The Banyan Tree
15 Value-Based Stories
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Children's Book Trust, New Delhi
The Banyan Tree is a collection of prizewinning entries received in the category Value-based Stories in the Competition for Writers of Children's Books organized by Children's Book Trust.

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The boys of Class VI came out of the exam hall.
"How did the maths paper go?" I asked Akash who was waiting outside.
"So-so! I finished all the problems, though it was quite a tussle," replied Tarun, the monitor of the class.
Nakul came in just then. He looked depressed.
"What's up, Nakul? Maths is your favourite subject!" Akash was surprised.
"I decided to answer the tough problems first and leave the easy ones for the last ten minutes. But they took more time than I expected. So I couldn't finish two questions," Nakul replied.
"Never mind. It's not the final exams! Write faster next time, or set your watch ten minutes ahead so that you can answer all the questions!" Akash consoled him.
"Huh! It's easy to say that as you don't have to worry," Nakul retorted.

Akash was a new boy. He had joined the boarding-school almost at the end of the first term. So the Headmaster had allowed him to sit out of the exams as the boy had missed many lessons.

When the dorm was silent that night, Akash woke up suddenly. He had heard a slight sniff. He looked at the next bed and saw that Nakul was awake.
"What's the matter?" Akash whispered.
"I've made a terrible mistake!" Nakul said.
"What's the mistake?" asked Akash.
"I'm sure I have forgotten something. I think I have either not written my name or my roll number on the maths answer-script," Nakul mumbled, dejectedly.
"Oh, is that all? I thought something awful had happened," Akash was relieved. "Look, it's just 9.30. Sir is sure to be up. Let us go and see him. You can explain what's wrong!"
"You're coming, too? Thanks!" Nakul looked relieved as the two boys crept out of the dorm and walked to the master's study.
Mr. Verghese was startled to see them and listened to Nakul's stammered explanation. He unlocked a drawer and went through the answer-scripts.
"You have written your name and roll number, Nakul. You panicked unnecessarily." He watched them leave his room.
Soon the exams were behind them and the next event the boys looked forward to was the School's Annual Day. As Nakul was tall and well-built for his age, the master chose him to play an important role in the drama.
"Help! I've got to learn so many lines!" Nakul groaned.
"I'll help you to practise till you're word-perfect," Akash grinned. Nakul was glad for his generous offer and with Akash's constant rehearsals, soon learned his lines.
"I hope I won't forget the words," Nakul looked tense before the curtains went up.
"Don't worry, the words will come to you easily," Akash encouraged.
To his surprise, Nakul found that he actually enjoyed his role!
"Thanks, Akash! You're a real gem!" he said, warmly.
"I am glad I could help you," Akash replied.
The master decided to take the Junior and Middle School boys on a picnic. The boys wheedled the cooks into packing hampers of their favourite eats. Just as they set out, the sun went behind the clouds.
"It's sure to rain," Nakul grumbled gloomily.

"No, it won't. The sun will come out soon and the day will be fine," Akash declared and looked at Nakul. "Why do you always look at the dark side of things?" he said. "Don't be a wet blanket all the time!"

Nakul felt annoyed and walked away to join the other boys. He refused to admit that Akash's judgement was correct, as usual. The day did turn out to be fine. In spite of this, Nakul found himself unable to enjoy the outing. 'Was it because of his tiff with Akash?'

Nakul was hidden behind some rocks when he overheard his masters talking.

"I admire that plucky little fellow, Akash! He's so cheerful despite his lame leg," said Mr. Verghese.

"You're right. I've been watching him and really marvel at how courageously he faces things!" agreed the Games master. "Do you know, he's always ready to help others."

"We could certainly do with more boys like Akash," Mr. Verghese remarked. "His cheerfulness in the face of difficulties is proving to be a good example to others. I heard from the Headmaster that Akash was keen on joining this school as a boarder, though his parents were reluctant to expose their only son to the rough and tumble of boarding-school life!"

Nakul looked thoughtful when he heard all this. He recalled the numerous times when Akash had gone out of his way to help him, though he could have easily looked the other way; times when he, Nakul, had caught a fleeting glimpse of pain in Akash's eyes when his leg hurt and he thought that no one was watching him.

Nakul admitted to himself that Akash's cheerful, positive outlook was like a bracing tonic which influenced his own way of thinking. He also admitted that his constant grumbling must be irritating to someone who liked to look at the bright side of things.

The next day, Nakul saw Akash among the spectators at the football match between classes VII and VIII.

"Come on, Rahul! Get the ball and pass it on to Deepak who's
nearer the goal!" Akash yelled, encouragingly.  
"I'm sorry for leaving you in a huff yesterday!" Nakul touched Akash's arm.  
"It's okay! Friends again?" Akash smiled.  
"I admire you! Despite your handicap, you are always cheerful! Doesn't it hurt that you can't join in the games?" Nakul asked.  
"It did hurt at first," Akash confessed, "and I was very touchy about it, too, till my Grandma told me:

'No one wants to weep with you  
If you are always sad,  
Lonely you will never be  
If you are brave and glad!  
Search the clouds, you're sure to see  
A gleam of light to follow,  
Though today is grim and grey,  
Remember there's tomorrow!'  

"I realized then that I couldn't go through life with a chip on my shoulder... that others in the world are worse off than me! So I decided to spread cheer in my own way!" Akash explained.
Happy Birthday, Dear Soni...

Vedavati Ravinder Jogi

"Happy birthday to you, dear Raju... Happy birthday to you...!"

Raju pushed the knife through the cake to the tunes of this song and extinguished ten candles in one blow. Relatives and friends who had gathered to bless him, clapped loudly. Raju fed a small piece of cake to his mother and his mother did the same. Raju's elder sister, Rita, burst the balloon that hung from the ceiling, right above his head. Lots of chocolates and toffees fell from the balloon. The children hastened to pick up the chocolates. It was great fun. Everybody was enjoying when Raju's father came in.

"What have you brought for me, Dad?" Raju asked eagerly

"Go out and see for yourself," replied his father. Before he could finish the sentence, Raju shot out of the hall.

"A bicycle!" he shouted, very excited. He could not wait to take a ride. One by one the guests presented their gifts to Raju. Aunty had bought a beautiful pen set, Uncle gave him a wonderful cricket set, and his friends had got lovely storybooks for him.

Then Raju's mother announced, "Please sit down everybody. Rita will serve you today's special dishes."

There was pav bhaji, pakoras, sweets, halwa, wafers and what not? At the end, Daddy served ice-cream to everyone.

Two big, round eyes, brimming with excitement, watched the celebrations from behind the door.

"What are you doing here, Soni?" Raju's Mummy asked.
Soni was a bit startled to hear the voice as she was totally absorbed in watching the function.

"Have you taken your plate? No? Then take one from Rita didi and go and help your mother after you finish, okay?"

Soni nodded, took her plate and sat in a corner in the kitchen. The food was very tasty. She slowly nibbled at the food.

"Finish off fast. We have to wash a lot of utensils today. Hurry up!" Laxmibai, Soni's mother, shouted.

Soni quickly gobbled down the food and went to help her mother.

"Ma, when will I have my birthday?" Soni whispered in her mother's ears while washing the utensils.

"Whenever you want," Laxmibai laughed.

Soni was perplexed. "Meaning?"

"It means I do not know the exact date and month of your birth. Understand? Work fast. Don't waste your time."

"Where was I born? In which hospital? We can find out my date of birth from their register."

"What rubbish! You were born in our hut. Who would have taken me to hospital? Moreover, your father and your three elder sisters were desperate for a boy," said Laxmibai.

"You mean you didn't want me?" Soni asked innocently with a lump in her throat.

"No, no dear! You are my most favourite daughter. In fact, after you were born your father got a permanent job and after two years, your brother, Deepak, was born. So you were very auspicious for us."

This explanation could not convince Soni but she preferred to remain silent. The thought about her birthday haunted her night and day. One day she mustered courage to ask her parents, "Can't we celebrate my birthday?"

"Are you crazy? With whatever the two of us earn, we can barely manage our needs. From where should we get extra money to celebrate your birthday?" Laxmibai brushed her aside.

Soni could not concentrate on her studies in school. She could neither take part in games with her friends nor did she join them at
recess. Her friends Ratan, Raghu, Vidya, Bhima, Sarja, Kamal were puzzled to see their friend's gloomy face.

"Something is bothering her," Sarja murmured.

"We should check with her mother," Baban suggested.

When they spoke to her, Laxmibai expressed her helplessness. "Soni is a fool. A lot of money is required for such things. None of us can afford it, can we? Believe me, kids, I don't even know her date of birth. I remember only one thing, that she was born on the second day of Navaratri," she added.

The children were terribly disappointed. They all belonged to poor families. Their parents could hardly afford their education, even at a school run by the Municipal Corporation. None of them had ever enjoyed his or her birthday celebration.

"After we finish our education and get a job, we will have enough money to celebrate our birthdays," said Vidya seriously.

"But we will all be old by that time! Will we enjoy our birthday at the age of thirty or forty?" Ratan argued. It was a valid point! It made others think.

"Who says birthday celebrations require plenty of money?" their teacher intervened, "we can celebrate Soni's birthday without spending a single rupee," she said with a mischievous smile.

"How can that be..?" the children exchanged glances.

The teacher explained her plan and the students were overjoyed.

"This year Dussehra falls on 25th October. That means Soni's birthday is on the 17th. Only three weeks are left. So hurry up and start your preparations. Don’t share the secret with her. Is that okay?"

The children started preparing in right earnest and their teacher joined in with the same enthusiasm.

On the 17th the children were bubbling with excitement, while Soni was not even aware of her birthday falling on the same day.

"Soni! Hey, Soni! We are going to the Saras Baug after school today. You must join us," Ratan instructed her and Soni nodded.

"May I join you kids?" the teacher asked them as if she was totally unaware about their plan.
"Tan...tan...tan..." the bell rang. School was over. The children started rushing out. Soni and her friends made a dash for Saras Baug. "What will we do there?" Soni was curious.

"I don't know," the teacher feigned ignorance.

The moment they entered the spacious, beautiful garden, all the children started shouting, "Happy birthday to you, dear Soni..." and started running around her in a circle singing the birthday song.

Soni could not believe her eyes. "It's my birthday?" Soni was pleasantly surprised. She found it difficult to contain her happiness. "Enough of dancing now, kids. All of you sit down and one by one present your gifts to the birthday girl," the teacher suggested.

Soni sat in the middle, surrounded by all her beloved friends.

Ratan gave her a gajra. Sarja gave her a handful of groundnuts. Baban said, "I don't have anything to offer but I can dance to the tune of a Hindi film song.

"Hurrah!!" the children shouted. Almost immediately Kamal began to sing and Baban started dancing. One by one the kids joined in. The whole atmosphere was filled with happiness.

"Enough! Now all of you sit down," the teacher ordered. Then she turned to Bhima and asked, "What about you, Bhima? Haven't you got a present for your friend?"

Bhima presented a piece of paper to Soni. It had a poem written on it. The teacher patted him. Then Raghu came forward. He was an expert at mimicry. He made everybody laugh.

"Why are you keeping quiet, Vidya? What have you got?" Bhima asked.

Vidya was an artist. She gave a small notebook to Soni. She had drawn beautiful sketches of Soni—Soni in a happy mood, Soni fighting with her brother, Soni very angry, mischievous Soni, Soni studying in class, and many more. Soni was thrilled. However, on the last page, there was a cross over the sketch of a 'crying Soni'.

Everybody was stunned to see that sketch. It spoke for itself. Quickly the teacher patted Vidya and hugged Soni, saying, "Can there be a better present for you, my child, than these blessings?"
"Ajanta," Mummy smiled, "our new house will be ready soon."

Every evening, after dusk, the white neon lights would illuminate the street. I would sit by the window of our rented house and gaze across the road.

The new apartment, Minto Towers, was being built brick by brick. Our new home. Our own address. I was so excited. Mummy had promised I would get a room all to myself. There would be a patio where I could display my dolls. I would fill up the walls with posters of pop stars and tennis heroes. I would set up my computer on a table. I would use the internet to chat with my friends, especially Rinky and Bunty. I would stack away the letters from my foreign pen pal, Mark, in the drawer. He loved swimming, horse-riding and skiing. I loved tennis, basketball and making new friends across the nation and the seas. There was so much to learn, even more to share.

One of my close friends was Sumita. She was tall, dark and frail and about my age. She had dark, shiny eyes and was very intelligent.

Sometimes, on my way back from school, as I got off the school bus, I would drop into her home. She lived inside the skeleton of Minto Tower. A tin shed across the red brick wall was her make-shift home. Sumita was the head labourer's daughter. Her mother carried the bricks that were being used to build my house.

Sumita wore a tattered yellow skirt. She walked barefeet upon the debris. Today she had invited me for the umpteenth time. It was
her doll, Priya's birthday. Priya did not have one limb. She had even lost an eye. She was dressed in rags. Sumita loved her.

After a day's labour, Sumita's mother had brought her a few sweets. Sumita offered the sweets to me on a tin plate.

"Oh, what gift can I present your doll?" I asked Sumita.

"Your old worn out frock," she smiled.

I pulled out an old, polka-dotted frock from the attic. 'Atleast Priya would have something nice to wear,' I thought

The following day it was raining but the sun was peeping through the clouds. I looked up and saw a rainbow in the sky. My friend, Sumita, was waiting for me at the bus-stand. She was holding Priya. I noticed my polka-dotted frock. Sumita was wearing it.

"Priya loves her home," Sumita confided in me one day. "See, how each day the bricks rise higher, layer by layer."

I wanted to tell Sumita that it was my new house in which Sumita's parents had built a temporary shelter. She would be so hurt if...

"See, Ajanta didi," Sumita said, holding my hand and leading me. "This is my room. I will live here with Priya...watch television there...cook in this kitchen...maybe even go to school!" Her face lit up with joy as she pranced upon the bare rooftop with excitement.

Everyday, brick by brick, Minto Towers rose. My dream home was nearing completion. Through sultry heat and torrential rain, Sumita's parents toiled to make my home. Sumita loved Minto Towers. Her little shelter under the silver-grey tin roof.

'Sumita is my friend. I've got to keep her,' I told myself. For I had realized that, like me, Sumita had a dream. She wanted to reside in Minto Towers. She too had stuck posters of film stars along the mud-plastered walls, and she loved cricket.

The ceiling was laid. The walls white-washed. The doors and windows fitted. Wooden panels lined the kitchen. Marble tiles were put in the bathrooms. Mummy and Daddy announced the big day when we would move into Minto Towers. It was the coming Sunday.

"Home, sweet home, at last!" said Daddy who worked on a ship.
Mummy sighed, "I had always dreamt of a home of our own."

The previous afternoon I had visited my new home secretly. I had seen Sumita's parents packing their clothes and bedding in a dirty cotton sheet. Daddy had told them to leave. Sumita's flowing, black hair was dishevelled. Anger raged in her timid, friendly eyes.

"Go away, Ajanta didi" she howled. "This is my home. My parents have toiled and built it, brick by brick."

I could not speak. I looked at my poor friend. 'She was right, wasn't she? Her parents deserved to live here, didn't they?'

Sumita now burst into tears. She offered my polka-dotted skirt back. "Take this. I will not be your friend again," she said.

"Sumita," I gently wiped away the tears from her tender, innocent face. "I'll talk to my parents. You will share my room."

I rushed back to my parents. I begged them to let Sumita stay with me. They just would not listen. To my utter surprise, she had not even been invited to our house-warming party.

"I've arranged a shelter for them," Daddy consoled me. "They will live near Minto Towers."

"Please understand, Ajanta," said Ma, "Sumita can never be your friend. After all, she is only a labourer's daughter."

On Sunday morning I met Sumita at the gate of Minto Towers. She had tears in her eyes. In her frail arms she held the rag doll.

"Ajanta didi, if you are my true friend," she spoke softly, "you will fulfil my wish."

"I'll try my best, Sumita," I comforted her.

"Keep Priya with you." And she handed me her one-legged doll. "It had always been her dream to stay in that beautiful house," she said, slowly. Then Sumita turned and waved me goodbye.

I knew it was not Priya's but Sumita's own dream that would never come true. I took Priya and placed her amongst my pretty, elegant dolls.

Minto Towers. I now had a super address. But I knew so little about Sumita's new home. Her dreams shattered, Sumita never
visited me again. Sumita, my friend, was lost forever to this cruel, insensitive world. Whenever I saw Priya I was reminded of my friendship with Sumita. Pure, joyful, memorable...until one day...when Mummy tossed away Priya from my life.

"Mummy," I shook her wildly, "Where's the rag doll?"

"I've thrown it away," smiled Mummy. "Surely, Ajanta, Daddy and I can afford to buy you a beautiful new doll, can't we?"

"Mummy, how could you?" I shouted at her, the last scent of Sumita disappearing from my life. But I was sure my memories of this short, sweet friendship would live on... It was the saddest day of my life.

Friendship has no boundaries of wealth, caste, creed or religion. How I wished my parents would understand.
"Amma, why are you removing all my things from the cupboard?" Anjali asked in a voice which sounded like she was ready for a fight.

"You already know, Anjali. Dada and dadi are going to need some place for keeping their things," her mother replied firmly, without the slightest hint of apology.

"But, Ma, where will my things go? This has been my room since I was a baby. Why should I give up everything just because dada and dadi are coming to live with us?" cried Anjali, just as unforgiving.

"Come on, Anju. You are not giving up everything. You are only going to sleep on the couch in the hall instead of in this room. And your things can be accommodated elsewhere," replied her mother, trying to be sensitive but feeling rather exasperated with her daughter's endless objections.

This is how it had been ever since Anjali had been told that her grandparents would be living with them from now onwards. They had recently sold off all their land in the little village where they had lived most of their life. Dada was nudging seventy now and was too old to be able to run the farm all by himself. He had promised he would not leave his beloved land till he died, but he was finding it more and more difficult to live there alone. All his children had migrated to the cities. Two of Anjali's chachajis were abroad. Only Papa lived in Pune while Rita bua was in Delhi. Dada had been persuaded by Anjali's father to come and live with them. Papa wanted to take care of him and look after him during his holiday time. He and dadi had neither the time nor the energy to look up after him. Dada and dadi would be spending most of their days and nights in the summer and the rains, but it would be for a shorter period of time. They were not going to be there permanently.

It was going to be an awkward adjustment for all of them to their new life. They were not used to this kind of living. They were not used to having a grandchild to look after for fun and games. They were not used to the good food that Anjali's mother was cooking for them. They were not used to the routines and schedules that Anjali's mother was keeping. Ziya was used to a strict routine and didn't adjust well. As the days passed by, her father knew that she had to be away soon, and then...
wanted all of them to be together as a joint family. He could then take care of his ageing parents.

Of course, Anjali enjoyed meeting her grandparents during her holidays, but that did not mean she was going to be happy giving up her room for them! Anjali was an only child. Never in her life had she liked sharing anything and she wasn't about to change now!

And so it was that when her grandparents came, Anjali was her fussy, irritating, brattish worst. She made a big hue and cry over how she had lost her room. When she wasn't making rude comments, she would not talk much and pretend to be glued to her favourite programme on TV. She was not very polite and complained, though not directly, for she was too afraid of her father's wrath.

It was true that having grandparents living with them needed adjusting to a new routine. They were used to a different way of life. They woke up much before anyone else did and that made things awkward. Dadi was forever doing some puja or another and if there was objection to onions in the food one day, it was eggs the next. They would not go with them to eat out at restaurants. They would not watch movies in theatres. They would not enjoy shopping just for fun. They thought strap dresses were too foreign and short skirts totally avoidable. Pop music was 'noise' and ice-creams were 'not good for health'.

The one thing they did share was an addiction to television, but the programmes they watched put Anjali to sleep. Anjali felt as if she had suddenly been imprisoned. The house, all eight hundred and fifty feet of compact space planning, suddenly looked too small.

As the days passed, Anjali's anger mellowed to a guarded truce. It was impossible to remain angry with someone who was so kind. Dadi stopped commenting on her clothes and even bought her a pretty T-shirt when they went sightseeing. TV became a divided schedule of the most unmissable programmes on each individual list. Dada helped Anjali with her projects and he was a big help with the Maths syllabus. He also got Anjali into the habit of reading the newspaper and they would exchange world views when he
walked her to the bus-stop every morning. Anjali’s mother worked in an office and she left along with her father every morning. Breakfast was always cornflakes and it was usually sandwiches for Anju’s tiffin. And when her mother got back in the evening, she was so exhausted herself that food was never a great culinary journey.

But now dadi had taken over the kitchen—she actually said she was getting bored of doing nothing! Dadi was a fantastic cook. Suddenly, they were being pampered with the most divine paranthas and subzi, mithai and pakoras, salads and pickles. Anjali’s mother could now slow down a little and rest her feet. She even had more time for her daughter. She was also immeasurably reassured that her child was in the most caring hands possible...till one day when the grandparents announced, "We are thinking of going to Rita’s place for a while."

Before anyone could say anything, Anjali burst out, "Oh! can I have my room back then? Dada-Dadi, when are you going?"

The silence that followed was terrible and only dadi had some kind and general words to fill it with. Later, apart from her room, Anjali got the worst firing she had ever received from her parents'. Anyhow, she had what she wanted and, in two days time, they were a nuclear family again. But it was a lonely achievement. There was no one to come home to but the silly TV. There was no one to talk to. Her mother was again harassed and overworked with no time for anything, or anybody. But most of all, the noise and bustle of one big happy family had faded into silence. The house, all eight hundred and fifty feet of compact space planning, suddenly looked too big.

When the phone rang the following night, just like they had expected it would, it was Anjali who ran and picked it up to say, "Dada-Dadi, When are you coming back?"
Abhay wanted the good things of life. After all, when his friends had them, why shouldn't he?

He looked at Tarun and Vijay. He looked at Bhaskar and Rajesh and the other 'groovy' boys. They had expensive jeans and bright scarves and flashy video games and trendy racing cycles and so much else that is the envy of every eleven-year-old.

Abhay longed for all these, without realizing that his friends, despite all their treasures, lacked the vital thing that Abhay himself had in abundance. And that was his parents' eternal love and care and guidance. They had inculcated in him a priceless system of human values that kept him on the right track in all he did. It also helped in making him an excellent student, consistently doing well in studies.

It was not that Abhay's parents could not afford these things. Though by no means as rich as his friend's parents, they were still reasonably well-off. They were also very careful to live well within their means, and never encouraged any wasteful expenditure on the part of Abhay or his sister. Abhay, however, at that tender age, could not appreciate the value of what he had and kept pining for the material possessions that he lacked. With all these temptations, who could blame poor Abhay?

The final straw came on the day the school session concluded. Abhay learnt that Tarun was going to France during the vacations
to visit an uncle settled there. Vijay was going to the Maldives with his parents. Several other friends were also going to far-off places and would escape the heat of an Indian summer.

Now, going abroad for the vacations was something Abhay's parents could not afford. Despite all his positive traits, something finally gave way within Abhay. Feeling dejected, he developed an urge to equal his rich friends. He wanted to come out on top, not only in studies, where he already excelled, but in all else, too. Having topped that year in his class was no consolation to him. He started feeling miserable. And his desire to be equal to his friends came round to manifesting itself in the form of a Rolex watch he had seen someone wearing. He imagined that if he had such a watch he would feel cool wearing it. He would hold his head high and flaunt his newfound status. But he knew his parents would not buy him one.

"That's no problem at all," said Rajesh, when Abhay told him of his predicament. "I'll procure one for you." Rajesh was only too glad to be of help to his friend.

"How?" asked Abhay, alarmed. Despite his longings, his conscience had not fully deserted him yet.

"Just leave that to me," snapped Rajesh with all the confidence in the world.

Abhay, still hesitant, was lost in thought and could not speak.

"Well, do you want it, or don't you?" Rajesh insisted.

At that critical moment, temptation finally got the better of Abhay and he weakly replied, "I do."

"Very well," responded Rajesh. "You shall have it." And he walked off as calmly as if he were going for an evening walk in the garden.

An hour later, he was back with the watch.

Abhay kept looking at it. His joy knew no bounds. Then, he put it on his wrist. He felt as if he had truly found paradise.

Later in the evening, when Abhay was away with his friends, there was a power failure in the locality and all lights went off. When his father could not find a working torch, he remembered that Abhay kept a spare one in his almirah. He decided to see if it
was working. He found the torch beneath some clothes and carefully concealed next to it, was the Rolex watch! The presence of the watch surprised him.

When Abhay got home, his parents questioned him. Naturally, they expected he would have some satisfactory explanation about its presence. Abhay, however, was stunned at the discovery and could only mumble some incoherent words in reply. It was then that his parents realized what had actually happened. They were extremely saddened. What followed is not hard to imagine.

That night, Abhay lay awake in bed, tossing and turning. He could not sleep. He was too ashamed to talk to his parents, or to his sister. He had never felt so restless in his life, nor so depressed. He had enjoyed a sense of equality with his friends from richer families, even if it was just for a few hours. But he had now realized that, in the process, he had lost something infinitely more valuable than that feeling. He had lost his parent's trust. He felt he would be willing to give anything to get that trust back. He wondered if it was too late. He lay awake, wondering if he would ever get it back.
Tarini was very upset. She had lost her silver-and-black pen. She was sure she had placed it in her bag after class. She had come home from school, dumped her bag on her study table as usual, gulped down a glass of milk and then ran off to play with her friends.

She had come back home at four-thirty, a little earlier than usual, because she wanted to revise her lessons for the science exam the next day. So she had gone to her room, opened her bag, removed her science textbook and looked for her pen. It just wasn't there! Everything else was—the pencil box, a scale, other notebooks and textbooks, even three toffees which she had forgotten about! Only her pen was missing...

The worst part was, it was her lucky pen, gifted to her by Ma and Papa last year, on her tenth birthday. It had been such a lovely birthday, too! She could still remember that wonderful cake Ma had baked and the games she and her friends had played.

But the best part was, Papa had been home to celebrate with them. He had got leave from his duties at the air force station to be there for her birthday.

And now she had gone and lost her pen! Naturally she did what any girl would do. She flew into her mother's arms and cried!

"I'm sure I'll do badly in my exam tomorrow," she sobbed. "Without my lucky pen I won't be able to do well."

"Now, now, Tarini," murmured Ma, stroking her daughter's hair.
"You shouldn't feel that way. We all know how much that pen meant to you. But these things happen. You'll just have to use one of your other pens tomorrow. And when Papa comes home next week, we'll get you a nice new pen just like the one you have lost."

But Tarini was much too upset. She jumped to her feet and raced to her room where she flung herself face down on her bed. Ma sighed and looked at Grandpa who was sitting in his armchair doing a crossword puzzle. All this while Grandpa had sat quietly while Ma had tried to comfort Tarini.

"Let her be for a while," Ma said softly, "she'll get over it. I'll make something nice for her to eat..." and she went into the kitchen.

For a while there was silence. And then Grandpa put aside his crossword, rose and shuffled slowly across to the kitchen.

"I think I'll go up to the terrace for some fresh air," he remarked, "I'll ask Tarini to come along with me."

Ma nodded and smiled gratefully at Grandpa. She knew how close Tarini and Grandpa were.

Ten minutes later, Grandpa and Tarini were standing on the terrace. The sun was just setting and the air was wonderfully fresh and cool. It had rained heavily that morning and a huge sheet of water covered the vacant plot of land below.

The orange-yellow sun turned redder as it sank towards the horizon. The sheet of rainwater below was like a mirror, reflecting the golden-edged clouds and the glowing sun. After a long while Grandpa spoke. "It's like a beautiful, painting, hmm?" he said, his eyes on the sheet of water. "How lucky we are that it rained today..." Then he fell silent.

Tarini looked quickly at Grandpa. He had said lucky in a special kind of way. She knew that always meant Grandpa was trying to tell her something important!

But Grandpa didn't say anything more. The sun sank lower, the colour of the sky deepened and Tarini exclaimed, "Oh look!"

The sun is like a balloon now! A shiny red balloon floating in the water and the clouds are like islands!"
Grandpa nodded gravely. "I wonder," he said softly, "would the sun's brilliance, the sunset's beauty, be any less if there was no rainwater down there to reflect it?" His eyes were still on the water, his face calm.

Tarini gazed at Grandpa, frowning slightly, and abruptly she giggled. The idea was so funny. "Of course not!" she exclaimed, "because...because the sun is always there, it rises and sets every day, while the rainwater...!" and her voice trailed away. She was slightly confused.

Grandpa nodded slowly and now he turned and looked at her. "Yes, Tarini," he murmured. "The sun is always there. The truth of the sun, its beauty and glory, is not affected by whether it reflects off that sheet of rainwater or not. Tomorrow that rainwater may have dried up but the sun will still shine, the sunset will still be beautiful, won't it?"

"Yes," Tarini whispered.

"So too with your lucky pen," Grandpa murmured. "Just as we see in this muddy pool of rainwater the truth of the sun, so too in your pen you saw the truth of Ma and Papa's love for you. It was your 'lucky' pen, your favourite pen because it reminded you of that love. Now the pen is gone, but the truth of that love is not changed! Just as when the rainwater is gone, the truth of the sun is not changed..."

Grandpa smiled at Tarini. She stared at him wide-eyed and suddenly flung her arms around him to hug him. They stood like that for a while, holding each other and then came Ma's voice from downstairs, "Anyone wants hot idlis? Come down, fast!"

"Idlis!" shrieked Tarini and was gone in a flash.

By the time Grandpa came down, Tarini was in her room, absorbed in her studies. Grandpa slowly went across to his armchair and was soon immersed in his crossword. After a while Ma came up to him. "Tarini is back to her usual self. What did you tell her?" she whispered.

Grandpa looked up at her and grinned mischievously. "Exactly what I had to tell you once, when you were eleven," he replied.
The Shoeshine Boy

Pramila M. Naniwadekar

Ganesh was fed up. Amma, crouched in a corner of the hut, was sobbing uncontrollably. Lakshmi, his thirteen-year-old akka, was trying to soothe her with a glass of water. His three younger siblings were away to avoid the unpleasant but too familiar, everyday drama. As usual his father was drunk and, after beating amma, lay snoring in another corner of the dishevelled hut.

Poor amma cleaned and washed in various houses. Akka toiled at home and helped amma, whenever she could. Ganesh too worked in the fields around but appa’s addiction gulped away all their earnings.

It was hopeless to remain there in that small village. There was no food, no love and no future. So Ganesh decided to leave for the big city—Hyderabad. Maybe afterwards, one by one, he could take his family also there. He just could not see the hunger and torture his family faced. So, one fine day, Ganesh simply ran away.

That was four years ago. He was only eleven then. From the day he left his house, Ganesh had a difficult time. In the beginning he had no food and no shelter. No one cared for him. He hated begging, so he cleaned the cars and floors of shops and served at food stalls. He did whatever he could do honestly for his survival. He slept outside the railway station and made friends with orphan boys and stray dogs.

Slowly, he started borrowing shoe-polish kits from his friends whenever they were sick or needed a holiday. Within a few weeks
he was able to purchase his own kit. He started travelling in trains, getting paid by passengers to get their shoes polished. At night he always slept outside the Secunderabad railway station. "You must search the empty compartments for leftover things," his friends advised him. "Sometimes, if you are lucky, you get a bed sheet or a food bag."

The group decided which pair or trio would go on an inspection of which empty train. Usually, they found nothing except empty plastic bottles or disposable glasses, but sometimes, if they were lucky, they would come across some food item or a forgotten bag. Ganesh did not like to take those things. His mother had taught him to earn money by working for it. "Only hard work can bring us success," she used to say, "begging or stealing cannot open any magic door for us."

But his new friends had taught him otherwise; that accepting leftovers was not a theft and no sin at all. It would not harm anybody.

So, on that lucky night, Ganesh, with Bobby and Chinu, was scheduled to be on the inspection tour of a train at the end of its run. Ganesh knew that Bobby was down with fever and Chinu would be trying to get tickets for a new picture that was a box office hit. 'Maybe he has got the tickets,' Ganesh thought as he waited for his friends before entering the train alone. His eyes searched for leftover things as he went from one compartment to another, when suddenly his eyes fell on a small briefcase lying on an upper berth, in a corner. 'No one could have left that purposely,' he thought, 'so it would be a theft if I take it away with me. Someone must have forgotten it, but another person will grab it if I leave it here. I must give the bag to a responsible person so that the owner will get it back. There may be something important in that bag.'

Thinking thus, Ganesh took the bag but he was afraid to go to the police. He had seen them being rough to people. 'They may accuse me of stealing it and then put me in jail,' he thought, 'Better I go to the station master. Atleast he knows that I am not a thief.'

All the vendors and porters working in the station premises knew
him well. He had earned their goodwill by his honesty and good manners. They would definitely help him in a difficult situation. He was sure of that. So, he decided to listen to his inner voice.

He took the bag and went to the station master's office. "I found this bag in an empty compartment, Sir!" he said, "I wish to hand it over to the police, so that they can return it to its owner."

It took a lot of courage to do that. He knew that his group would be very angry. His friends would laugh at him, criticize him, maybe even boycott him. But he had to do what he believed to be correct.

And his courage paid off. The owner of the briefcase came to lodge a complaint and was happy to get back his briefcase which contained a lot of money. He rewarded the boy handsomely. The railway people too collected some fund for Ganesh. The press published the story of the shoeshine boy and many welfare associations came forward to felicitate Ganesh on Children's Day.

Now, Ganesh stays in a hostel and studies in a good school. His dream is going to come true. In the near future he will be able to get a decent job and look after his family.
The Lucky Charm
Cheryl Rao

Nikhil walked into the room just as Jeet was putting away the remote control car that he had been dusting. "Hey! Leave that alone!" shouted Nikhil, giving Jeet such a start that he almost dropped the toy. Nikhil grabbed the car from Jeet's hand and put it on the shelf. "No one is to touch that but me," he said.

Jeet didn't say anything. He had grown accustomed to Nikhil's ways and knew that though Nikhil hardly played with his toys, he didn't want anyone else touching them, either. For Jeet, the boxes of Lego, the GI Joes, and other action figures were like treasures to be lovingly touched when no one was looking, though he barely had time for that, what with the housework he did and his school in the afternoon.

He was lucky that Nikhil's mother, Mrs. Mehta, insisted that he attend the small school just outside the colony. "Someday you can join the army," she had told Jeet. "But for that you need to be educated first."

Jeet knew that she was right. There were too many of them in his family. He would not have got a chance to go to school, but would have to help his father on the farm just as his elder brother was doing right now. The salary he earned went almost entirely for the expenses of his younger sisters and brother. How he missed being there with them—running out in the open, being free and knowing that everyone in the house was the same as him, unlike here, where Nikhil was always to be seen with him. When...
Nikhil was special. At home he was bhaiya and his sisters respected him. When would he go back to that?

One day, when Nikhil was changing his clothes to go out and play, he couldn't find the T-shirt he had decided to wear. "Where is my old WWF T-shirt, Ma?" he demanded.

"Oh, I never saw you wearing it so I gave it to Jeet," she replied.

"What? Without asking me?" cried Nikhil. "How could you do that? I won't let him wear it. Jeet! Jeet! Where are you?"

"Jeet has gone home for a while," explained Mrs. Mehta. "His mother is very ill. That's why I cleared out all the clothes you've outgrown and the ones you don't wear. Atleast he and his younger brother and sisters can use them."

It seemed to Nikhil that he just had no time for himself over the next month. School re-opened and without Jeet he had to polish his shoes daily, make his bed before leaving in the morning, and run around collecting his bottle, tiffin box and umpteen other things.

"Why isn't Jeet getting back?" he grumbled.

"He will take another month to return," said Mrs. Mehta. "Since he's learnt so much with me, he is able to look after the home while his mother recuperates. She still needs another month of rest."

"I bej there's nothing wrong with his mother and he's just having a holiday!" muttered Nikhil nastily.

But when Jeet returned, he looked so tired and thin that Nikhil knew that he had been wrong. He must have had a hard time at home.

One afternoon, Nikhil caught Jeet crying in the kitchen. He wanted to ask him what happened, but Mrs. Mehta made a sign to him to go out. Later she told him that Jeet was worried that his mother would fall sick again. Nikhil couldn't understand Jeet's behaviour. Surely he was over-reacting. The realization came sooner than he expected.

One day, Nikhil came home from school and found Jeet alone. "Where's Ma," he asked him, carelessly throwing his bag on the sofa and dumping his water bottle on the floor.

Jeet looked down. "She's in hospital," he said.

"Why? Who has she gone to see?" Nikhil wanted to know.
"She has been admitted," replied Jeet.

"How can that be? Don't tell lies. There's nothing wrong with Ma." Jeet looked up with tears in his eyes. "She met with an accident."

Nikhil began to shout, "Papa! Papa! Take me to see Ma!" He ran from room to room with Jeet following.

"It happened just a little while ago, when she was returning from the market," explained Jeet. "Your Papa has gone to the hospital and your dadi is coming here now."

Just then the doorbell rang and dadi and dada entered. Nikhil ran into dadi's arms and she held him tight. "I want to see Ma," he whispered.

"You can't go right now," she said. "They are operating on her and she is unconscious. Your father is there and we'll take you later in the evening, when she is awake."

Nikhil's idea of an accident was something similar to the injury he had received when he had hit the road divider in his colony while cycling and had his leg in plaster for a month. He was not prepared for the sight of his mother's bandaged head, her bruised and battered face, and her inability to sit up and talk when he went to the hospital.

That night, he couldn't stop his tears. His grandparents and his father were whispering in the drawing room with serious faces. He was scared. Was Ma going to die?

Jeet came into his room. "She'll get better," he said. "It's fine for you to say so. She's not your mother!"

"I know how you feel," said Jeet, "I felt the same way a little while ago." Then he took something off his neck. "Here, keep this."

Nikhil looked at the little silver tube threaded on a black string. "What is it?" he asked.

"It is my mother's. When I have something of hers with me, I feel she is close," Jeet said. "Maybe it will make you feel better now." Then he shrugged. "I have nothing else to give you and I don't like to see you unhappy."

Nikhil looked down. He tried not to think of the past and how he had behaved. He knew that he would be different in the days ahead.
Different Measures

Cheryl Rao

It was the summer of discontent for Ajay. Until then, he had never given any thought to his way of life. He and his parents and his sister, Anu, lived in a rambling farmhouse in Ahmadnagar district with other children. Each had a specific task and they managed to do all the housework, grew their own vegetables and fruits and looked after the farm animals.

"This is an important part of learning, to handle life, and as important as your studies," Baba said and no one argued.

Then Ajay went to Mumbai with his mother. She hadn't been keeping well and Baba said, "My brother will get all your tests done and Ajay can get to know his cousins."

Ajay hadn't expected the kind of lifestyle his cousins had. The two older boys were married, but the youngest, Milind, was twelve, just a year older than he was. They lived in a flat on Malabar Hill, had two cars, and so many electronic gadgets that Ajay walked around for days with his mouth open in amazement. There were servants to do the housework and Milind spent his days watching TV or playing computer games.

"How do you manage to pass the time there without any TV?" asked Milind as he idly flipped channels.

"There is no time for TV," replied Ajay truthfully, thinking of the work each one of the children did after school. Until now, he hadn't thought of it as work, but just as something that had to be done.
"My dad says that your dad was always stubborn," commented Milind. "He never wanted to join the family business. He took his share of the money his father left him and sank it into that home for orphans, while my dad doubled the business and has been named the most successful businessman of the community more than once."

Ajay believed him, especially when he saw his uncle, Manohar, handing Milind hundred-rupee notes whenever he asked for money to spend. If only his own father had stayed on in the business, maybe he and Anu would be in a room such as Milind's, full of clothes and toys, with money to spend and shops to visit. True, he wouldn't have the company of Raju and Mohan and they wouldn't have open fields in which to run, but he would surely have had other friends like Milind's, who slouched in and out of the flat in baggy shorts and bright T-shirts, chewing gum and knocking each other about.

Soon Ajay was back home with Ma and the test results. 'Milind would call this place a dump,' he thought as he entered the old house, noticing for the first time the uneven stone floors and lack of furniture. The next few weeks were difficult for Ajay. At every turn he thought of the lavish lifestyle in his uncle's home and wondered why his father had chosen—actually chosen—to have nothing.

Then one night he overheard his parents talking. "I've asked Manohar for the money for your operation and treatment. Don't worry about it," Baba was saying.

Ajay shook Anu awake. "Did you know that Ma has to have an operation?" he asked, "and that there is no money to pay for it?"

"We must do something," said Anu. They awakened Raju and Mohan and the four of them discussed ways to collect money. "We can stop our gliss of milk each day and sell more," suggested Raju.

"We can sell all the fruit and more vegetables," suggested Anu.

"We can also grow more," put in Mohan sensibly.

They started their campaign from the very next day, working harder than ever, but eating less. Ajay was soon fed up. "If Baba had joined Uncle Manohar and stayed in the family business, we'd have nothing to worry about now," he grumbled to Anu.
She gave him a dirty look. "Ever since you've got back from Mumbai, it's been Milind this and Uncle Manohar that," she said. "Do you know that Uncle Manohar has said that he can't give Baba the money for the operation and the treatment because he has just bought a new flat for his second son and has no money to spare?"

Ajay stared at his sister. "And isn't it Baba who always says that we should manage within our means? He had the money but he threw it away on his dreams and now Ma has to suffer!"

There was an atmosphere of gloom over the house. Then suddenly, one afternoon, a car drove along the bumpy road and parked under the peepul tree. Ajay ran out. 'Could it be Uncle Manohar, come to say he had changed his mind and would help after all?'

But no, the man who got out of the car was not familiar. He smiled affectionately at Ajay and said, "Hello. I'm Dr. Vinay Tilak, one of Baba's 'old boys'."

*Baba* came out and hugged Vinay with tears in his eyes. They went to a secluded corner of the verandah and later at lunch, Vinay sat on a mat like everyone else and ate. "It's good to be home," he said. "And to be here at a time when I can at least do something for Baba and Ma."

*Baba* smiled, "Vinay came here over twenty years ago and was a part of the family like all of you." He looked lovingly at each of the children. "Today, he is a surgeon and he will take over Ma's medical care. We need no longer worry." He turned to Vinay. "The children thought I didn't know, but they have been trying to collect money for Ma's operation by eating less and selling more of the farm produce."

Vinay didn't laugh as Ajay had expected him to. Instead he said, "*Baba* has taught you well. You are lucky to be guided by a man of vision who is not afraid to make sacrifices."

Ajay felt like Vinay's words were directed just at him. All at once, he understood. There were different measures of success.
A Pair Of Slippers

Cheryl Rao

Mohini jumped a little as she walked towards the site of the multi-storeyed building where her parents were construction workers. The hot tar burnt into the soles of her feet. 'A pair of slippers!' she whispered to herself as she clutched the bottle of water with one hand and held her baby brother, Keshav, with the other. 'Let there be enough money to get me a pair of slippers!'

She had been growing so fast that it was all her parents could do to get her a skirt and blouse that was big enough to last through the year. There were the other children, too, to think of and they went to school. They needed uniforms. 'I wish Keshav hadn't been born!' she thought viciously. 'Because of him, I had to stop school and that was easier work than this!'

She reached the construction site and handed the water to her parents. Then she put Keshav down and returned to her job of sifting sand through the slanting sieve near the roadside. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched the passers-by hurrying to work. Feet flashed by—in shoes, in sandals and in slippers. 'Any one of those would do!' she thought, then gave a start as she heard the screech of brakes and a loud wail. It took her a moment to realize that Keshav was not beside her. With a loud scream she ran to where he stood crying in the middle of the road as vehicles moved around him and drivers shook their fists and cursed. She swung him onto her hip and retreated, hoping that her mother had not seen.
It was her father who had caught sight of the whole incident from his perch on the wooden slats fifteen feet off the ground. He yelled something at her but his voice was drowned in the noise of the traffic and she hoped he would forget by the time he got down.

The building progressed fast and soon summer was almost over. Mohini still hadn't got a pair of slippers. There was always something a little more important to buy for the family when the weekly wages came in—until the day Keshav decided to chase the stray dog that was playing in the sand beside the site. At first, it was only a game and Mohini ignored her brother's squeals. Then he grabbed the dog's tail and pulled. The pain made the dog turn and snarl, and Mohini raced desperately to get Keshav away. She didn't see the shard of glass until she had stamped right onto it with her bare feet. She screamed with pain. Her voice made Keshav let go of the dog's tail and it slunk away. Mohini looked at her foot which was bleeding profusely. She felt giddy. Keshav came up and held her arm, too scared by the blood and what had just happened to him.

Soon a piece of cloth from Ma's sari was tied around the wound and it stopped bleeding. "She'll need stitches," said one of the women workers, but her Papa shushed her. "It will heal in a few days," he said.

But it didn't. And finally that weekend, Papa counted out a few notes and said to Mohini. "Come, let's get you a pair of slippers."

The monsoon set in the next day and Mohini was thrilled that she didn't have to get her bandage wet. With the softness of the slippers to cushion her feet, she could barely feel the pain of the wound. 'It's like magic!' she thought happily. 'My new slippers have made the wound heal!'

The rainy weather didn't relent for days and work on the site came to a standstill. Mohini huddled in the plastic-covered shelter in the building. Keshav was cranky and annoying, but she was not affected because her mind was still in awe of her wonderful new possession.
It was early morning when a deep rumbling awakened Mohini. 'Thunder!' she thought, wrinkling her nose at the idea of more rain. Suddenly, the rumbling gave way to a cracking sound and she looked out of the shelter, mystified. To her horror, the pillars of the building were cracking and the masonry was coming down slowly.

"Run!" she screamed, shaking her sisters, still half-asleep, and pushing them out with her parents. Then she turned back to lift Keshav. That was when darkness came crashing down on her.

When she regained consciousness, she realized that a beam lay at an angle above her. There was rubble all around but the beam had protected her from the full impact of the collapsed bricks. She sat up slowly, scared that her movement would make the masonry move and bury her completely.

"Keshav? Where are you?" she called. There was no reply and tears came to her eyes. 'Was that troublesome brother of hers dead? She looked around desperately and spied Keshav's yellow shirt among the fallen bricks. She tugged and realized that she was holding a small, thin arm. Frantically, she dug in the dirt until she could see her brother completely. He groaned and she began to cry with relief. He was alive!

Above the angle of the beam, Mohini could see a ray of light. She began to crawl towards it, dragging Keshav behind her. It seemed like hours before she managed to poke her head out of the hole and see relieved faces looking down at her. When at last she was out of the rubble, safe in the arms of her mother, she looked down at her feet and noticed that she only had one slipper on. "I must find it," she cried, moving back towards the building. But as she did, the last of the masonry came down and she knew her slipper was gone.

Keshav waddled up to her and put his hand in hers. She squeezed it. Suddenly, the slippers no longer mattered.
The Meaning Of Education

Cyril Antony George

Anitha knew she didn't have many friends in class. Her classmates thought that she was a big show off and Anitha didn't mind their saying so. After all, it was the truth. The only thing Anitha cared about was coming first in class, which she usually did.

Not so with Nandini. Everyone liked her except Anitha. Nandini always had a smile on her face and was ready to help anyone with their homework. Whenever there was a collective decision to be made, the class turned to Nandini. People laughed the loudest when she was around. Everyone tried to get her attention. All this made Anitha very envious of Nandini. But she would console herself saying, "I am the Topper of the class and she comes second. That makes me better than her."

Thus Anitha doused the flames of jealousy that ate at her heart. Everyday she repeated those words many times to herself. Every time she saw Nandini receive a smile, every time she saw Nandini sacrifice her free time to help someone else, she kept going over those words.

Most students dreaded the examinations. But not Anitha. The exams were a great joy for her. She loved to see all her classmates struggle with their subjects while she relaxed. Anitha had the knack of writing tests well. She took it as an opportunity to show off her talents. But she never helped anyone else.

"Anitha, could you teach me this sum?"
"No. I am too busy," would be her curt reply. "It's easy any way. Why don't you learn it yourself?
"Anitha, this essay is too difficult. Could you help me?"
"Another time," would be her reply.
"Anitha, where on the map is England?"
"Silly, find it yourself."

But when the same people approached Nandini she took extra effort to help them out.

Anitha couldn't understand Nandini's behavior. "Why do you want to teach these idiots? You should spend the time studying yourself. Who knows, you could even narrow the gap between us."
"I guess, I can't change myself," Nandini smiled back.

Anitha's big day arrived in a few weeks. The examination schedule was announced and the first exam was English.

"All the best, Anitha!" her father wished her on the morning of the exam. "I am going out for a walk. The driver will take you by car."

Anitha got into the car and reached the school early. The students trooped into the examination hall when the bell rang, their faces looking worried.

'Stupid people! Why do they get so nervous for an English exam?' Anitha thought as she sat down at her desk. Then she looked around for Nandini. She was nowhere to be seen. 'Mad girl,' she muttered to herself, 'why can't she come in time for the exam?'

Half an hour passed, then one hour. Still there was no sign of Nandini.

Anitha was really glad. 'So Nandini will not be coming for today's exam. She's going to fail and again I am going to be the class topper.'

With only half an hour's time left Nandini rushed into the hall, sweat running down her face. The teacher helped her to a chair and gave her the question and answer paper. Poor Nandini was too exhausted to write anything and gave up halfway.

When the examination ended, everyone gathered around Nandini.
"What happened?"
"Why were you late?"
"I was delayed a bit," Nandini explained.

The others tried asking Nandini more questions but Nandini was evasive.

Anitha couldn't help taunting Nandini. "You are so lazy. Serves you right! You are going to fail this exam."

A tear rolled down from Nandini's eye and she ran away from the spot.

Anitha went back home in her car. She saw many of her classmates walking home. But she didn't bother to offer them a lift.

When Anitha walked into her home she knew something was wrong. Her relatives were present in the house, her mother was looking tense and the doctor was calming everyone.

"What happened?" Anitha rushed to her mother.

Her mother embraced her. "Nothing, Child. Thank God nothing has happened."

"Where is Daddy?"

Her mother led her to the bedroom. Her father was lying on the bed, looking a bit pale. Anitha knelt by her father's side.

"One of your classmates helped me," her father whispered.

"Don't speak to him now," her mother led her away.

Back in the hall, her mother explained. "Daddy had left for his early morning walk when he suffered a stroke and collapsed on the pavement. Thank God one of your classmates passed by and took your father to the hospital."

Anitha had an uneasy feeling of who that classmate could be.

"Did he tell the person's name?"

"He said someone called Nandini," her mother replied.

Anitha closed her eyes for a moment. She couldn't understand what was happening. The person whom she had ridiculed for coming late had actually saved her father's life.

She could not sleep well that night. She started hating herself.

By the next morning, a change had come over her.

She rushed to the school and found Nandini standing by the library.
"Nandini," she spoke hesitantly. "I want to apologize."
"Why?" Nandini was surprised.
"I mocked you yesterday. You saved my father's life and I ridiculed you for coming late. Why didn't you tell me?"
"You didn't give me a chance," Nandini said.
Later that day, the Principal called the students for a special assembly.
"Students, I have to tell you something," he said. "Learning Science and Maths is not education. Education should make a person a good human being. A good student need not come first in class but should have a good character. I am glad to say Nandini is one such student. She has saved a person's life yesterday even though she had to sacrifice her exam for it. We are proud of you, Nandini."
Everyone clapped, but Anitha clapped the loudest. When she went home that day she offered to drop many of her classmates at their homes.
She started smiling at her classmates. She helped them with their homework and shared whatever she had. Within weeks people gathered around Anitha the way they flocked to Nandini. Soon Anitha and Nandini became best friends.
Someone asked Anitha the reason for her change.
"I have understood that it is not for knowledge alone that my parents are sending me to school. More importantly, I have to learn to become a good human being. Nandini made me realize that," Anitha replied with a smile.
"Is it true, Daddy? Will we have to give up all this?" Renu looked around the expensively furnished drawing room. "Please say that it is just a joke, Mummy!"

"I'm sorry, Renu, but it is true," her mother sighed and explained to her bewildered eleven-year-old daughter. "Your Daddy's business has done badly and he has lost money. So our present lifestyle has to change.

"Have we really become poor?" Renu whispered.

"No, no! We haven't become poor. But we must be careful how we spend money," her mother assured her.

Dinesh, her eight-year-old son, wanted to know if he and Renu would have to leave school. His parents laughed for the first time in many days. "No. We've paid your fees for the whole term. So you'll both continue to go to school till it closes for the vacation. By then I'll be able to decide what to do," his father told him.

Renu and Dinesh had to use the public bus to go to school as their father no longer owned a car. Renu entered her classroom to put away her bag before joining her friends as usual.

"Hi, Tabu! Have you started your revision for the exams?" Renu asked her best friend.

"No, there's plenty of time," Tabu turned to greet her friend, Sonia. Renu found it a little odd that the girls stared at her and exchanged whispers.
They began talking loudly whenever she joined them. It occurred to her that many girls whom she had thought of as her best friends, were trying to avoid her company. Perhaps they had heard about her father's financial problems. Their parents had told Renu and Dinesh that they would be moving to a small flat some distance away from their present house. Renu found that she had to share a bedroom with her brother and longed for the privacy of her own room. Renu's mother skilfully arranged the flat so that it looked very cosy soon.

"Happy Birthday, Renu dear," her parents greeted her one morning. "We've planned a party for you on Sunday. You can invite all your class friends!"

Renu was very touched that despite their troubles, her parents had arranged a party to please her. She wrote out the invitation cards and took them to school. After the assembly, she sought out Tabu and the others.

"Do come to my birthday party on Sunday!" she invited them all as she handed them the cards.

"I will come if possible!" Tabu's voice was strained.

Renu looked around the neatly arranged sitting room with satisfaction. Her mother had made the sandwiches, jellies, ice-cream and snacks herself. Renu had enjoyed helping her to set the food on the table. Everything was in place. Only the guests had to arrive.

The doorbell rang and some girls came in. Renu wasn't very friendly with them, especially Maya who sat next to her in class. But a guest is a guest and Renu chatted with them pleasantly.

Time passed, but none of Renu's special friends came. Renu concealed the hurt she felt and decided to cut the cake. She was surprised to find that she enjoyed the evening spent with Maya and the other girls.

"Why didn't you come to my party yesterday?" Renu asked Tabu when the two girls met at school.

"My aunt fell ill suddenly and we all went to see her," Tabu replied.
"Hey, Tabu! Thanks for treating me to the film yesterday evening!" Sonia exclaimed as she came up just then.

Maya, who was standing some distance away with Renu, heard this. Both girls showed no reaction. But Maya noted that Tabu looked ashamed of herself.

A sudden downpour at the end of the day at school took the girls by surprise as they streamed out of the gates. Maya and Renu covered their heads with books. A car whizzed by and Renu saw Tabu sitting in the rear seat.

"I was a show off like her," Renu had the grace to admit.

Renu and Maya came closer together in the following weeks. They did their revision together and secured good marks in the examinations.

"Just read this, Mummy!" Renu waved her report card.

"I've good news, too! Your father's business has improved greatly," her mother laughed, delightedly.

"Oh! I hope we won't have to leave this happy home and go back to our old house?" Renu said.

Her mother was pleased to see how Renu had adapted herself to the changed situation and had learnt true contentment. She knew that Renu had picked up many of Maya's good habits which she had seen during her frequent visits to Maya's home.

Renu refused her father's offer to use the car saying that it was more fun to travel by bus with Maya.

"Please come to my birthday party on Sunday," Tabu smiled at Renu one day just before the school closed for the vacation.

"I'm sorry but I've already made plans to go to Maya's party. It's her birthday too!" Renu replied. She had noticed that Tabu and Sonia were trying to become friendly again, now that her father was rich.

Renu's father visited his daughter's school. He had a long talk with the Headmistress.

There was a special assembly when the Headmistress announced that an annual Endowment Prize would be given to the best pupil for all-round performance. "The first winner is Maya!" she said.
"Congrats, Maya! You deserve it!" Renu whispered.
Renu thought how proud she had been...how she had used the generous allowance given by her parents to buy the friendship of girls like Tabu and Sonia. But they had spurned her when her father had lost money.

It was Maya who was a true friend. She wasn't impressed either by Renu's wealth or her lack of it. For her a friendship was a friendship—to stand by a friend in times of joy and sorrow!
The clock tower stood at the cross section of four streets, east-west and north-south. It was the centre of Shujabad, a small but important town, 200 kilometers north-west of Ahmedabad in Gujarat. The square buzzed with voices of the young and the old. Some came from as far as Rajasthan and erstwhile Junagarh to hawk their wares. In the evenings, the town square echoed like the Tower of Babel. Locals and outsiders bargaining in peculiar dialects, aided by gestures of hands and faces. The town was rather peculiar in another way. The shops selling similar goods were lined up in groups along one of the four streets called Kirana bazaar, Mithai bazaar, Loha (steel) bazaar and Tota bazaar (selling bazigars, sparrows and so on). Thus it was quite easy to shop, both from the view of location and pricing. But Pratap Rai always bought his household provisions from Labha because they were friends from school days.

The story goes that Pratap came from a very rich family. More than half of the students in the class were children of peasants under heavy debts to Pratap's father. These boys considered him an adversary and avoided his company. Labha, the son of a grocer, was the only one to befriend the rich child. He never pawned on his friends goodies nor ever took advantage to advance his father's business. The two boys played in opposite teams in kabbadi matches and wrestled to fell each other. The friendship grew solid on mutual respect for each other's strength or weakness.
Pratap went away to Ahmedabad for higher studies. He later joined the provincial services of the State. Though he became a big man in his own right, he never forgot his friend. No sooner than he landed in his hometown, Pratap would call on Labha at his house or the shop. The two spent their morning walks together, recollecting their school days. Of course, Pratap had many new experiences to narrate. Their marriage and growing families in no way weakened their bonds. Pratap completed his service tenure of thirty-odd years with distinction. He decided to settle in his hometown after retirement. Labha became the owner of the shop after his father's death. Pratap would come over to his friend's shop to make purchases, but more often to gossip and while away his time or lend a helping hand in Labha's business.

Once Pratap came to Labha's shop to buy a tin of ghee. The price amounted to rupees fifty and eighty-three paise. Labha gave back forty-nine rupees to his friend who had given a hundred rupee note.

"Where are the remaining seventeen pennies?" Pratap asked.

"Forget the paltry pennies, my friend. I do not have the change in the till at the moment. After all, this petty amount can buy you nothing these days," replied Labha in a friendly tone.

"Money is money, my friend, I must have my due," Pratap was firm.

"It is busy time at my shop. Do you expect me to ignore my business for seventeen worthless pennies?" Labha was aggressive.

"Mind your words, Labha. My money is not worthless. Do what you may, I must get my seventeen pennies here and now," Pratap was unrelenting.

By then Anand, a friend of the two for long, came to the shop. He wondered why Pratap, a very well-to-do man, was quarrelling for an insignificant amount? And that too with his best friend! He had never seen them locked in such a verbal duel before.

Partap made a suggestion, "I will attend to your shop while you arrange for my money. Is it okay with you, Labha?"

"Have I a choice? I am going to the bank to arrange the money for you. I can realize you are short of cash these days." Labha was
angry with his friend so he walked away in a huff.

Pratap attended to customers with rare sincerity. It seemed he had been a salesman throughout his life. He was making every effort to ensure that his friend suffered no losses during his absence. On an impulse he called Nathu, the helper at the halwai's shop to fetch three glasses of hot milk mixed with 250 grams of jalebis in each.

Anand, who had seen Pratap wrangling with Labha only a while back, was mystified. Labha came back panting and puffing. He thrust a small packet into Pratap's hand. "Here is your fortune, my friend!" Labha had obviously still not cooled down.

"Thanks, Labha! Now come, my friends, let us enjoy hot jalebis and milk. This hot drink is very refreshing and soothing," Pratap said, offering the big steel tumblers to Labha and Anand. The two were speechless and held their glasses hesitantly.

Anand gulped a mouthful but dared to ask, "I cannot understand you, Pratap. You have spent more than a rupee to recover seventeen pennies. What sort of bargain is this?"

"I do not bargain with friends," Pratap replied and continued to sip his drink. Labha, too, had reconciled by then. He began drinking the invigorating drink, though still surprised at his friend's eccentricity.

"Why did you create so much fuss over seventeen pennies, Pratap?" Anand persisted.

"It is neither a bargain nor a question of creating a fuss, my dear. The first part is business. The second is friendship. I do not mix friendship with business. Today Labha owed me a small amount. There can be many times when Labha's customers can owe him small amounts. In time the small amounts can grow into a big sum. That will be bad business, my friends," Pratap said in a matter of fact manner.

Labha and Anand were left with no argument. They realized that Pratap was right. He had passed on his tremendous experience to Labha for carrying on an equitable practice in business.
The Greedy Zamindar

Manoj T. Thomas

Rajnath took pride in being called the village zamindar even though he stayed in the city. He liked to come once every month to have a look at the fields and talk to his manager, Keshav. One day, he saw a field on the way and was struck by the beauty of the standing crop. "What is it that you have planted here?" asked Rajnath with the pride of a zamindar who owned such a fine plot of land.

"Sir, this is not our land. Our land begins there," Keshav pointed out to the nearby field. Rajnath noticed that the crops on the nearby fields were poor in comparison and the plants looked weak and wasted.

"Why is the crop on this land so good?" asked Rajnath.

"This is a very fertile land," replied Keshav. "Its location is such that the rainwater brings all the silt from the uplands and deposits it here renewing the fertility of the land."

Rajnath was impressed. "Who owns this piece of land?" he asked.

"This belongs to Sarju," answered Keshav. "He owns only these two acres in the entire village and he spends most of his time here."

"Send him to me," said Rajnath.

Keshav passed on the message to Sarju. Sarju appeared the next day at the house of the zamindar. He went and saluted Rajnath.

"You have a fine field, Sarju," said the zamindar.

"It is all God's grace and your kindness, zamindar saheb," said Sarju, happy at hearing the praise of his land.
"I called you here, Sarju, because I liked the land very much. How much are you willing to sell the land for? I wish to buy it."

"Sell the land? No, zamindar saheb! The land is my livelihood. It is like a mother to me. I can't sell my mother."

"Come on, Sarju," said Rajnath. "I will give you a higher price than whatever any one can offer you."

But Sarju was adamant.

"Not even if I wanted to buy it?" asked Rajnath, getting angry.

"But you have so much land all around the village," protested Sarju.

"Why are you so obsessed with my small plot of land?"

This gave the zamindar another idea. "I will give you thrice the amount of land somewhere else in the village. In place of the two acres that you have, I will give you six acres."

Sarju had no choice but to sell the land, but now that Sarju had agreed to the deal, Rajnath felt he had been too liberal. "Yet," he told Keshav, "in order to safeguard my reputation, I have to fulfil my promise."

Rajnath had promised to give six acres, but he had not specified which land he would give. He spoke to his Manager. "Keshav," he said, "is there any part of my land which is presently uncultivable and barren?"

Keshav replied, "Yes, there is some land on top of the hills which does not have any irrigation facility. The soil is also very thin there and full of boulders."

This, for some reason, made Rajnath very happy. "Give it to Sarju," he ordered. "Give him six acres there on top of the hills."

Sarju was shocked when he heard that. "But that land is not fit for anything, saheb; what will I do with it?"

Rajnath was very rude. "I don't know and don't care what you will do with it. We had reached an agreement that day and I hope you are man enough to abide by it."

Sarju felt tricked but decided to accept the unfertile, barren land. Rajnath was pleased to have acquired such a good piece of land in return for a worthless piece of land. He was so happy at this incident.
that he didn't return to the village for more than a year and would get news of the village by telephone from Keshav. At times, he would ask about Sarju. "What is the fool doing now?"

Keshav used to say, "He is working on his new land."

Yes, Rajnath could see that Sarju was a complete fool. Who else but a fool would try to work on a barren piece of land?

A year later, when he visited the village, Rajnath was shocked to see that the new land which he had bought from Sarju didn't have any crop standing. "What happened?" asked Rajnath.

"The entire crop was attacked by pests," replied Keshav. "It seems as if Sarju had cast some sort of spell."

This made Rajnath very angry. Sarju had tricked him! He directed his driver to go straight to Sarju's farm on the hills. There, another surprise awaited Rajnath. When he came to Sarju's farm he found it to be green and lush with different crops. He couldn't believe his eyes.

" Didn't you tell me that it was a barren land, full of boulders and totally uncultivable?" he barked at Keshav.

"It was all that and much more," said Keshav, "but this Sarju seems to know some black magic."

"I will show him some of my own magic!" shouted Rajnath, as he walked into Sarju's hut.

"You could have called me," said Sarju, when he saw the zamindar.

"It is good that I came," replied Rajnath. "If I hadn't come, I wouldn't have known about your black magic. Tell me, where did you learn those filthy black magic tricks? I think I will call a village meeting and have you kicked out of the village."

"Did Keshav tell you that I have used black magic?" asked Sarju.

"What if he did?" replied Rajnath angrily.

"Zamindar saheb," said Sarju, you have been misinformed. "Even my previous land was not very fertile as many people thought it to be. It was my labour in the land, which made it productive. I was disappointed when you gave me this land, but then I thought that no land is unproductive. I did have to work hard on this land. I picked the boulders from the fields, terraced the land, dug two wells and God has
been kind to me, because both my wells yielded water and my health was good enough to undertake such heavy labour. Your crops failed because you were not here to take care of the land and I think Keshav may not have acted very responsibly. He must be telling you the story of black magic to turn your attention away from his own inefficiency."

Rajnath realized his mistake. He sold off part of the land and gave away some of the land free to the villagers. He kept with him only as much land as he could manage well on his own.
There once lived an old man in Jeetpur, a village in central India. His name was Dhanpat and he had two sons, Shiva and Hari. Dhanpat was a farmer who, through sheer hard work, had amassed a tidy fortune.

However, while he was very hard working, his sons were extremely lazy. They were good-for-nothing fellows who hated the very thought of work. Moreover, they couldn't stand each other and were always fighting. In spite of all his efforts, Dhanpat could not change the attitude of his sons.

Finally, on his deathbed, he made a will. Then he called his sons and said, "I don't have long to live. I have tried my best to raise you as hard-working, responsible citizens. But I have failed. The saddest part is, you are so selfish that you can't even live together in peace. That is why I have made a very special will. I hope, at least after my death, there will be some improvement in you." Two weeks later he died.

The next day, Shiva and Hari went to the lawyer's office and enquired about the will. The lawyer, Viren Mallik, was a tough man who had great respect and admiration for Dhanpat.

"Your father was a very intelligent man," he said to them. "He made his will after careful consideration. As per the will, the house in which you live will be sold. The money from the sale of the house will be used to purchase two identical houses selected by
your father. You will have to shift to the houses which are side by side. His farm will be sold and the money kept in the bank. The interest will be paid to you every month but the capital will remain in the bank."

"How much will it be?"

"Each of you will get ten thousand rupees every month."

The two brothers looked disappointed.

"One more thing. You'll get this money if you fulfil one condition."

"What condition?" Shiva asked.

"There is a garden in-between the two houses. It is a beautiful garden with lush green plants, pretty flowers and delicious fruits. Both of you will have to maintain it together. As long as the garden flourishes, you will get the money. If the garden decays, your monthly payment will stop. Also remember, that you will not be able to sell your houses or the garden."

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A month later the brothers shifted to their new houses. "You work for an hour in the morning and I'll work one hour in the evening," suggested Hari.

"Okay, but no cheating," declared Shiva and Hari nodded.

From the next day onwards the brothers started working in the garden. Each was more bothered about what the other was doing.

"Hey, Shiva! You didn't bother to water the brinjal plants today. The bed was dry," accused Hari.

"Who says so? Of course, I did. In fact you conveniently forgot to spray the pesticide on the rose plants," retorted Shiva.

"You do your job and let me do mine. You are no one to direct me."

"It was you who started accusing me..."

Gradually, in their competition to do less than what the other was doing, they started neglecting the garden.

One day, Mr. Mallik came for an inspection and was shocked to see the state of the once beautiful garden.

"In six months you have completely messed up the garden. I'm stopping your monthly allowance."
"Come on, you don't have to take the old man's will so seriously," Shiva said. "In the last days of his life he had become senile."

"And for once I agree with this fellow!" Hari added.

"Shut up, you fools! Now listen carefully. Your monthly allowance ceases from today."

"But you can't do this! What will we eat."

"You should have thought of that before fighting like street dogs and messing up the garden. However, there is still a ray of hope."

"What is that?" they both asked.

"Your father bought a piece of land not far from here. You can both cultivate it and survive on what you can grow."

"B...but we don't know anything about farming."

"That is your fault. Instead of wasting your time, you should have learnt farming from your father."

For a week the brothers' sulked. Then Hari went to Shiva's house. "We'll have to do something or we'll starve," he told him.

"I had a look at the land and also asked around. It will be ideal for growing sugarcane which is in high demand," suggested Shiva.

"But how do we go about it?" Hari asked him.

"Father's friend, Chandrabhanji, has a field right next to our land. He said he'll guide us," replied Shiva.

"Then let us start immediately," Hari was eager to get started.

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Hari and Shiva started working on their land. It was back-breaking work. They would go in the morning and return only in the evening. Initially it was desperation that kept them going. They knew this was their last hope. But gradually, as days passed, they started enjoying the work. This was the first time in their lives they were doing something useful and doing it together. They were surprised to find they were liking it. They enjoyed working together. Shiva and Hari found to their amazement that each had qualities the other found admirable. The natural love and affection that was buried deep down now surfaced.

Whatever little free time they got from farming they spent in the
garden and gradually it was restored to its original beauty.

When the first saplings appeared, their happiness knew no bounds. They jumped with joy, hugging each other. Soon the results of their labour were there for all to see. As the sugarcane plants swayed to the breeze, the hearts of the brothers sang with ecstasy. They invited Mr. Mallik to take a look at their achievement.

"I can hardly believe my eyes!" he exclaimed, his stern face breaking into a smile.

"Now let me tell you the final part of your father's will which states that in case you manage to cultivate the land and make a success of it, your allowance should be restored."

Hari looked at Shiva who nodded.

"We don't want the allowance anymore. You can give it to charity," Hari said.

"I agree with my brother. We have learnt to stand on our own feet. The lesson our father taught us is the most valuable allowance we can ever get."
To every Indian, the Banyan tree is very sacred. Under this kalpavriksha many have had their wishes fulfilled... Under its shade many have sought rest and refuge...
The collection you hold in your hand epitomizes all that its name stands for and more. For, its slender roots are anchored, not in the ground, but in tender hearts, as fifteen contemporary stories, that effortlessly bear the weight of strong, moral values.