddu,
it was quite scary in that deep, dark well. I bent to pick
up the long and strong-looking stick. But as soon as I had
touched it, I screamed with fright, and it echoed and
echoed. It was a snake! Scared, it slid away. Just then
there was a rushing sound, and a shattering crash behind
me, cr... a...sh and there was a battered and bruised
Guddu in the bucket, trying to get out.

"Hey, why did you come down, Guddu? Now who
will pull us up, you idiot? Nobody knows we are down
here."

"I like that!" he yelled back, our voices echoing away.
"First you scream as though you have been murdered,
and then you ask me why I came down to help.

"Yes, but how on earth will we get back, Guddu?" I
was worried.

"What will I tell Saab and Memsaab, if something
happened to you? Don't make any noise. Let them
throw the chick in, then we will make a racket."

"Now that you are also here, I am not a scared cat any
more."

We spent about fifteen minutes according to my digi-
tal watch just talking and whiling away the time till we
heard the excited voices of Nandu, Didi and Vishu Dada
at the top of the well.

Then there was a flutter of wings, flap, flap, and a
loud, 'kok, kok', but no chick came hurtling down.

"Stupid bird," I heard Nandu saying, "you are sup-
pposed to go to the bottom of the well and then fly out,
you fool."

"It is not the chick's fault, nut. You should have
catched its wings tight before lowering it," Didi said.
I had steeled my nerves and could feel my mouth going drier and drier. Even Guddu, standing next to me, seemed to have stiffened. The 'kok, kok, kok, kok' alerted us and the fluttering and flapping of wings above our heads told us to be ready.

The poor little chick fell between Guddu and me.

I picked up the chick and found it unharmed. I tucked it into my frock, next to my chest. There it lay, its chest heaving, its breath coming heavily... and it was quiet.

Now, Guddu and I started our din... "Hey, Didi! Nandu... du... du... du" the echo seemed louder than our voices. "Help... ep... ep... ep."

"Didi... di... di... help..."

I heard Nandu yelling, "Hey it is ghosts in the well." He seemed to be frightened.

"No, you fool, it is Vaiju and Guddu's voice," cried Didi. She started calling, "Vaiju, Vaiju, Guddu! are you two in there? Answer me, how did you get in?"

"Now we are sure to be punished," wailed Vishu Dada, "and I am the eldest. Why do you always get us into trouble, Vaiju? Quick, get out fast..."

"Bhaiya," said Guddu, "we have a long rope and bucket down here with us. If you lower that old rope, we will tie our new one to it and you can pull us up one by one."

"All right," said three sullen voices.

Didi asked us in a loud voice, "Where is the chick?"

"It is here with me, Didi. Your scientific experiment has failed," I shouted back.

"We know, we know, we are sorry..." mumbled three voices again.

"Nandu, go and fetch Ramu Chacha, Guddu's father; he will..." I heard Vishu Dada saying.

"No, no. Please don't call father, Nandu Bhaiya, he will thrash me. Call Majid Chacha, he is big and strong..."
and he will keep our secret too," Guddu pleaded.

Didi and Vishu Dada lowered the worn-out rope, and Guddu's expert hands quickly knotted the new rope to it.

Guddu forced me to get into the bucket first, "What if the snake comes out," he hissed, teasingly.
"Ha, ha," I joked, "little chicken licken will kill it."
"Now," he said.
I got into the bucket and soon I was up in the air. Chicken licken didn't like the jerk or the ride. It squawked loudly and put its head out of my frock. I held it tight. Any way, I had already reached the dazzling sunlight and three eager pairs of hands grasped the bucket and pulled me out. I basked in their love and hugs. The chick flew out of my hands. Guddu too was pulled out. I forgot everything and hugged him and so did Didi, Nandu and Vishu Dada.

Majid Chacha had brought a flask of water with him. Both Guddu and I drank the water greedily. All fear, guilt was gone now, and Didi, Nandu and Vishu Dada were being so nice and seemed to be so truly sorry.

Later in the evening when everybody was home and Nani (grandmother) was distributing prasad, we narrated our adventure and apologised and made Majid Chacha explain nothing untoward had happened. Mausaji (maternal aunt's husband) and Daddy gave us a small lecture, saying, "All is well that comes up the well but beware."

And Nani said, "But my good little girl deserves a prize." So the adventurous little chick was bought from Shanti and was presented to me. I presented it to Guddu. "Look after it for me," I said.

Guddu smiled and accepted it.
The Cricket Match

"And here comes Anand, bowling round the wicket, and Ashok lifts it for a magnificent six. With this delightful six the Raja's XI have won the semi-finals. Next week they will meet the Nawab's XI, the reigning champs at Sawan, for the finals of the Sawan's School Cricket Tournaments. And now for some interesting figures..." went on the commentator.

But no one was interested in all the statistics the commentator was reeling off. The host team had won, the air was filled with jubilation. The chairman of the factory, Mr. Pradhan, came over to congratulate the winners.

"Well done, boys. It is the first time our team has qualified for the finals. I hope, you play to win the trophy. The ground at Sawan is ready for you," said Mr. Pradhan.

Sawan is the township of the chemicals factory nearby. The Sawan's School Cricket Tournaments are an annual event sponsored by the factory. This first victory of the Raja's XI was an event to celebrate. All of them piled into the township bus and there was a lot of singing and dancing, all the way home.

Ashok, the captain and the player of the Raja's, and
his friends were seated in the last row. They were engrossed in a vigorous post-mortem of the match.

"I understand the Nawab's XI are a very good team. And they have a professional, to coach them," said Ashok.

"As long as you hit some beauties like the last one, we have nothing to worry about," said Rahul.

"Let us not talk of what happened, but do some hard practice from tomorrow. All of us come to our grounds at 3.30; all right with everyone?" asked Ashok. "Yes, yes," went up the chorus.

The following evening, at 3.30 sharp, the boys were ready to start practice. There was a cold breeze, but the warm winter sun made it a pleasant afternoon. One by one, each boy took his turn to bat. It was Sunil's turn to bat. He had just hit a couple of balls when he straightened up to wipe his brow.

"Gosh! it is hot, and I thought it was still winter," muttered Sunil.

"It is hot, may be they are heating the place for us," joked Rahul.

"Stop fooling around, guys," ordered Ashok. "If you two want a break, go ahead. Let me bat," he added.

Soon, he too felt uncomfortable and could not connect bat and ball. His eyes began irritating him.

"No, today is not my day. I think, I will call it a day," said Ashok, under his breath.

"Look! Ashok, see that smoke from the factory chimney," cried Rahul.

"That is it. That is why we are all feeling uneasy," sputtered Raju between coughs.

By now Ashok's eyes were red and watering. Raju's cough was getting more frequent. Rahul and Sunil felt uncomfortably hot. Their team-inates too were uneasy.
The grey-black smoke cloud was slowly spreading across the blue sky. The beautiful winter noon was marred.

On reaching home Ashok washed his eyes and felt better. But very soon the irritation returned. At dinner time Ashok’s mother noticed his red eyes.

"Did you hurt yourself, Ashok?" asked his mother.
"No, Ma, but there is some irritation," added Ashok.
"Maybe we should see a doctor tomorrow."

The next morning Ashok and his mother went to the polyclinic. While they were waiting to see the optometrist, Raju arrived with a bad cough and fever. He too was accompanied by his mother.

"This time Raju's cough is more severe. I hope the doctor is able to give a medicine to cure it permanently. He never had this problem in Ahmedabad," said his mother. She looked worried.

Ashok’s mother sympathised and told her about Ashok’s problem.

Just then Ashok and his mother were called in. The routine tests proved that Ashok did not need glasses. But looking at his eyes the doctor was not too happy.

After conducting more tests, he said to Ashok’s mother, "Well, Mrs. Jain, I feel that Ashok’s eyes have got acute allergy. It is good you have come early. With proper treatment he should be cured. I wish something could be done to keep the air cleaner. The number of such cases is on the increase," said an agitated Dr. Bose. Then he turned to Ashok, "And, Ashok, at least during the treatment, avoid going out much."

"That is impossible, doctor. I am leading our cricket team, the finals are just a week away. How can I stay home?" pleaded Ashok.

If he were younger, he would have cried. His mother was in a quandary. Winning this match could get Ashok
a place in the State team, and Ashok had been working
towards this for the past year. But his eyes were too pre-
cious. She looked imploringly at the doctor.
"I am sorry, son, you have to be indoors at least when
you are undergoing the treatment. If you don't take care
now, you could damage your eyes permanently,"
warned the doctor.
Ashok felt that the whole world had crashed around
him. His head bent down, he walked out of the doctor's
office.
That evening when the boys came to call Ashok for
practice he told them about his visit to the doctor. The
boys were flustered.
"But Ashok, you are the team captain, without you,
how can we play?" wailed Rahul.
"Maybe, I will be all right in a few days, then I will join
you. But all of you carry on with the practice."
The boys were upset, yet they decided to practise.
They then went to Raju's house. There too, they were
greeted by ailing Raju. He was also affected by
pollution.
The best player being laid up was too much to take.
The boys went to the field, but no one had his mind on
the game. While on the field the smoke from the factory
once again blew over the field affecting the players.
They all went back to Ashok's house, and told him
about the thick smoke blowing over the field. Most of
the players were coughing. Ashok felt depressed.
"I feel really bad, especially when we have come thus
far, and for the first time," moaned Ashok.
"But this smoke is making it impossible for us even to
practise," Sunil was angry, "we have to do something
about the smoke or we cannot play the match."
"Let us meet our Principal, in the morning. After all
the prestige of the school is also at stake. I will come with you," suggested Ashok.

The next morning they went to the Principal's office. Ashok was also with them wearing the dark glasses, to protect his eyes.

There was a lot of excited conversation and the Principal listened to them patiently.

"Sir, besides the match being in jeopardy, what will the opposition team think of us? How will they play, for they too may get affected by the pollution," Ashok said.

"Yes, it is a very serious problem. I think you all go and present this pollution problem to Mr. Pradhan," suggested the Principal.

By now, word had got around that Ashok and Raju were ill owing to pollution. Other similar cases were also being discussed.

Ashok and a few team-mates were to speak on behalf of all the children. They all went to the factory to see Mr. Pradhan. Mr. Pradhan was standing on the verandah. On seeing Ashok and his team-mates, Mr. Pradhan came forward to greet them.

I hope the field is in good condition and you boys are practising hard," he said.

"Though we would like to practise hard, we are not able to do it," said Ashok.

"Sir, the smoke from the factory is affecting all of us," added Sunil.

Mr. Pradhan went into the details of the past couple of days. He was deeply concerned. He said after a pause, "We do have plans for putting in air-filters and planting trees around the colony. But somehow they got postponed. I think now I will press the matter."

"But these are long-term measures, sir. What about the match on Saturday?" asked Sunil.
"Sir, if I may suggest, could you shut down the factory a day before and on the day of the match," asked Ashok hesitantly.

After a few minutes of consideration, Mr. Pradhan agreed.

"After all 'Sawan' too has a stake," he said.

The players were thrilled. For their daily practice they used an open field further away from the colony. Ashok and Raju came for practice the day before the match when they played in their home field.

The day of the finals arrived - a perfect cool winter day. As the factory was closed, the spectator-stands were packed to capacity. The trophy on one side of the ground was glittering in the sun.

The two teams came on to the field in their whitest of white uniforms. The Nawab's, oozing confidence, the Raja's nervous but optimistic. Mr. Pradhan tossed the coin and the Nawab's went to bat.

The match was exciting, fought evenly by both teams. The successful partnership between Raju and Ashok got the home team the Trophy. As they ran back to the pavilion, they looked up. They could see an unpolluted, clear and beautiful blue sky.
"So our exams will be over today," I said to Gopal, "and we will be free."

Gopal was equally anxious for the exams to be over. He said, "Yes. We will be free tomorrow and the first thing we will do is to go to the mango groves by the side of the hill and eat mangoes."

"Yes, we will start early in the morning."

The last paper was in the afternoon session. It was very hot, and we were perspiring from head to foot. At the cross-roads Sridhar joined us. We walked to our school. Soon the grey walls of the school at a distance came into view. We walked fast.

At the school we saw everyone in a frantic hurry doing last-minute brushing up. Some were squatting on the play-ground, some leaning against trees - their eyes glued to their note-books. Our last paper was British History.

Sridhar, who was afraid of History, was nervous. When we reached the school, he asked me, "Any guess about the questions? Will they be difficult?"

"Our History teacher, Krishna Pillai, is rather crazy. So anything can be expected." My answer made him more uneasy.
The bell rang. Leaving our books on the platform inside the examination hall, we hastened to our seats.

The answer papers were already there on our desks. I wrote my number on the fly-sheet of the answer book, and the subject - British History.

As the second bell rang, there was a rustle of papers. The question papers were distributed. As soon as I glanced through the questions, a wave of joy surged within me. They were quite easy and they were 'expected'.

To gain more confidence, I raised my hand, and asked for water. The school peon, Raman Nair, brought a glass of cold water from the mudka (earthen pitcher). After drinking it, I started to write. I did not know that I could write so fast.

After completing the answers, I looked at the clock. Twenty minutes past four, and the paper was to go on till 5 o'clock! Why was not the paper set for two and a half hours, instead of three? I looked eagerly at the verandah outside. If only I could pluck up courage to hand in the paper and go out!

Then, I spotted Krishna Pillai, our master. I sat upright. His eyes were on me. I pretended to be busy with the answer paper; I might as well do a little revision. I read a few lines of my answer to the first question, which left me bored. Turning over the sheets, I kept gazing at the last answer, pretending I was revising.

Krishna Pillai had gone. I looked at the clock, hoping it must be 5 o'clock now. It was only half past four!

I turned to see what the others were doing. Gopal was writing and writing, almost lost to the world. Sridhar too was writing with his tongue thrust out of his mouth, and moving it right and left, with tilts of his pen. Raju gazed at the ceiling, scratching his chin with the pen, probably
to get more ideas. Hari leaned back in his chair. The invigilators walked up and down the room. The supervisor was sleeping in the chair.

I briskly took my answer book, handed it over to the invigilator and walked out. I kept the question paper folded in my pocket. I stood on the verandah waiting for my friends to come out.

I had various plans of spending my summer vacation. My uncle at Madras had invited me to stay with him for a few days. How fine to roam about freely on the Marina Beach, in the evening, enjoying the cool sea-breeze! Madras had nice libraries and eating-places, and also good cinema houses showing the latest English films. Then to North Kerala to my aunt, who had invited me to her countryhouse. I had longed for the last day of the exams. And that day had come!

A bell rang, "Half an hour more," one of the invigilators shouted in his hoarse voice. At that time, I heard the supervisor's voice from one end of the hall. "There is an announcement. Please listen. You know there are 8 questions in the History paper; 5 on page 1 and 3 on page 2. You are expected to answer only five. This instruction was omitted by oversight while printing the Question Paper."

What! Eight questions! I took out my question paper and looked on page 2 of the paper. A cold shiver ran through my spine. Three questions had escaped my notice! Thank God for the announcement!

I ran home. I saw my mother standing at the gate, anxiously waiting for me. "How was your last exam?"

I showed the paper to her and told her the whole story.

As I was saying this, I could notice the emotions on my mother's face - anxiety, fear, relief and finally gratitude and happiness. "God has saved you," she
exclaimed. "This time when you go to Kerala during your vacation don't forget to go to the Guruvayoor Temple. He has saved you. He, no one else!"

Mother had prepared some delicious snacks for tea. As I was eating them, father came in. He was in his usual jolly mood and patted me on the back saying, "So you are a free bird now. Planning your trip to Madras, I suppose? I know that is the star attraction. Then to Nilambur, and to Trichur, your grandfather's place where you will eat plenty of jackfruits, and grow fat!"

He laughed again. He cast a glance at my mother with a glint in his eyes - "By the way, how did you do your British History paper?"

"So-so," I said sheepishly.

"Why so-so? Let me see the paper?"

I gave it to him. He went through it carefully. "I hope you have answered all the questions well?"

"No father, I answered only five."

"Why? What about the rest? Question numbers 6, 7 and 8?"

"I didn't see them."

Father's voice changed suddenly.

"There you are! I knew you would commit such blunders. You are always in a hurry. And absent-minded!"

"But father... later on there was a correction. We were expected to answer only five questions."

He was not pleased. "You were thinking of your summer vacation. You wanted to be free from the exams as early as possible. You were impatient. And you didn't care to see both sides of your question paper... Anyway all is well that ends well. But you can't expect the same luck every time. Better be careful." He paused for a while, then smiled, "Now you go, take your bath, eat well, sleep soundly and dream of jackfruits and movies!"
The Maleo Birds

The smallest of the Nicobar islands was not very far from the biggest one. A boat ferried between the two every evening. Javed lived on the big island. His father was a coast-guard. Javed wanted to visit the smaller island, but his father would not permit him to do so. Whenever Javed asked him, his father always said, "What will you do in a small place that has just a handful of primitive inhabitants?" Javed was disappointed, but his curiosity increased.

Javed wanted to know how the islanders lived. Fishing was their main occupation. They sent their fish by boat to the biggest island and got what they needed in exchange. Javed pestered his father to let him go there. Finally, the day Javed was eleven, his father agreed. Javed was overjoyed.

When the boat from the smallest island arrived, Javed quickly got into it. The boatman, a friend of the family, was happy to take Javed to the island.

The sun had set when the boat reached the island. A warm breeze blew. The ferryman's son, Tumu, greeted Javed joyfully and took him home. He was almost as old as Javed.

Lanterns dimly lit the darkness in the house. Javed
had a good meal of rice and fish and also a sweet dish of coconut and bananas.

Soon after dinner, it was bedtime. The people of the island had nothing else to do in the darkness. But Javed was not used to going to bed so early. He lay awake for a long time before sleep overcame him.

In the morning, Tumu took Javed around the island. There were a few coconut trees. Wild bushes with juicy purple berries and banana trees grew all over. On one side there were mounds of sand and dry leaves and a stretch of jungle.

"What is inside the jungle?" Javed asked.

"Some wild dogs and mongooses. There used to be many coloured wild fowl but now there are very few," replied Tumu.

"Have they died?" asked Javed.

"I don't know."

Javed told Tumu, "I cannot go to bed at night as early as you. I will carry a lantern and go out for an after-dinner walk."

"Aa...ng! The evil spirits will dance around the lantern and attack you," said Tumu, full of fear.

"Nonsense!" retorted Javed. "Evil spirits don't exist."

"Anyway, my mother wouldn't allow you," argued Tumu.

Javed persuaded him, "Come along with me. We will go out quietly when everyone is asleep. We won't go too far."

After some hesitation, Tumu agreed.

When night fell, Javed and Tumu lit a lantern, quietly opened the front door, and slipped out. Far away a dog howled. Otherwise, all was quiet. It was a clear, warm night. The lantern in Tumu's hand threw a hazy light around.
Suddenly something small and bright shone in the darkness ahead. Tumu stopped, tugging at Javed. Javed had also noticed the glittering object. But he moved slowly ahead and looked carefully. Soon he laughed.

"It is only a glow-worm," he remarked.

"No," denied Tumu. "It is the evil spirit." He turned, and ran back home. Javed stood alone in total darkness.

In a little while, the moon rose. Javed decided to go ahead and walked on. He had almost reached the jungle, when suddenly he stopped. Javed crouched, and listened intently. Surely, it was the sound of footsteps and the rustling of dry leaves. Javed waited. But he heard or saw no more. He went back home and crept into bed. He decided he would go again the following night to investigate.

The next day, Javed told Tumu about the footsteps. "Evil spirits again," cried Tumu.

"Shut up. I am going there tonight. You need not come if you are scared," retorted Javed.

Curiosity overcame Tumu's fears. He decided to go with Javed.

When night approached, Javed and Tumu waited for the moon to rise. They did not carry the lantern. But they went armed with lathis. They reached the very spot where Javed had stood the previous night and waited.

Soon they heard the footsteps and the rustling. The footsteps were quicker. As Javed and Tumu peered into the darkness, a figure quickly flitted past them. Tumu gripped Javed's hand.

"Come, we will follow the figure," he whispered and began to walk noiselessly ahead. In the moonlit night the figure of a man hurrying along was clearly visible.

"I know where he is heading," revealed Tumu, "to the fishing boats."
"Is there any short-cut we could take?" whispered Javed.

"Yes," Tumu led the way. Both of them ran ahead. Soon they overtook the figure. They went forward, and hid behind some bushes. They held their lathis across the path. The figure stumbled and fell. As he struggled to get up, Javed and Tumu came out and faced him. But the figure grabbed one of the lathis and brandished it in the air. Before he could hit the children, they ran back and hid themselves. The figure looked around. All was silent. Lathi in hand, he quickly turned and ran away in another direction. Soon he had disappeared.

"He changed his mind. He did not go to the fishing boats. He went towards the fishermen's huts," concluded Tumu from what he could see in the moonlight.

Javed was disappointed. Both of them were tired. They decided to come back in the morning to explore and went home with one lathi only. Sleep overcame them as soon as they crept into bed.

When Javed woke up, it was broad daylight. Soon afterwards, Javed and Tumu went out, and re-traced the path they had taken the previous night.

When they reached the mound of sand and leaves, they found it all dug up.

"Did that figure do this? What for?" questions arose in Javed's mind, but there was no answer.

The children went ahead to where the figure had tripped and fallen. They could find nothing there. Finally they went towards the huts, where the figure had disappeared.

The men of the village had moved out to sea to catch fish. The fisherwomen were drying fish. Some fish lay packed in baskets, to be carried to the mainland in the evening's boat trip. The children returned home, not
very happy with their investigation, except for the recovery of the lathi which they found lying on the ground. Javed was about to throw away the lathi, when Tumu cried, "Look! There is a small piece of cloth stuck to the nail at the end of the lathi. That might be the prowler's. Some evidence, at least!"

Javed grabbed it, and put it in his pocket carefully. "We must tell my father about the prowling figure," said Tumu.

"Hm." Javed was unenthusiastic. He had to leave by the evening boat and go back home. He hated to go, with a mystery growing in his mind.

"I will tell my father about it," he said finally. Tumu quickly added, "I am coming with you in the boat this evening."

Late that evening the boat arrived. Both Javed's and Tumu's fathers were puzzled by the story of the prowler which the children told them. Javed also took out the piece of cloth from his pocket and showed them.

"Is there any thieving or smuggling going on?" asked Javed's father.

The children looked at Tumu's father, eagerly. "Not that I know of," came the reply. He however examined the piece of cloth and said excitedly, "That belongs to the head fisherman's turban."

"Some things have been happening, unknown to us," said Javed's father seriously and fell silent. Then suddenly he remarked, "Let us examine the fish you have brought."

"What for?" asked Tumu's father.

"Because I say so," Javed's father raised his voice. Javed and Tumu helped to open the baskets of fish. There were nine baskets in all. But the last basket did not contain fish. Instead, it contained eggs.
"Such big eggs!" cried Tumu. The eggs were three times larger than ordinary duck's eggs.

"Now, how do you answer for this?" asked Javed's father sternly. "Do you breed a particularly tough variety of fowl on the island and market their eggs?"

"No...no...we don't. I...I don't understand," stammered Tumu's father.

Tumu told me there were pretty-looking wild fowl on the island earlier, but they are no more to be seen.

"Didn't you, Tumu?" said Javed.

"Yes...yes," Tumu agreed.

"What my son said is certainly true," added the boatman.

"Disappearance of wild life... eggs... the prowler... hm!..." muttered Javed's father.

"What was that you said, father?" Javed asked.

"Nothing really, right now, I must find out a little more," replied his father. He let the boatman and Tumu go back to the island, after telling them, "keep this matter to yourselves, till I investigate further." He himself walked home, silently, with Javed.

Javed's school reopened. He was itching to talk to his father again about the night prowler. But his father told him to concentrate on his studies. After some days, however, he himself called Javed and said, "My boy! Your after-dinner walk, and the report of the prowler have been of great help in the investigation. It has been found that the eggs are those of a very small group of birds that have the peculiar habit of laying eggs but not hatching them."

"Strange! then how does the chick come out of the egg?"

"These birds place the eggs in locations where they are hatched by natural heat. The mound of sand and leaves
that you saw at the island is where the birds dig a deep hole to put their eggs in, to hatch, and cover them up carefully, to form a mound. In due course the heat of the interior makes the eggs hatch and the chicks are strong enough to find their way out."

"How fascinating!" exclaimed Javed.

"Yes. But the night prowler, the head fisherman, is poaching the eggs."

"He sends them here in fish baskets to be sold, I suppose."

"Yes. His man at this end pays the cheap price of a basket of fish for the eggs, and sells them at exorbitant rates. The two men share the money."

"But then, these strange birds will eventually disappear, won't they, if the eggs don't hatch," Javed remarked.

"They have already started diminishing in number, as Tumu pointed out," added his father.

"Won't the head fisherman be caught and punished," asked Javed.

"Certainly, thanks to you and Tumu. The naturalists will be visiting the island to study the lifestyle of these birds more closely. They will endeavour to protect these megapodes or the maleo birds, as they are called, and their eggs, too."

Javed was happy for himself, Tumu, as well as for the birds.

"Will you let me visit the island again during my holidays?" he requested his father.

"Certainly, Javed," came the reply.
Durga came bouncing into the house. "Radha-kaki, I am hungry," she shouted as usual, throwing her school bag on one side. She sat on the wooden swing, her favourite seat in the house. But Radha-kaki didn't come with the snacks.

"Radha-kaki", she called again.

"Durga, have patience. Don't you know everybody is busy preparing for the Navratri Puja which begins tomorrow."

"O, I completely forgot about it. Radha-kaki, please let me see all those ornaments of the Devi. You are in charge of putting them on the goddess."

"Yes, I am. But I am not sure whether I should let you see them. You take so long just looking at them that my work gets delayed and then your Ma and Dadi will scold me. You have seen them so many times, so what is the point in...

Dhadam...! A loud noise made them both jump. It was the sound of the door being shut, as Durga's father, Wamanrao, came in. "Aai, where is that lovable Madhav of yours," he roared.

Durga's grandmother rushed into the room when she heard her elder son. Durga's mother too came in.
"What has happened to Madhav?", Jankibai, Durga's dadi (grandmother) asked anxiously.

"Nothing has happened to him, I hope. But the police is after him. They came to the shop today to ask his whereabouts. When I told them that we do not know where he is, they would not believe me. They taunted me. They threatened me and because of this darling son of yours the police humiliated me amidst many! Now the whole bazaar will know."

"Calm down, Waman. Madhav has not done anything wrong of which you should feel ashamed. He is fighting for the freedom of the country," Jankibai reasoned.

"I know you will always side with him. But just look outside! Because of him our house has been surrounded by the police. Like criminals we are being watched." Wamanrao continued his tirade.

"What has he done to deserve all this?" Jankibai asked.

"I don't know. May be he has thrown bombs or attacked trains."

"No, no, he will never do that. He does not believe in violence," interrupted Radha, Madhav's wife.

"Do I have to know about my brother from you?" shouted Wamanrao. Radha rushed out of the room followed by Durga.

After an hour, when Jankibai called Radha and Durga, everything was quiet. The gaiety of preparation had been turned into a silence of tension. Delicious eatables lay half-cooked in the kitchen. Flowers brought for garlands and decorations remained in the basket.

There was no sign of Wamanrao. Durga's mother too had retired to her room. "Radha, start preparing for Puja. Whatever happens, the Navratri Puja has to be performed, so get to work. Durga, help your kaki," Jan-
kibai said. Durga followed her Radha-kaki to the big hall. Just then they heard a knock at the door. Radha went to open it. There was a policeman asking for water. "I will get it," Radha answered.

"No. I will take it from the well. I am sure you must have got one," said the policeman as he stepped in.

Radha walked towards the well, followed by the man. "Listen, Radha bhabhi," he said.

Radha turned sharply. Noticing the astonishment on her face, the policeman said, "I am Raghu Jadhav, a friend of Madhav. I have just got information that Madhav and his colleagues are hiding in the Gouri temple at Chaturshringi. And the police are going to surround the temple tonight. So please send him a message that he should leave the place. Otherwise anything can happen. Orders are to catch them dead or alive."

"No, they can't," Durga, who had come there unnoticed by them both, said sharply.

"O, God, I hope this little girl will not give away the secret!" Jadhav exclaimed.

"No, no, I will not," said Durga.

"But bhaiya, how will we send the message, when we are surrounded?" asked Radha.

That part you will have to work out. Do whatever you can. But send a person whom you trust. Now I must go, if not, the other policemen will suspect me. Raghu Jadhav walked out with a bucket of water for his colleagues.

Radha and Durga did not know whom to send or how to give the message. Wamanrao, Durga's father, they knew, would never go. Jankibai, her dadi and Durga's mother were out of the question. Radha wanted to go, but they were sure that she would be followed by the police as she was Madhav's wife. They knew that
Radha's absence would be immediately noticed by other persons in the house. "I think, I must go, I am the suitable person," said Durga.

"Durga, how will you walk such a long distance? Secondly, they will keep an eye on you too as you are a family member," said Radha.

"Then I will go as a non-family member."

"What do you mean by non-family member?"

"I will disguise myself. Now let us think who will I be! Yes, I can be Gangu, the maid servant's daughter. Come on, Radha-kaki," Durga said with all the excitement of adventure that lay ahead.

"But Durga..."

"No, but Radha-kaki, we have to be quick. I must be back before Baba returns from the shop. It is already 3.30." Off went her lovely frock, the red-ribboned plaits and golden ear-rings. And in fifteen minutes Gangu, with her wrinkled lehanga (skirt) and blouse, her hair loosely knotted, opened the main door.

"O.K. Bai, I am going now," she said stepping out.

"Come soon for the evening work," Radha said.

"Hey, girl! What are you carrying in this bundle," one of the policemen asked.

"Aare baba, Bai has given me some rotis (unleavened bread) to take home. But for her kindness we would go to bed hungry. That drunken father of mine never provides for us!" Durga imitated Gangu perfectly. Radha had a hard time controlling her laughter.

"O.K. Gangu, hurry up now, and don't waste time. Otherwise you will be late for work and I will have no vessels to cook the food in," Radha hurried her.

"Ha. Bai ha," said Durga as she rushed away. She came to the main road and started towards the temple. She walked and walked. It was difficult with the bundle
of rotis and at one point she thought of giving them to a cow on the roadside. But suddenly it occurred to her, 'May be Madhav-kaka, hiding in the temple, needs the food.' So she decided to carry along the bundle of rotis. And started walking again. There was quite a crowd on the main road because of the coming festival. Durga found it difficult to walk fast as people rushed past her.

She decided to take a short cut. Even then the road seemed unending. She kept on walking. Finally when she heard the temple bells ring, she breathed a sigh of relief. The saffron flag on the temple was now visible. She hurried along. At last Durga reached the temple. On both sides of the entrance, vendors were busy putting up their shops. Inside, the floor was being cleaned. Garlands of flowers decorated the main hall. Panditjee was giving instructions to workers who were putting the final touches to pictures of the gods and goddesses. Every year these pictures were repainted before the Navratri festival.

Durga looked around, she did not know where to look for her Madhav-kaka or his colleagues. She walked out of the temple and went to its back. It was all quiet and lonely there. She felt scared. She was confused and frustrated. 'Is all my endeavour going to be a waste? Why couldn't Raghu Jadhav have told me how to find Madhav-kaka', she thought, as she went round the temple once, twice, three times.

Durga was almost in tears when she heard somebody singing, "Jai Durga, jai Bhavani." The sound seemed to be coming from a small temple adjacent to the main one. Some were singing the bhajan while others were busy decorating the place. It gave Durga an idea. As soon as the bhajan was over, she started singing "Ananta, Keshava, Madhava, tuzya namat re godava" (Ananta,
Keshava, Madhava, there is such a sweetness in your names), the favourite bhajan of her Madhav-kaka, which they often sang at their house. Durga looked around as she sang. She noticed one person stopped his work and stared at her. Then he went behind a pillar. It was obvious from his look that though he suspected something, he had not recognised her. She kept on singing and walking around. She came near the pillar and emphasised on "Madhava, Madhava" and then ended with "Madhava, Madhav-kaka" as she did at home, to tease him. She had recognised him.

As people clapped, she went out. She saw Madhav-kaka following her, so she walked to the back of the temple towards a lonely spot. She was not afraid now as her Madhav-kaka was there. Durga stopped in one corner where nobody could see them.

"Who are you?" Madhav-kaka asked.

"Can't you recognise me? I am Durga; how else would I sing our bhajan ending with Madhav-kaka?"

"My God! Durga, I really could not recognise you. I suspected as much when you started the bhajan but then you looked so different. And even in my dreams I could not imagine that you, of all the persons, would come here. How did you know I am here?"

"Not only I, but the entire police force knows you are here. They are going to surround this place. Otherwise they will catch you, dead or alive."

"How do you know all this?"

"Your friend, Raghu Jadhav who is in the police, told Radha-kaki."

"How did he meet Radha?"

"Our house is surrounded by the police. If you try to come, they will catch you. Raghu Jadhav was on duty and managed to convey the message to us."
"Thank you, Durga, but why did Radha send you."
"Who else could come when the house is under vigil? I managed to come in this disguise of Gangu." Suddenly Durga remembered the rotis in the bundle. "And here, take these rotis which Radha-kaki gave me to complete the disguise of Gangu."
"Home-made food after a long time. But Durga, now you rush back before it gets dark. I will ask Panditjee's son to give you a bicycle to ride up to the Ganpati chowk and from there you can walk back home."
"But kaka, you must leave before the night."
"Yes, yes, we will. Ask your Radha-kaki not to worry."

Durga reached home well before she was expected. The police did not stop her.
"Bai," she called. Radha came running. Radha was about to hug her. But seeing the door still open and the police hovering near it, she paused. Durga winked and said, "Bai, look, I came earlier than promised. Let me finish the work quickly." And Durga went in. Radha followed her after closing the door.

Quickly Durga narrated her adventure. Her father had not returned from the shop. Her mother was still in her room, while her grandmother was busy in the puja room. They had not known her escapade.

After an early dinner everybody retired. Radha-kaki and Durga could not sleep. Both were tense. They prayed that things should work out safely for Madhav.
"The police raid on the Gouri temple proved futile. The freedom-fighters led by Madhav Gokhale fled." The boy selling the morning newspaper shouted and threw the paper in their house. Radha-kaki looked at Durga, and hugged her.

Jankibai too had heard the boy. She called Radha to
the puja room. Durga went too. Wamanrao and his wife were there. Jankibai lit the lamp and doing a namaskar, she said, "Durga be praised!"
Raghu And I

It was Diwali night. I was up on my roof admiring the myriad lights twinkling in our mohalla.

Across the lane was another house, decorated with rows of candles and earthen lamps. There was a boy on the terrace, playing with crackers all by himself. He had just lit an anar which exploded into a dazzling fountain of light. Then, he sent a rocket zooming into the sky. I watched it burst into a shower of coloured stars high up above our heads.

I too wanted to shoot a rocket. I too wanted to light an anar, and hold a sparkling phuljhari in my hands.

The boy looked up and caught me staring.
"Do you also want to try?" he asked.
I nodded.

The boy wrapped something in an old paper and threw it across to me. There were various crackers and a matchbox in it. I lit them all and had a great time.
"What is your name?" the boy called out.
"Ashraf!"
"I am Raghu," he said.

This was how Raghu and I became friends.

Though we were neighbours and only a narrow lane separated our houses, our parents never met. But Raghu
and I gradually became good friends. Every afternoon, we played *gilli danda* or marbles, while our families slept.

Raghu was very fond of sweets. When Id came, I told him about the delicious dishes my mother was preparing. My description of the *sewai* (sweet dish), sprinkled lavishly with nuts and raisins and covered with silver paper, made his mouth water.

"You must come and have the *sewai,*" I invited Raghu.

"But how? Amma won't let me go," said Raghu.

"Don't tell her then. But you must come over. You will, won't you?"

"Yes."

On Id day, I wore my new silk kurta (shirt) and the embroidered cap Abba had brought from Kashmir. I wanted Raghu to see me in all my finery.

In the afternoon, when the bell rang, I rushed to open the door. It was Raghu.

"Who is there?" my mother's friend called from the kitchen.

"Raghu!" I told her.

"Who is this Raghu?"

"The boy who lives next door."

"That family? We have nothing to do with them. Ask him to go away," said my Ammi's friend.

"But why, Aunty?"

"Don't ask questions. Just do as I say."

Raghu had started to walk away. I ran after him, though I could hear my mother shout.

"Listen, I will bring some *sewai* over for you," I cried.

"I don't want it," he replied.

I did not let him go. I caught Raghu's hand. "But I want you to have it. Listen. Come to the park in front of
the station. We will meet there to have the *sewai.*"

"You are quite stubborn, Ashraf," smiled Raghu.

I took out my school tiffin box and quickly filled it with the sweet dish. Then I hurried to the park. The two of us licked the tiffin box clean.

"I wonder why our families don't talk to each other," mused Raghu.

"Looks like an old quarrel. My people have lived here for ages. Since the Mughal times, in fact."

"Mine too. They were here during the 'Mutiny'."

"Is it not silly to carry on such an ancient feud?"

"Yes."

We were interrupted by shouts. We looked in the direction of the noise and noticed a group of men gathered around a man who was giving a speech. He was speaking excitedly about something. In between he raised his fist angrily and shook it, thus making the crowd cheer and clap. As the speech progressed, the crowd of listeners became more and more excited.

Finally the crowd started to move off, led by the fiery speaker.

"Where are they going?" we cried.

"You boys must run home!" a passerby warned us, "that excited mob is sure to cause trouble and destruction."

We quickly got up, and rushed towards our homes. To our horror, we realised that was exactly where the angry crowd was heading.

We managed to take a short-cut and were in our lane even before the mob could enter. Shopkeepers hastily pulled down shutters. Women rushed out to call their children and hurriedly shut the doors. The lane was soon deserted. Only the two of us were left.

"Ashraf!" Raghu stopped me, "those men will be here
soon. They are in a mood to destroy. Let us stop them from going further."

"Are you mad? I cried. "They won't listen to you."

"I will make them! If you and I can be friends, burst fire crackers at Diwali, and eat sewai together on Id, why can't grown-ups be friends?"

Raghu caught my hand, and turned to face the entry to the lane.

"Are you not afraid?" I whispered to him. He gave a strange reply, "Ashraf, did you see the film, Gandhi?"

"Yes. But..."

"Bapu was never frightened. Even when they hit him with lathis."

When the crowd reached us, we stood across the narrow passage, holding hands and looking defiantly at the men rushing close.

"Stop!" we yelled. "Stop!"

The men were taken aback and stopped at once.

"Give way, boys!" the leader shouted.

"Out of the way," a few others shouted roughly.

"Our homes are here. We won't let you go a step further!" we shouted back.

"What cheek!"

Both of us picked two stones and yelled, "Get out, before we hit you!"

"What is it? What is happening?" their leader inquired. He emerged from the crowd and asked us politely, "What do you want, boys? Let us pass!"

"No!" we said firmly.

Of a sudden a rough-looking youth pushed Raghu violently aside, and my friend went sprawling to the ground. He hit a stone and blood oozed from a cut in his forehead. The leader rushed forward.

"Are you hurt? What is your name?"
Seeing Raghu hurt, I grew angry. Before Raghu could answer, I began to shout. I rushed at the leader, and started hitting him with both my fists, shouting crazily.

"He is Raghu, my friend! I am Ashraf!" I cried, "We are friends! We live here, and we don't want you to destroy our homes! Please go away!"

I expected the crowd to rush at me, but it stood still.

"Raghu... And Ashraf!" whispered the leader. "The two boys are friends?" Then he turned to the men who were busy whispering and mumbling.

"These boys have taught us a lesson," he spoke softly, "Please go back to your homes, all of you. I must speak to the kids' parents and tell them how brave and wise their sons are."