CAMP ADVENTURE

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End of the camp

Amit's eyes fluttered open at the first ray of sunlight. In the past three weeks, it had become a habit for him to wake up early and wander into the forest alone. Now he lay on the camp-cot and marvelled at the changes in his outlook in these short weeks.

He had come here reluctantly, angry at being sent away from home; determined not to adjust and not to enjoy himself. But the Sathes, who were running the camp, had been so friendly and so interested in each of the forty boys in their care, that even sullen Amit had been drawn out.

He found himself telling them what his hobby was and when some others had listed 'day dreaming', 'collecting matchboxes', and 'making paper boats' among their favourite pastimes, his own obsession with stone throwing did not seem so foolish.
"What do you throw stones at?" asked Mrs. Sathe.
"Lamp-posts, pillars, other stones, sometimes even into the sea near my house—but that is not much fun because I like to know whether I have hit my target."
"Are you accurate?" Mr. Sathe questioned.
"Mostly," shrugged Amit, not wanting to tell him in front of everyone that it was the stones which had led to his being 'exiled' during the holidays.

Mr. Shah's windows had smashed for the third time and what was more, the stone had narrowly missed his daughter, Mamta's head. He had barged into the Borkars flat angrily, not waiting for Amit's father to return from work. "I am going to report that boy of yours to the police!" he had stormed at Amit's mother.
"How often can I keep quiet about the young rascal? If he is not stopped now, he will injure someone seriously someday and who will be responsible? You, for begging on his behalf, and Me for covering up for him and not pursuing the matter when I have known all along that he is doing it deliberately!"

"But it is not deliberate, Mr. Shah!" Mrs. Borkar cried.
"He is too young to do such a thing deliberately!"
"Young?" shouted Mr. Shah. "Is thirteen too young to understand what he is doing? If he were my son, I would have thrashed him and put him to work. That would cure him of throwing stones at his neighbour's windows."

Amit's mother may not have told her husband about the incident if the family had been living alone. But theirs was a joint family, with the two Borkar brothers,
Lokesh and Mukesh, sharing the old spacious flat and raising their families together. Now everyone had heard Mr. Shah’s complaint and she certainly could not keep a secret from her husband.

She tried to play it down, however, but Lokesh had already heard the story from his children. When the two brothers were alone, he began, "Look Mukesh, I don’t like to interfere, but I do think Amit is a disturbed child. You must do something about it."

Mukesh, Amit’s father, was silent. He knew Amit needed disciplining. He wondered why, of his three children, only Amit had problems. Look at Suhasini—she had won a scholarship to study abroad! And little Arun was always at the top of his class and popular with his friends.

Lokesh’s children were no less intelligent and talented. The twins, Rohan and Mohan, were two classes ahead of Amit, when they were just nine months older, and the eldest son was a qualified paediatrician with a practice of his own! Where had he gone wrong in his handling of Amit? Probably, he had been too lenient.

The very next day, Amit’s name was put in for the summer camp at Kasara ghat and he was sent off without being given a chance to protest or air his views.

I want to go with Mohan and Rohan to Goa,’ he had raged inwardly, too scared of his father and his uncle to say anything aloud. 'Why do they have all the fun? Why do they get all the praise?’

Amit’s younger brother, Arun, came up to him.
"I will miss you, Bhaiya (brother)," he said plaintively. "I wish I could go with you, too."

Amit jerked away from him. "You will do well to stay away from me!" he said in a surly undertone.

Arun's feelings were hurt. He was just trying to be nice to the brother he loved. Why was Amit making it so difficult for him?

"You are a bad influence!" Amit's father had said in a moment of intense disappointment. Today, as he proceeded towards the camp, his father's words played on his mind all through the bus journey to Kasara ghat.

'I don't belong in that successful, intelligent family,' Amit told himself. 'I don't belong anywhere!'

Within a few hours of his arrival Amit had made friends with the other boys in the group. He was surprised at the sense of belonging he achieved at the camp. None of them knew his cousins or his baby brother, none of them had seen him standing outside the Principal's office for not doing his homework or for failing in his class tests. None of them had heard Mr. Mathur upbraid him for getting a zero three times running in his maths tests.

Here he was just Amit. Most of the boys did not even know his surname. And all of them had come to admire him in a very short time.

Mr. Sathe had chosen him to be the first one to wield the bow and arrow. "Let us see if your stone-throwing has given you a good eye," he had said, showing Amit
how to fit the arrow and take aim. Everyone had clapped when the arrow had struck the target. It was not in the centre, as many may have expected after seeing 'Robin Hood', but once the others began trying their luck, they realized that Amit's had been an exceptionally good first attempt.

They had learnt a bit about archery and a lot about survival in harmony with nature. They had trekked overnight into the hills, using the contents of their backpacks to fill their stomachs and to keep themselves comfortable. It was an adventure that had stretched into three weeks, and now, at the end of it, Amit was loathe to rise from his cot and begin his preparations for his return to Mumbai.

'I wish I could stay here forever,' he thought, as he ran down the stairs and out of the building into the forest he had come to know so well. 'Possibly, Mrs. Sathe could give me admission in the school that she proposes to institute here. Where the emphasis will be less on studies and more on nature and the environment. I am sure her school would not have any of those boring lessons that carry on and on while the children doze at their desks.'

Amit's footsteps were loud as he pounded along the trail he had cut for himself. Dried leaves crackled under his feet and the little forest animals scurried for cover as he approached. He fantasized. 'Any school run by Mrs. Sathe is bound to have fun things to do. Environmental science under the trees, social studies in the village, maths in the market place... Oh! but
what is the use? I will never be sent here even if the Sathes agree to take me. If I say I want to go, everyone at home will make sure I don’t!’

Amit turned and trudged back uphill, breathing hard. Within another couple of hours, the two busloads of children would be returning to the city. He had to go and pack. But an idea had taken root in his young mind and he allowed it to sprout and grow and spread itself into every corner of his being.

i am not going home,' he decided as he re-entered the room he shared with three others. 'I must find a way to stay here.'

Rajesh, Bobby and Jeetu, his room-mates, were ready for breakfast. "Come on, wash-up fast," said Jeetu. "You are late."

Amit quickly splashed water on his face and joined his friend as he ran down the stairs to the dining hall on the ground floor. Boys were pouring out of the other rooms, but there was no pushing and shoving as there would have been in school. There were no well-ordered lines either—just a natural discipline that seemed to have been learnt by the children on their own. No one had shouted or rung bells for them. They had just been told the timings for each meal and they were always there, with healthy appetites and a hearty appreciation for what was laid out on the counter for them to help themselves to.

This morning, both Mr. and Mrs. Sathe spoke to the boys, thanking them for joining in the activities wholeheartedly and for making the camp so enjoyable.
After that, there was much back-slapping and hand shaking, before they filed out to pack their belongings. A deep feeling of desolation came over Amit. He was reluctant to join the others as they threw their clothes into their bags and ran down to book window seats in the buses.

Soon Jeetu was also ready. "I will go and see about our seats," he said, walking quickly out of the room.

Amit followed him to the verandah that ran the entire length of the first floor. Their room was the first on the left of the staircase. There were five rooms on each side of the stairs. Downstairs, immediately below Amit’s room, was a large suite of three rooms that the Sathes had occupied. Next to them were two large dormitories. On the other side was the dining hall, the TV room, the kitchen and two store rooms. Mr. Sathe had told them that the building was about a hundred years old but had been renovated with modern fittings.

Amit peered over the wooden railings of the verandah. Happy boys dumped their luggage into the buses and cried, "This seat is mine!", "Hey, don't pick up that sock! I have kept it there to mark my room-mate's seat!"

'Why can't I look forward to going home?' thought Amit, as he slouched back into his room. Slowly, he went to the cupboard and pulled out his bag. He held it open and threw his clothes in without bothering to fold them. One of his shirts seemed stuck at the back of the cupboard. He half-entered the cupboard and looked carefully at the place where it was stuck.
He had not worn that shirt and a part of it seemed to have got into a crack in the wood. He tried to ease it out by putting his penknife into the crack.

Suddenly, one panel of the cupboard opened backwards, his shirt came free and he and his penknife overbalanced into the darkness. Amit was too surprised to cry out. His eyes were just getting used to the lack of light and he could make out a small room behind the cupboard, when he heard footsteps climb up the stairs, and Jeetu’s voice calling, "Amit! Are you ready?"

Hardly knowing how the thought entered his head, Amit swung his full bag into the dark space behind the cupboard, shut the panel, then the cupboard, and turned towards the door. His heart was thumping wildly, though he tried to stay calm as Jeetu entered. "Where is your luggage?" he asked, looking at the bare room.

"I have loaded it on the bus," Amit said casually. "I just came to see if we had left anything behind."

"Oh, don’t be an old fusspot!" scoffed Jeetu. "At the most we would leave a toothbrush!"

"No, even that is not there," laughed Amit. "Come on, let us go."

He allowed his friend to precede him—out of the door then down the stairs, his mind working all the time at a furious pace.

Mrs. Sathe was at the bottom of the steps with a list in her hand. She was ticking off, one by one, as the boys entered the buses. Amit got into the second vehicle with Jeetu and sat down. As soon as he saw Mrs. Sathe finish the checking and go inside the building for some
last minute work, he said to Jeetu, "Hey, I have kept my luggage in the other bus! Let Josh sit here. He looks so cramped on the front seat. I will hop to where my bags are!"

"Uh...okay," replied Jeetu, taken by surprise. He had wanted to sit with Amit all the way to Mumbai so that they could exchange addresses and meet on weekends even when they got back to their routine. 'It does not matter,' he thought. 'I shall ask him when we arrive at the bus-station. I can even get his address from Mrs. Sathe.'

Amit got off the second bus quickly. Instead of going to the first vehicle, he made a dash for the steps. Within seconds, he was inside the building, up the stairs and in the shadow of the banisters. No one had noticed him.

Crouched halfway up to the first floor, he watched as Mrs. Sathe got onto the first bus and it slowly pulled out of the driveway, the other following closely behind.

"I did it!" exulted Amit. "I am not going back home!"

**Alone**

From where Amit sat on the stairs, he could hear sounds of a lot of activity going on in the dining hall and kitchen. Mr. Sathe came into view, talking to one of the camp guides, Ranjan Mehta.

"Do you think we can clear out in a little over twenty-four hours?"
"Easily," laughed Mehta. "Prema has already started packing up all the extras from her kitchen, while the rooms are being cleaned and closed. Then we are going to have a picnic lunch to celebrate the safe conclusion of the camp."

"That is a good idea," said Mr. Sathe. "It is funny, although I miss the happy sound of children's voices, I have a deep sense of relief that they have gone off safely. No accidents, no injuries, no fights. A clean record. We need to congratulate ourselves and each other!"

Amit felt guilty as he heard that. It struck him that if Mrs. Sathe double-checked her list en route, or at their destination, the cat would be out of the bag. The bright spot for him was that no one would be at the bus-station to receive him because it was just a block away from his house. He had boarded the bus alone and he would have gone home alone.

For once, he felt thankful for the independence he had because his parents were busy with the business and had no time to drop him and pick him up when he went out.

He heard the sound of sweeping and as quickly as he could, he ran up the stairs and back to the room he had vacated a scant hour ago. He opened the cupboard, reached into his pocket for his penknife and once again began to move it in the little notch where his shirt had got caught.

For a moment nothing happened, then, as before, the panel on the back swung open. Amit's bag lay just inside the small room behind the cupboard. He pulled
out his torch, switched it on and stepped into the room, taking care to close the cupboard and swing the panel shut behind him.

"What an exciting place," he breathed, shining the torch around. "I wonder who made it and for what!"

The room was almost six feet square. It was just a little smaller than the bathroom that lay alongside. 'How did no one guess that a room existed here?' Amit marvelled, realizing that with the bathroom on one side, the cupboard in front and a niche in the staircase wall at the back, nobody could guess that a space existed there.

The room was a bit musty and smelt stale, but Amit felt sure there was some vent for the circulation of air. As he swung the torch around, he noticed small round holes in the wood a little above the level of his head. "I thought as much!" he murmured. "No one would build a place like this and then seal it so that whoever chose to hide here died of suffocation!"

Amit wondered whether, if he looked through those holes, he would be able to see Deepabai coming up the stairs now with such a clatter. He spied a chair standing in the corner and quickly took it to the panelling and stood on it. He could peer into the holes, but could see nothing but blackness.

The sound of the buckets receded and he guessed that Deepabai had gone to the other side to begin her cleaning. 'Good. That gives me more time to explore this place,' he thought.

The room was furnished with a small table and chair. They looked as old as the house, but the chair had
held his weight when he had stood on it, so it must be sturdy.

There was enough place in the room for him to fit in a small camp-cot, like the ones they had been using during the camp. 'But I don't need to sleep here,' he thought. 'It would be warm. I can easily sleep in the room and hide in the secret place if anyone comes.'

He examined the walls. "There must be some way of getting out of here! What is the point in having secret closet if there is no way to get out of it secretly as well?"

As he murmured to himself, his hands touched a small gap in the panelling. He tugged. It did not open. He pushed. It stayed shut. He flattened his hand against the surface and tried to move it. Quietly, it slid open. Amit leaned forward, expecting to see another level space like the one he was standing in. But all his torch revealed were two iron bars like the handles of a stepladder.

Below the bars, was a staircase so steep that it was almost a ladder. There was no way that he could go down the stairs in the usual manner. He would have to descend backwards, as if he were getting down from a ladder.

Amit held on to one of the bars and took his first step into the chasm. He had stuck his torch into his shirt, allowing a faint light to come through the cloth. After every four steps, he stopped, held the bars with one hand, pulled out his torch and shone it up, down and around. There was nothing there. Only a dark well-like space with the steep wooden stairs almost one under the other.
Amit reached the bottom and stopped. Where was he now? He tried to imagine in which part of the building he was. He closed his eyes and thought. As far as he could tell, he was still on his own side of the stairs. That meant that he had come down somewhere at the back of the Sathes suite of rooms.

A picture flashed across his mind. Yes! He could not be mistaken! He had seen a back door there. If he moved the panels, the ones that he faced now, would he find himself outside the house? It was broad daylight. Could he risk searching for the exit at this time?

Suddenly, he heard Mr. Sathe’s voice—and so clearly that it seemed he was standing in the same room with him! Amit held his breath and covered his chest with his hand, as if, by doing so, he could still the wild beating of his heart! Mr. Sathe seemed close enough to hear that crazy pounding!

"I have let out the ground floor for a month. That will give us some income until we return in July to get the school going. We can't have the usual holidays in a place like this. There is too much rain once the monsoons set in."

"Who has rented it?" asked Mr. Sathe's companion. From the voice, Amit identified him as Ranjan Mehta, the camp guide.

"Some rich business folk. They wanted a holiday home for a while. With their kind of hard sell, the ghats during the monsoons will be made to appear like a beach resort!"

There was a short silence, then Mr. Mehta said,
"If the upstairs rooms are going to be closed, we can store some of our stuff there. All those tins of food will not spoil in one month and there is no point in carting them back and forth."

"You are right. You can ask Prema to keep the perishable stuff separate for removal. The rest can be stored here."

The talk of food made Amit feel hungry. With a start he realized that he had not given a thought to what he would eat during this great adventure he had embarked upon alone!

"I must make a list of all the things I will need. Then I will have to fill up a couple of boxes and store them in the secret room for my own use. What a good thing I overheard this conversation!"

He heard footsteps leaving the room and then the door shut. They have gone!' he breathed. 'Now is my chance to search for the exit.'

He found a small level in the wood on his right. He turned it. With a slight sound, something moved and he found a small gap through which he could squeeze into Mr. Sathe's office. He inched his way through, knowing that at any minute Mr. Sathe could re-enter his suite and discover him there. He looked behind him. A part of the bookshelf that lined the wall of Mr. Sathe's office had come forward. There was no obvious lever on this side to return the bookshelf to its place or even to get it to move as he had done from the other side.

I will look into this part of it later,' he thought, quickly
stepping back into the darkness of the stair–well and clicking the bookshelf into place.

Now, he looked on the other panel facing the stairs. He found a small grip for his hand. He pulled and the panel creaked open. He was in the narrow hall that led from the back door to the study. It was dusty and it looked like no one had used it in the past twenty years.

Amit unlatched the back door and peeped out. There was nobody around. He did not step out, but instead, studied the space between the door and the trees. If he ran out, even in the day time he would not be seen unless someone was standing at one of the windows. The house was raised off the ground and there were six steps leading down. If he stood on the mud, his head would not be in level with the windows. He would have to climb onto the narrow ledge that surrounded the house and then peep in.

He closed the back door and retreated to the safety of the secret stairs. Slowly, he climbed back to the hidden room behind the cupboard. There were sounds of tables being shifted and furniture being dusted vigorously. Amit tried to imagine what would happen if he poked his head out of the cupboard just then and said "hello" to Deepabai. He grinned to himself, but made no attempt to settle down in the room or move about, as long as he could hear those sounds from the other side.

There was the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs and then he heard Deepabai’s voice. "I have finished cleaning those rooms and have locked them. Bring all those boxes here."
It seemed as if something was being dragged in. Then one of the men said, "If this room is being used as a store, we may as well get the other stuff, the boss has told us to put away—the second gas cylinder and the stove, the big pots and pans. You know that the downstairs portion has been rented out, don't you?"

"Yes," said Deepabai, "I heard something to that effect. But I didn't think that the boss would want everything locked up!"

"Not everything—only the extras. Prema catered for three and a half dozen hungry boys and all of us. The new tenants will probably just be a small family. They will need a few dishes and that is about it."

Amit listened with a thrill to what was being said. 'I am in luck!' he thought. 'Everything is stored in this room. I don't need to prowl about when the staff members are here, in search of supplies for the month!'

He waited to hear the sound of the door being locked before he ventured out of the cupboard. Quickly, he inspected a few cartons, 'Fruit, baked beans, tinned sausages, condensed milk, soup...Wow! I can feast on all this without anyone saying, "Don't eat too much tinned food!" Lucky me!'

He eyed the stove suspiciously, wondering whether he would have the courage to light it. 'I will need match boxes anyway, and candles and...what else? I can't think of anything.'

He retreated into the secret room and waited for everyone to leave for the picnic he had heard them talk about. "Tin-openers!" he said suddenly,
aloud. "I must get one or else all that food is of no use to me!"

When the house became silent, Amit decided to go downstairs. The door of his room was locked from the outside, but Amit did not even bother to try it. He opened the window, swung himself over the sill and padded along the long verandah. He ran down the stairs, relieved to see that Prema had left the kitchen unlocked.

He helped himself to candles and matchboxes, then rapidly looked through the drawers to see what else he may need. A couple of plates, a glass and cup, some washing soap and a sponge and other odds and ends found their way into his cache in the secret room. He found a big dish of *rajma* lying on the kitchen platform to cool. "Tonight's dinner!" he exclaimed.

He piled a plate with his favourite meal, took out a few slices of bread from the loaves stacked there and went back to his room, to eat in comfort. He also stocked up on his quota of cereals by picking up some loaves of bread, a packet of cakes and several of chips and popcorn.

He was impatient to be alone. 'Why doesn't everyone leave this evening? Then I will have the house to myself and I can enjoy my adventure!'

That first day passed very slowly for Amit, because he could not risk moving about until night-time. Then, when he ventured out for a walk, he did not enjoy the deep shadows and mysterious corners of the forest. 'I prefer daylight walks,' he decided and returned to
his room via the secret entrance. Instead of spreading out his bed in the secret room, he slept in the crowded room he was beginning to call his own.

When he awoke the next morning, it was late and there was utter stillness in the building. No voices, no sounds of movement, not even a breeze to rustle the leaves. '8.30!' he exclaimed. 'What happened to me? Why did I not get up early like I do everyday?'

He jumped out of the window and crept down the stairs. He peered out on either side of the verandah. Not a soul in sight. He looked at the doors. Locked. "They have gone!" he exulted. "I am alone!"

"Yahoo!" Amit shouted, running down the verandah at full speed. Instead of using the steps at the side, he jumped over the railing and landed on the gravel. "This is all mine now," he said, loudly spreading his arms and running towards the treeline.

The day went quickly. He took out some of the arrows that had been packed away and the bow he had grown used to handling. With a bounce in his step he went 'Hunting', enjoying the trek on his own, with nothing but his thoughts as company. It was evening by the time he returned. He was tired and hungry and he mixed himself a delicious meal of beans, sausages and bread, followed by pineapple pastries.

Suddenly, the stillness was broken by the sound of thunder. Outside a few big drops of rain fell onto the parched earth and the lovely smell of wet mud rose up to greet him. The sky became overcast within minutes and suddenly, there was a downpour.
Amit stood on the verandah and watched as the calm of the day gave way to a storm that was frightening in its fury. Amit had never been afraid of thunder and lightning and rain before, but this was different. He trembled with each rumble from the heavens and cowered when the brilliant flashes of lightning split the sky into two.

'It is not because I am alone that I am scared,' he told himself. 'I have never seen a storm as vicious as this.'

Sheets of rain swept across the open space in front of the house and Amit felt as though a tidal wave was approaching. Each time the direction of the wind changed, a blast of water hit him on his face. 'I don't want to be alone in this,' he whimpered, quite unnerved.

Almost like an answer to his wish to have company, the headlights of a vehicle came into view. 'I have been discovered!' he thought, wildly, ducking behind the railing and then scampering across the verandah and back into the safety of his room. 'It could be Ma and Papa—or the Sathes returning in search of me.'

Quickly, he pulled the window shut and rushed into the space behind the cupboard.

The search

Until that moment, Amit had not given a second thought to what could be happening at his home in Mumbai. The previous morning, all the children had been collected by parents and friends and no one had
noticed that Amit was missing. Indira Sathe had his name ticked off on her list for she had seen him enter the bus herself. Jeetu had not had time to look out for him when they arrived because his younger sister and mother were waiting for him.

The Borkars expected Amit to be home by the time they returned from their shop in the evening. When he did not, they were a bit surprised, but not alarmed. Mr. Borkar rang up the Sathes Mumbai number. The person who picked up the phone said that Mrs. Sathe had returned but had gone out again, and Mr. Sathe was still at the Kasara House and expected back the next day or the day after.

"They must have extended the camp for a day or so," Amit's father said, and the rest of the family left it at that.

When the next evening brought no signs of Amit, Mr. Borkar again called up the Sathes. This time he got Mr. Sathe on the line.

"How can Amit not have returned home?" Mr. Sathe said to Mr. Borkar. "The camp broke up yesterday and all the boys were home by 11.30 in the morning as we had promised you when we took them."

"But Amit is not! He didn't come back!"

"Every boy has been accounted for, Mr. Borkar. My wife came back on one of the buses herself. Did you bring it to her attention at that time that your son was missing?"

"Well...er...Amit was to come home on his own as we live very close to the bus-station. When he was not at home last night and I found that you had not got
back from Kasara ghat, I presumed that the camp had been extended."

"We would not do a thing like that without notifying the parents, Mr. Borkar," Mr. Sathe said. "I am afraid your son has returned to Mumbai but has not returned to you."

Mukesh Borkar and the rest of the Borkar family were shocked. "Where is the poor boy?" Amit's mother cried. "You were too harsh on him! You should not have sent him off the way you did. He wanted to go with Arun and the twins to Goa."

"Maybe he has gone there on his own thinking we would stop him from joining them if he came home first," Amit's uncle, Lokesh said.

"But he has no money," said Amit's father. "Just twenty or thirty rupees that I gave him for cold drinks on the way to Kasara."

"We don't know that he does not have any money," Lokesh's wife Mrinalini said. "He may have taken some from the house before leaving."

"Are you saying that he stole money from one of us?" asked Mr. Borkar with a spark of anger.

"No, no," replied his sister-in-law hastily. "I just mean that we don't know for sure how much money he has with him, that is all."

Mrs. Borkar was sobbing softly into her handkerchief. "Oh, please ask the Sathes whether he seemed unhappy at the camp. Whether he joined in with all the others in their activities or not. Maybe, he made friends there and told someone his plans."
"You are right, that is what we ought to do," said her husband.

Immediately, the Sathes were dialled again, and hearing the distress in the mother's voice, they said they would come over with the list of names and addresses to try and locate someone who may know something.

When they arrived, Amit's mother clung to Indira Sathe's hand. "Please, tell me whether Amit was unhappy there," she begged.

"On the contrary Mrs. Borkar, Amit joined in everything. What is more, he was one of the best campers—a real outdoor person with a lot of stamina and great tenacity."

Mrs. Borkar dropped her hand. 'How could this lady have known Amit? Anju loved her son, there was no doubt about that, but she would never have described the sullen boy who loafed about the neighbourhood getting into trouble, as an 'outdoor person' with 'stamina' and 'tenacity'! Had Amit gone to the camp at all? Or were they describing someone else?'

She went to the book case and pulled out an album of photographs. "This is Amit," she said. "Are you talking about him?"

Mrs. Sathe looked at the photographs of the unsmiling boy. "Why yes, I do mean him. Amit. Did you have any doubts?"

Slowly, the whole story came pouring out. The Sathes could not understand how Amit could be such a different boy at home and at school and the Borkars could not
get over how he had flowered and shown his better nature to strangers and not to those who loved him.

"Perhaps, he doubts your love," suggested Indira Sathe, gently.

"But how could he?" cried Anju Borkar. "Does he not know that we are trying to discipline him for his own sake?"

They found Jeetu’s number and telephoned him. When he told them that Amit had not travelled on the bus with him and had said that he was getting into the other bus, Mr. Sathe rang up the house on the ghat. There was an engaged tone. He called up Ranjan Mehta and told him about Amit’s disappearance.

"The phone at Kasara must be dead," Ranjan said. "It is usually out of order. And as for any child being left behind, it is absolutely impossible. I checked every room myself before locking up. There was no one there."

Indira Sathe tried hard to recall whether Amit had been in the first bus with her, as Jeetu had said. She knew for sure that she had seen him get into the bus, but she was not sure whether she had seen him once they moved out. They contacted Bobby and Rajesh, Amit’s other two room-mates. Both said that Amit had got into the second bus with them, but maybe he had not sat with Jeetu.

Mr. Sathe gave a defeated sigh. "Well, that is it. Those are all the leads I can give you. I told you that your son has returned to Mumbai. He is somewhere around here, I suggest that you put an advertisement in the newspapers. I am very sorry such a thing has happened
and I hope Amit comes home soon. That boy has a lot of potential in him."

The Borkars were at a dead end. Over the next twenty-four hours, they rang up friends and relatives in Mumbai. They called up their cousin in Goa, informing him of what had happened and asking him to let them know if Amit turned up there. They filed a complaint with the police and inserted messages to Amit prominently in the newspapers.

"We have done all we can," Mukesh said to his wife.
"I suppose so," she gulped. "Where can he be?"

**Intruders**

Amit cowered in the secret room for a long time. The thunder seemed to shake the house and he knew that the rain still came down in a steady stream because he could hear it beating a tattoo on the roof. Above the noise, he heard voices—deep growls. Nothing that sounded like the Sathes or like his parents. But who could tell? This storm was drowning out all sounds and making them unrecognizable.

After what seemed like a long, long time, the storm abated. Amit uncurled himself from the corner he had sought refuge in and came out of the cupboard. He went into the bathroom to wash and get ready for bed. 'I will sleep inside my cubby hole,' he decided, not wanting the Sathes to come upon him suddenly if they decided to search the closed rooms.
Now that the storm was over, his courage returned and he did not want to be taken home in disgrace. "I am not turning back now," he spoke resolutely to himself, forgetting that a few short hours ago, he had been longing for company.

Suddenly, there was the sound of heavy feet tramping up the stairs. Amit raced out of the bathroom and into the cupboard and back into the secret room. The latches of each door were rattled, then the same heavy feet went down the stairs. A voice called out, "No sign of anyone here! Everything is locked!"

'So they are searching for me!' breathed Amit. 'But who are they? Has Papa called the police? What will they do if they find me? Send me back home after a sound thrashing, I expect. I would better wait them out.'

Amit lay on his sleeping bag and fell asleep.

He awoke early. It was not yet light outside. 'Only five o'clock,' he thought. 'I have a chance to see if the search party has gone away.'

With great care, he opened the window of the room and swung himself onto the verandah. The first floor was deserted. He crept down the main staircase, wondering whether the people who had come in search of him were still there.

'If they waited out the storm, they will be here,' he decided. He was right. Parked a few metres from the front steps were two cars. From the shadow of the stairs, Amit peered out at them. There was a white Maruti and a white Ambassador. He could not see the registration numbers because they were parked at an
angle, but he knew it was not his father's car or his uncle's.

'They don't look like police cars either, but then, why were they searching upstairs? Who are they? How do they know about me?' He could find no answers to his questions, but a moment later, he forgot the questions themselves, for, from the end of the verandah, near the kitchen, he heard someone clearing his throat and groaning as if he were reluctant to get up and face the day.

Quickly, Amit ducked into the shadows and padded up the stairs to the place where they turned. It was a good vantage point if people were on the verandah downstairs, but at this hour, there was only that one shadowy figure astir.

'I need to look into the rooms and see what is happening,' Amit decided. He backed up the stairs to his room, re-entered the secret closet and was soon descending the steep ladder at the back to the ground floor. He listened at the panel which opened into the study. There did not seem to be anyone about. Quietly, he clicked open the panel and stepped into the room. Everything was as it had been earlier. There were no signs of fresh occupation.

He tiptoed across the carpet to the door leading into the bedroom. He listened at the door. Nothing. He turned the handle and the door opened a few inches. A night light burned in a corner of the room and on the bed, Amit could see a figure. Quickly, he retreated, the way he had come.
"It must be the new tenants Mr. Sathe was speaking of. He didn't say when they were due, but who else could it be?" He sighed as he went up the ladder again to his room. 'The best thing to do today is to stay out until evening,' he decided.

Amit filled his backpack with whatever food he needed and was soon downstairs again, letting himself out of the secret door and racing for the cover of the trees. "Let anyone come and search for me!" he exulted. "I will not be there!" He set out at a brisk pace, determined not to let the presence of new tenants in the building affect his staying on until the Sathes returned in July to set up their school. 'Just four weeks to go,' he thought. 'I have enough food for that much time. I can manage.'

He marched on. The ground was wet and squelchy. His shoes got caked with mud and the bottom of his jeans were quite dirty! But he did not care. 'Freedom!' Amit thought. 'No one to bug me to wash up and eat breakfast on time and do anything I don't want to do! No tuitions, no lectures from teachers and Papa and Uncle Lokesh, no being told to behave and not be a bad influence on poor, darling Arun!'

Amit laughed aloud. The sound of his own voice startled him. It was almost like talking to a ghost, "I will have to get used to it," he said. "There will be no one to talk to but myself for some time." He felt a pang of loneliness but cast it aside determinedly.

By mid morning, Amit reached his favourite perch on top of a neighbouring hill. The going had been
tougher than usual because of last night's rain. Twice he had almost taken a tumble. Only because he had learnt so much in the past three weeks, did he manage to keep his feet.

He sat on a rock under some shade and finished the last of the cake he had helped himself to from the kitchen two days earlier. It tasted a bit stale and he threw the last few crumbs to the birds.

He lay back and drifted off into a daydream. His parents, his little brother, Didi (sister), and even the obnoxious twins were around him saying, "How did you manage, Amit? We never thought you had it in you to be so brave! Discovering a secret room, staying on your own, what a wonderful adventure!"

Amit smiled, then frowned. It could never be that way. Now that he had taken this great step and not gone home, they would all say to each other, "I told you so. That boy is trouble!"

Not one of them would say, "Do you really want to stay at the Sathes school? Let us give it a try." No. Had they ever given his ideas a hearing? What would they do it if he contacted them somehow and told them he would only go home if they agreed to allow him to return to Kasara in July?

Oh...why was he thinking of home? Was it the food that was beginning to get monotonous, bringing to mind the wonderful smell of freshly cooked vegetables and hot chapattis? Or was it that he was lonely and not used to being away from home in the middle of nowhere, with no company?
It had been a mistake, he decided at last. Not going home started as an adventure, but already I have nothing very much to do with myself. How can I last four weeks like this? How can I hide in that tiny little room without making a sound for fear of being discovered? If those tenants had not arrived it would not have been so bad. At least I could have used the stove to heat my food, walk around freely, make a noise... Hiding like this is as bad as being in prison!

It struck Amit at last, that his impulsive action had been a failure. Now he was in more trouble than ever before! How could he return home as if nothing had happened? This time no one would spare him! He went into another reverie, thinking of the worst punishments his family could devise for him...and at last, he realized that whatever they did, they could not commit him to as many weeks of silence, loneliness and furtive living as he had condemned himself to in his haste.

It took hours for him to reach his decision. At last Amit said, "I have been a prize fool! I am going home. Back to where I belong."

He picked up his rucksack and started back on the trail to the building he had left behind. 'One more night in that room and I will leave early tomorrow morning. I will not make my presence known to the new tenants...Why tell them about the secret room and the staircase? Why get them involved in my problems? No, I will slip in tonight, slip out tomorrow, and hitch a ride back.'
Feeling light-hearted at last, Amit hurried along. It was late evening when he came to the forest that surrounded the house. It was cloudy again and he wondered if there would be another storm. 'I hope not,' he thought, 'all that thunder and lightning makes me nervous especially when I am shut up in that tiny room. I feel that the house will be struck by lightning and catch fire and no one will even know that they have to save me, that I am even there.'

He stood behind the last tree and looked carefully at the back of the house. There was no movement and no one near any of the windows. Keeping low, he ran lightly and noiselessly towards the back door.

He was just a foot away from it, when he heard a loud voice—a girl's voice—crying, "Let me go! You will never get away with this! My father will get you, just you wait and see!"

Amit was so stunned that he stopped dead in his tracks and forgot that he should hide. 'Who could that be? What is happening here?'

The voice had seemed to come from the room next to the dining hall. Quickly, he removed his backpack and kept it on the steps. Then lightly, he pulled himself onto the thin ledge that ran along the back of the house and inched his way forward.

The first window he came to was a few inches ajar and through it, the voice had carried clearly to him. A light had come on now, but the curtains were half-drawn and Amit knew that if he peeped in, it was too dark outside for him to be seen.
He looked inside through the gap in the curtains. He saw a young girl, a year or two older than himself—maybe 14 years old or 15—lying on a sofa with her hands and feet tied. A man with a red scarf was untying the knots that bound her. "Eat up like a good girl," he was saying, indicating a plate he had put down beside her. "Eat up and don't waste your breath shouting and screaming. There is no one for miles around to hear you."

"That is what you think, pal," Amit muttered, trying his best to see as much as he could of what was going on inside the room.

Accidentally, his hand touched the window and it banged shut. The man straightened immediately, looked directly at Amit and moved quickly towards him.

Amit let go of the window sill, dropped lightly to the ground and raced back to the steps where he had left his bag.

The window opened completely and the man leaned out, peering into the darkness to see who was there. Then he withdrew his head and closed the window but did not lock it. 'It must have been the breeze,' he thought, forgetting his suspicions.

Just a short distance from him, within the safety of the secret stair-well, Amit was wondering frantically whether he had been seen. All thoughts of going home in the morning had left his head. The only thing he could think of now was that there was a prisoner in the house.

The girl was being held here against her will. 'What kind of tenants had Mr. Sathe given the place to? Was
this some gang of crooks? I wish I had seen them arrive,' he thought. 'How many are there? Who is the girl? Have I been discovered? How can I help her?'

A prisoner

The girl wanted to take the plate of food and fling it against the wall. She had done it with her breakfast and her lunch, but now she was so hungry that she could not bring herself to make the gesture of defiance.

The man with the red scarf had left the room and her hands were free! Quickly, she sat up, then tried to stand. Her feet were tied too, but with the help of her free hands, she stepped out of the bonds and walked to the window. She picked up a sandwich from the plate and munched it, smiling to herself despite her situation. So those creeps had learnt not to bring gravy that could mess up the room, had they!

She thought with a shudder of the other man—the leader. He had walked in, twirling that lethal looking cane of his, as the lunch was being wiped off the floor. "Do that once more and you shall clean it yourself," he had threatened. Somehow, though his face was uncovered and he did not look in the least bit brutish, he had given her the creeps. He meant what he said. All the others, who covered their faces with scarves and dirty lengths of cloth, spoke roughly and pushed her around, but did not have the same terrifying effect that the man had.
'If he has allowed me to see his face, it means he has no intention of letting me live!' she thought. 'Oh, what am I to do? How could I ever have believed that man in a driver's uniform, when he said that Daddy had sent the car for me?'

She shook off her regrets. 'I must escape. I must find a way to get out of here!' She had no idea where she was. She had been blindfolded and brought here at night in the middle of a raging storm. She had no idea how long the drive had been. For all she knew, she could be in a different town altogether!

She pushed the curtain aside and opened the window. A cool, fresh breeze touched her face. "This is not the same as Mumbai. They must have brought me really far out of the city. It is so quiet now. No traffic, nothing." She peered out into the darkness, trying to make out what kind of house she was in.

Suddenly, she was jerked away from the window. Her head snapped back and she winced with pain. It was the man with the red scarf! "Get back to the couch you brat! You are not to wander about like this!"

"Please don't tie me up again," she begged. "You said no one could help me here. I will not try to run away or even shout! Just don't tie me and gag me, please!"

He paid no attention to her pleas, just dragged her back in the direction of the couch and pushed her down on it. Again he tied her hands and feet, but he did not cover her mouth. He did not think that she would waste her energy shouting. She had got a glimpse of the utter darkness outside. What help could she hope for from
there if she shouted. He double-checked the knots, then
left the room, pulling the latch across from outside.

It was late, and the girl was tired. She had been lying
down in a cramped, uncomfortable position all of last
night and today, now she wanted to stretch out and
sleep. She wriggled about on the couch, trying to get
comfortable enough to fall asleep. Her back was in the
curve of the couch and she was facing the window.
She dropped off to sleep.

Some time later, a noise awakened her. There was
the low rumble of thunder from a distance and she
smelt rain. "Not another storm," she sighed. Closer to
her than the thunder, there was another sound. As
she stared ahead of her, she saw the curtain move.
A shadow seemed to enter, then withdraw. Now
something shining was lying on the window sill. Had
she imagined it or had a hand really put that there?

As quickly as she could, she got up and hobbled to
the window, trying not to make any sound. Yes, there
was something there, and what was more, it was just
what she needed. An open penknife! She turned, raised
herself on the tips of her toes and somehow, with her
hands still tied at the back, managed to pick up the
knife. She hobbled back to the couch and sat down.

As she worked on her bonds, she felt a ray of hope.
There was someone outside who knew she was a
prisoner and wanted to help her! That banging of the
window some time ago had not been the breeze.
Someone had been watching her! Someone who
wanted her to get away!
As soon as she freed herself, she shut the knife and put it into her pocket. Then, wondering what came next, she moved towards the window to see if the silent helper was still there. It was raining in earnest now and whoever was outside would be soaking wet!

She was barely halfway across the room when there was a hiss from the corner near the door that led directly to the dining room. It was shut now and locked and she did not know where it led. All she knew was that coiled right in front of it was a snake. A snake that looked like it meant business! She screamed.

The door burst open behind her and two men entered. She was petrified, staring in horror as the snake made its move in her direction. Suddenly she realized this was the opportunity she had been waiting for!

She backed into the feet of the leader, then turned suddenly, grabbed his stick and hit him as hard as she could. She had caught him unawares. Stunned, he stopped in his tracks to fight her off, taking his eyes off the snake. The other man, however, did not show as much presence of mind. He stared at the approaching snake stupidly and did not go to the aid of his boss.

The girl saw freedom ahead of her. She lashed out once more with the cane, then ran out of the open door and onto the verandah. She paused a moment to bang the door shut and latch it, then she ran along the verandah as Amit had done the previous morning. The lights were on and she could see where she was going.
Her legs seemed to have grown wings and she hardly felt the strain as she ran.

From somewhere, she heard pounding footsteps behind her. She did not turn. She kept running into the welcoming darkness of the trees. She forgot that she hated the dark. Now it seemed to be her friend, for it hid her from the view of the kidnappers unlike the occasional flashes of lightning that exposed her to them.

She stopped for a moment to catch her breath, but she knew those men would get her if she did not keep on going. She ran on. Suddenly, she felt the ground open under her feet and she fell headlong.

To the rescue

Amit had been watching the girl through the window as she tried first to sleep, then wake up, then spot the knife and free herself. From where he stood, clinging on to the rough stones of the wall while he balanced on the narrow ledge, he could not see what had made the girl scream the way she had. 'Shabaash!' he thought, presuming she had done so to attract the attention of the kidnappers and mislead them.

When he saw her run out, he thought she would head for the front steps, so he quickly jumped from his perch and raced towards the side of the house to get around it and reach her before she went onto the road. He could not put on his torch. He could not even keep too close to the house. Instead, unmindful of the rain, he
sought the cover of the trees before turning towards the front of the compound. 'She will never make it if she takes the road!' he thought. They will chase her in their cars and get her back.'

He need not have worried. The girl ran off the side of the verandah and headed for the jungle. Quickly, since his eyes were accustomed to the darkness, he tried to overtake her and take her to some place that her pursuers would not find. He was quick on his feet, but fear had made the girl swift and he found it difficult to catch up with her.

He realized that the girl was headed for the gully that formed the natural boundary of the land owned by the Sathes. He did not want to call out to her to warn her. All he could do was to try and reach her as fast as he could and lead her safely away. Then, a few seconds later, he heard her cry and he knew that she had fallen.

i hope she is not hurt,' he prayed. He half ran, half slid down the steep, wet slope of the gully. He reached the girl and stopped, his mind working furiously. He touched her. "Are you hurt?" he asked.

She groaned, but did not move. In the distance he could hear a shout, "Find her. We have lights. She will not get far."

Amit's heart sank. How many men were there? How could he get the girl to safety? A little to his right, he saw the deep shadow of a banyan tree. 'That is the one with the hole inside,' he thought and without waiting to rouse the girl, he put his hands under her arms and began to drag her to it.
He had been fascinated by this tree for weeks. It was a huge banyan, whose shoots had embedded themselves into the ground about six feet away from the main trunk of the tree. These had taken root over the decades and now it appeared like one broad trunk, but it had a large hollow space between the actual trunk and the web of shoots, where three or four persons could hide with ease. If he managed to get the girl there, no one would see them in the darkness—unless they inspected the tree very carefully with the light of their torches.

As Amit thought this, he worked frantically. The girl was dead weight. He thanked the Sathes for the three weeks of exercise in the outdoors which had hardened him and given him strength beyond his years. His back touched the secondary tree trunk. *Aah!* They had reached.

Quickly, he crawled underneath the low arch left by the shoots as they had dug their way into the ground. He reached out and caught hold of the girl again. The lights were at the edge of the gully now. The storm had passed and there was only a light drizzle to mask his heavy breathing. He heard an unwary man slip and then tumble down as the girl had. From the noise he made and the string of curses Amit heard, it was obvious the man had not been hurt badly, but had landed in a bush of thorns. "Serves you right!" crowed Amit silently, grateful for every extra second he got as the other men helped their comrade to his feet.

At last Amit and the girl were both inside the hidden
space. Amit could see outside for there were many
gaps where the shoots inter-twined. He knew that it
was not easy to see inside, because Jeetu had hidden
from him one afternoon and it had taken a long while
for him to be spotted—and that was in daylight!

Amit felt safe. 'We are not going to be caught,' he
thought. Somehow, he was a part of this now. He felt as
threatened by the men as he knew the girl did. Certainly,
he was as likely to be punished if they were discovered!
He crouched there next to the girl and listened to the
snatches of conversation as the men combed the gully
and the forest around. Not one of them even brought
a torch near the banyan tree, but still, Amit did not
dare to move and ease his cramped limbs.

The sounds of the search had receded into the
distance, then he saw lights coming back. "She has
gone," one of the men said. "We will have to wait until
tomorrow morning to search for her."

Another said, "She could not have gone far in the
dark on her own. She has nothing with her."

"Ah, but she has got the boss' stick, did you not
hear him shout?"

'What is so grand about the stick?' wondered Amit.
He waited for the sounds of the search to cease
completely before he ventured out. He went to the
place where the girl had fallen. If she had the stick
with her, it must have fallen somewhere here.

Quickly, making certain that his torch pointed down
and threw no light upwards that could be spotted by
anyone on the look-out, Amit swung it back and forth
in search of the stick. Suddenly, he saw it lying half inside a bush. He snatched it up and ran back to the banyan tree. He crawled back into the hollow, then, with his torch, he examined the girl for signs of a serious injury.

As he touched her and tried to raise her head, she stirred and groaned. "Ssh," he whispered. She groaned a little louder. He clamped his hand over her mouth. "It is okay. I am a friend," he said. "Please don't make a noise or both of us will be in trouble."

The girl's eyes flickered open. For a moment she stared at him in alarm. Then, when he repeated his assurance, she held her head and tried to sit up. "Ouch!" she cried, then quickly lowered her voice. "Sorry. My ankle hurts. I think I took quite a toss."

"You did! Here, let me see your ankle."

She struggled into a sitting position and leant forward to hold her ankle. "I hope it is not broken," she whispered.

"Probably not," he replied matter-of-factly. "When I broke my arm two years ago, I was screaming with pain. If you are able to talk about it without screaming, you must be okay!"

She rolled up her jeans and looked at the offending joint. It was swollen.

"Do you think you can walk?" Amit asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "How far do we have to go?"

"Back to the house."

"What?" she asked, aghast. "I am not going back
there! Who are you anyway? You said you are a friend but you want to take me back to those hoodlums! Are you the son of one of them?"

"No. I am a friend. Your friend. And I will take you to a secret place in the house. No one will find us there. Those hoodlum friends of yours didn’t find me, did they? I have been there since you arrived."

She stared at him disbelievingly. "You are putting me on. How is it that no one saw you?"

"I told you. I know a secret place. But you will have to be very quiet. If we are heard, they will storm the place and get us."

"Why do we have to go back at all? Why can we not just move on from here?"

"At this time of the night? And with your foot like that?" Amit scoffed. "They will be on our trail and they will get us! No, I think it is better to wait. If they can’t find you, they will think you have made your way back to wherever you are from and they will leave. Then, we can go back, in broad daylight."

"It is a good plan," she replied, thinking. "But how do I know you are not in league with them and will not hand me over as soon as we reach the house?"

"You are nuts!" he exclaimed. "Who do you think gave you the penknife? And if I had wanted to hand you over, I would have called out to the men when they were searching for you! Why should I take the trouble of helping you back to the house? They could have carried you or dragged you with ease!"

"Sorry," she said softly, touching Amit’s arm. "I am
sorry for doubting you. It is just that I trusted someone recently and look where it brought me!"

She explained to him how she had been met by a stranger in a smart khaki uniform at the airport and she had believed that her father had sent him. It had been so easy for him to drive away with her, luggage and all!

"Who is your father?" Amit asked.

"You would not have heard of him," she replied. "His name is R.K. Roopchand and I am Ruby. My father has got a chain of stores in Mauritius and he has come to India to open some stores here too. You will be hearing a lot about him once the shops get off on their feet."

Amit nodded. He introduced himself and then said, "Come on, let us go." He crawled out of the gap, then gave her his hand to help her out. "I can't put on the torch and you are not to utter a sound. Just hold on to my shirt and follow me."

"Will you go slow, please? My ankle really hurts."

"Lean on this," he said, handing over the stick he had retrieved from the bush. "You had it with you when you fell." He did not add that the men seemed to have wanted the stick almost as badly as they had wanted her. Why frighten her more than was necessary?

With difficulty, because of the rain, the two of them started up the slope, stopping often to allow the girl to rest. Amit knew that she was in pain for she made little sobbing sounds now and then. Even so, she did not protest or ask him to stop. In silence, they kept on moving.
It was a mere fifteen minutes climb to the house but they took over an hour to get within sight of it. The building was almost in darkness and from where they were, at the rear, they could not see whether the cars were still parked in the drive way. Maybe the men had gone in search of the girl.

Amit's keen eyes scanned the backyard. There was no one about. "We will have to move faster now," he whispered to Ruby. "Try and do it."

She nodded.

Making no noise, they crossed over to the shadow of the back door. Amit had his hand on the knob when he heard voices from somewhere in front. They were not distinct and he could not make out what was said. Swiftly, he pushed the door open and drew the girl inside. Within another few seconds, he had slid open the panel and they were in the stairwell of the secret staircase, safe from the risk of discovery.

In the pitch darkness, Amit flashed on his torch. He looked first at Ruby, who was pale and sweating with exhaustion. There was a deep gash on her forehead and she looked like she was about to faint. Amit made frantic signs to her with his eyes, flashing his torch on the steep stairs and begging her, sans words, to hold on until they reached safety. With a visible effort, the girl nodded, then started to climb the stairs slowly. She left the stick against the wall at the bottom of the stairs, and Amit let it stand there. He wanted one hand free in case Ruby needed help.

At last, they were at the top of the stairwell. Ruby
leant against the wooden beam of the doorway and slowly crumpled into a heap on the floor. Within a second, Amit stepped over her and entered the secret room. As he had done in the gully, he put his hands under her arms and dragged her into the room and laid her out on the floor. Before closing the door to the stairwell, he went down lightly and retrieved the stick.

Once safely inside, Amit lit a candle, then stepped out of the cupboard through the secret panel and went to the bathroom. He removed his sodden clothes and changed into dry ones. He went back and looked at the girl. She was soaking wet but she looked so exhausted that he did not disturb her. He covered her with his towel and he left her, but this time, when he went into the outer room, he opened the window silently and jumped out onto the verandah.

It was nearly midnight. The drizzle had almost stopped and there was only the sound of dripping from the roof. Amit wondered whether there would be anyone on guard in the verandah downstairs, as there had been the previous night. After all, now, there was nobody to be guarded! He peered over the railing and noted that one car was missing. 'So they have gone in search of her! They are not waiting for the morning,' he concluded.

Amit padded along to his vantage point at the curve of the staircase. The light on the stairs was off and a thought struck him. 'If it is dark outside, the glow of the candles I had lit may be seen through the ventilating holes.' He looked up to where the secret room was
concealed by the niche in the wall, but there was no light filtering through at all. Probably a double wall, he realized.

He kept on going until he reached the bottom of the stairs. There was no one on the verandah, but the door to the main suite was open and he could hear voices from inside. "Let them search the whole night if necessary! Tomorrow we have to send the old man some evidence that we have her in our power. See to it."

Someone came out of the main bedroom and Amit pulled back into the shadows, going back up a few stairs so that he was hidden. A man crossed the space where the staircase was located and went into another room. 'It must be the room where the girl was locked up,' thought Amit. There was the sound of a thud, then a few seconds later, the man was out again on the verandah. He ran down the steps to the second car, started the engine and left.

Without thinking twice, Amit lunged down the last six stairs and came out onto the verandah.

A risk

Amit was fully exposed to the view on the verandah. He looked around quickly to make sure that no one was about, then darted into the room from which the man had come out. He shut the door gently. 'What was that man doing in the room in which Ruby was imprisoned?' Amit wondered.
He dared not put on the light switch, instead he used his torch. A swift survey of the room showed that nothing much had changed since the time he had peeped in some hours earlier, except that now, on the floor, was a wide open suitcase. Amit knelt beside it. "He must have taken something from here to send to Ruby's father to make him believe she was in his clutches!"

He thought of the girl lying upstairs in her soaking clothes, and acting quickly, he decided. Without bothering to choose what was appropriate, he grabbed an arm full of clothes and straightened what was left inside, so that the difference would not be discovered.

With one hand holding the clothes and the other clutching the torch, Amit managed to open the door an inch and peer out. There was no one about. The lights shone brightly on the verandah, and if the leader came out of Mr. Sathe's room, the game would be up. There seemed to be no one else about. 'Everyone must be scouring the countryside for Ruby!' Amit chortled to himself.

The sound of someone clearing his throat came to Amit. 'I can't let myself be caught in this room,' he thought. In a panic, he stepped out, turned and was up the first flight of stairs, in the time it took the man with the sore throat to come onto the verandah.

From the bend in the staircase, Amit peered down at him, but all he could see was his back. The man was standing near the railing of the verandah and looking out into the darkness. 'I think it is the same man who
ran into the room when Ruby screamed.' Amit felt sure. 'Same shirt anyway.'

As noiseless as he could be, he crept up the stairs and back to his room. When he re-entered the secret closet, the girl was stirring. The flame of the candle was still burning steadily and since he had not been able to detect the glow from the stairs, he switched on his torch.

He had a good look at Ruby. She was wearing jeans and a T-shirt, both of which were muddy and soaking wet. Her arms and face were covered with scratches and when he tried to raise her head, he felt something sticky on her hair. He was worried. 'She seemed all right. She walked all the way back and climbed the stairs herself. I hope she does not get some delayed reaction and die on me!'

"Hey!" he said, in an anxious whisper, "wake up! I have brought you a change of clothes. You need to dry yourself and put some antiseptic cream on the cuts."

Ruby sat up groggily, leaning heavily on him and almost pulling him down in the process. "Everything aches," she murmured. Amit nodded sympathetically, knowing fully well that he could not do very much to relieve her pain.

"Go into the bathroom and clean up," he instructed her. Just see that you don't make a sound with the mugs. Don't even open the tap too much or the sound of running water gurgling down the drain will make the man suspicious. There is no one here but the leader—and he is on the verandah.
Ruby tried to stand but did not succeed. She sank awkwardly into the chair. "I can't. I can't," she gasped.

"Okay, stay here," said Amit. "I will get you some water in a bucket." He went into the bathroom and returned with half a bucket of water, then left Ruby alone. While she changed, he decided to go down the secret stairs and have a peek into the domain of the leader. 'It is a risk, but I must do it. I must find out who he is and why he kidnapped Ruby.'

When he clicked open the panel of the bookcase and stepped into the dark room, his heart was beating so loudly that he felt sure he could be heard outside on the verandah. 'I hope no one comes in now.' This room, he knew, was much safer than the others, because it did not open directly onto the verandah. Whoever entered would have to come through the bedroom, giving him ample time in which he could switch off his torch and hide. And there was so much to hide behind! A steel safe set at an angle in the corner opposite that part of the bookshelf that opened out, a large desk under which he felt sure he could hide and not be detected, a settee in one corner near the window, with a cover hanging almost to the floor. Yes, this was a 'safe' room.

Amit went to the desk and cautiously opened the drawer. The light of his torch shone on a gun! He was too scared to touch it. Next to it lay a wallet and Amit had no compunctions about lifting it out and opening it- He barely glanced at the wad of notes inside; what held his interest was a small notebook filled with phone numbers and names. And behind it was a driving
licence! He removed both these from the wallet and then returned it to the drawer.

"I will copy down the names and numbers," he decided, going quickly back through the secret panel and up the stairs.

He found Ruby lying exhausted on a cushion made up of his backpack and her clothes. The water in the bucket was brown with mud and blood and she looked tired and worn, the cuts and grazes making a sharp contrast to her pale body. Gently, without rousing her, he put antiseptic cream on whichever wounds he could see, then sat down to copy the contents of the address book and the driving licence. It was almost two o'clock in the morning and Amit was giddy with exhaustion. He managed to copy down three or four pages, then found the writing blurring before his eyes. As he was, with the notebook in his hand, he lay down on the floor and fell asleep.

By the time Amit woke up the next day, it was past noon and there were no sounds from the house. With a start he realized that he still had the address book and the licence with him. He noted down the name and number on the licence, then hurried down the stairs to put it back where he had found it. 'I hope it has not been missed,' he thought anxiously. 'If they suspect that there is someone around, in the house, they will not leave a stone unturned until they have found us—and we will be in deep trouble!'

For a while, he listened on the dark side of the panel. There was no sound. Then he gently clicked open the
bookshelf and peered out. No one. The curtains were drawn across the windows, but the light was not blocked out. Amit went across to the desk and opened the drawer in which the wallet and gun had lain. It was empty. No gun. No wallet. No sign to show that anything had ever been there!

Amit went to the door and opened it slowly. There was no one in the bedroom and no signs of occupation. He went to the door leading from the bedroom to the verandah and tried to open it. It seemed to be locked from the outside. For one confused moment, Amit wondered whether he had dreamt the whole thing about Ruby and the men who had kidnapped her. But in his hand was the book and the driving licence and in the secret room he had left a sleeping girl. No, he had not dreamt it. It was real.

He pocketed the two booklets and went up to the girl. "Wake up Ruby," he whispered, not wanting to take a chance and talk aloud. "Wake up, I think they have gone."

Ruby stirred but slept on. Her breathing was quick and her face was flushed. Last night she had been so pale. Amit touched her forehead and gasped. 'She has fever,' he thought worriedly, 'What am I to do? How do I make her well enough to leave this place?'

Suddenly, without warning, tears came to Amit's eyes and he choked back a sob. He remembered the last time he had been ill. He had got chickenpox and unlike most of his other classmates, he had a severe attack with high fever and boils all over his body. Through it
all, his mother had stayed with him, applying cold
compresses to his forehead and lotion to the pustules
to make them itch less.

"Oh, Ma, I miss you," he whispered, knowing that if
she had been here, or for that matter, if Papa had been
here, Ruby's illness would have been dealt with in a
matter-of-fact way and there would be nothing for him
to worry about. But he had made sure that no one in
the family knew of his whereabouts, so he was alone
and he had to cope—a gang of kidnappers who may
or may not return, a seriously ill girl, the prospect of
getting her back to her father unharmed, and last,
getting himself back home to face the consequences
of all he had done in a moment of mad resentment.

Amit moistened his handkerchief and placed it gently
on Ruby's forehead. He stared at her hopefully,
expecting the fever to come down dramatically. But
there was no change and Amit kept on moistening the
handkerchief and sponging her face and hands.

At last, pangs of hunger got the better of him and
he stopped. He opened a tin of pears and helped
himself to them. He felt too tired after the night's
activity to organize a more varied meal. 'Oh, for some
hot chapattis and pumpkin,' he sighed, licking his lips
at the thought of his favourite vegetable.

He shook himself, wondering how he could think of
his stomach when, beside him, Ruby could be dying.
'What is wrong with her?' he worried. 'How I wish
Aunty Machani was here.' Dr. Machani was the lady
who lived above the Borkars in Mumbai. She had her
own clinic across the road from their house and whenever Amit injured himself during his pranks, he could rush to her for medical attention.

She never reported to his parents unless his injury was severe enough to require rest, and she never asked him to pay any fees. He had been so angry with her when she had called on his family last year to instruct them to make sure that he did not play any strenuous games and get jerked about after his head injury. It was the first his parents had heard of his fall off the wall and they had not let him out alone for a full month after that.

Now he realized that Dr. Machani had been a good friend. Her help never had strings attached and she had only gone to his parents when his welfare had been at stake.

With a jerk, Amit came back to the present. Here he was in the middle of nowhere with no doctor to run to, and no one to help him get the sick girl to safety. 'How could I ever have thought that this was a haven?' Amit wondered. When the Sathes and the other staff members were here with all the boys and there was help in every form, nothing very exciting had happened. And now that he was in the middle of the most exciting adventure that had ever happened to him, look what a mess it was!

'I have got to do something!' Amit exclaimed, going out of the room and onto the balcony in broad daylight. He started to go down the stairs. 'I will walk to the village and get a doctor,' he decided. 'It does not matter
if I have to give away the location of the secret room and get into trouble for staying here without letting my parents know. I have to save the girl.'

He had gone down barely four stairs when he heard the sound of a car sweeping into the over-grown driveway. Instinctively, he checked himself and went back up the stairs. He knelt down outside the window that gave him access to the room he had occupied with the other three boys, and which he now considered his own. From that distance, he peered through the wooden bars of the verandah railing on the first floor. He could see nothing, for the car had already reached the front steps.

He heard two doors bang, then feet moved at a brisk pace. There were no voices—only the ominous sound of those footsteps...

**A tense wait**

Amit hopped into the room through the window and silently shut it. It took him only another few seconds to shut himself up in the closet, but even those were anxious moments. He could hear the sound of doors being unlatched and thrown open with a bang and he knew that, whoever it was, he had to see that Ruby made no noise.

She was breathing heavily now, almost in gasps, and from time to time, she would mutter something. Suppose she spoke as the people who owned those
thudding feet, came up the stairs. They would hear her! He crouched next to her, his hand near her face. He listened to the noise from below. As yet, no words had been exchanged, but he knew it could not be people who were concerned about him or Ruby, or who suspected that they were holed up in the house. Such a search party would call out to them.

No, these had to be the kidnappers—and either they had realized that Ruby had doubled back to the house, or they had discovered that the licence and address book were missing. From the noise that was being made, it was obvious to Amit that the searchers had no suspicion of his presence and that of the girl, so close to them. So they were in search of the missing items.

One part of him trembled with fear at his mistake. 'I should have put those booklets back last night! Why did I fall asleep like that?' Another part exulted. 'Those things are important. They can give them away! And I have them with me!'

Ruby clutched at the sheet that Amit had spread over her. "You can't..." she started to say, but quickly, Amit covered her mouth and her voice became a "glugghh."

"Please, please be quiet," he whispered in her ear. "They are back here and they will hear you!"

But no one came up the stairs. Maybe the men thought that they had not been upstairs so there was no possibility of the licence and address book being misplaced there.

A good half-hour had passed and now there was an uneasy silence. Amit was curious. He had not heard
the sounds of a car starting and leaving. What was happening downstairs?

Taking the risk of Ruby saying something aloud in her delirium, he tiptoed down the secret stairs and put his ear to the panel of the library. He heard someone clear his throat and push back a chair. There was the sound of a click—the door perhaps—and the footsteps came closer.

"Nothing has been left behind, sir," someone reported.

"Then it must be misplaced at home," said another voice. "Are you sure there are no signs at all that she has ever been here? There is no way that anyone can connect a random tenant with a kidnapping?"

"Absolutely sure. Everything is as it was before. It could just as well be that we had never been here."

"Well, we will do just that. Return the keys and say that we have changed our minds about renting," said Sore Throat.

"We will not get back what we have paid," reminded the second man.

"But we will not be under any suspicion either," said the other.

"There will be fingerprints everywhere," said the cautious one.

"No crime," laughed Sore Throat. "And therefore no reason for anyone to dust for fingerprints at all!"

There was a moment's pause and then the leader, Sore Throat, asked, "Are you sure that no one used the phone in this room?"
"It has been dead since the time we entered the house. That storm must have damaged the line and we can leave it as it was. All our phone calls were made from public booths in Mumbai. Untraceable."

"Fine. Let us make a move then."

There was the sound of the men moving out of the room. From above him there was a cry, "No! No!" To Amit standing in the stairwell, it sounded extra loud and he knew that Ruby had stirred. He dashed up the ladder as fast as he could and launched himself at her.

"Get away," she was saying as he stuffed a corner of the sheet in her mouth, almost making her choke in his haste.

"Sorry, sorry," he crooned, as he gently uncovered her mouth and allowed her to breathe easier.

He listened again, his heart in his mouth, but he could not hear what had transpired between the men downstairs. "What was that?" the leader had asked.

"A tile slipping on the roof maybe, or a stray bird or something."

"It sounded like a voice."

The Cautious One was not so cautious now. "Oh, these old houses always have draughts of air going through pipes and windows and creating ghostly noises," he said.

"And a ghost probably got the girl," the leader growled. "There have been no media noises about her return to her father!"

"That could be deliberate."

"Mmph."
The car started and the men left. Amit heard them. "This time for good, I hope," he said aloud. He turned his attention back to Ruby. He resumed his sponging of her forehead and hands. She seemed to be better. After a couple of hours, she stirred and opened her eyes and seemed to know him.

"Have some water," he said. When she sat up, he handed her a glass. Then he mixed some powdered milk and cocoa and forced her to drink. "You have not eaten all day," he said. "How will we get back to Mumbai unless you are strong enough?"

Ruby nodded and drained the glass obediently. "Everything aches," she murmured, lying back again. She fell asleep within minutes and Amit, feeling cooped up inside the small room, decided to go for a walk.

He emerged from the back door, and ran into the jungle, as quickly as he could, unwilling to allow any risk of detection. Once he was within the shelter of the trees, he walked at an easy pace, enjoying the cool evening breeze. It was only a short time since his last leisurely walk. How much had happened! And how much he had changed!

He still enjoyed the open spaces, but now he wanted the security of neighbours. He wanted anonymity, and he also wanted the comfort of being familiar to the people across the street!

Being alone is very difficult, he had realized.
Fugitives set out

It was three days—three long days—before Ruby was well enough to walk about the room and venture out onto the verandah alone. She still limped and the swelling had not fully gone from her ankle, but the fever had left her and the cuts and abrasions and even the ugly wound on the scalp had healed.

She was eating well now and since there was no one to get the smell of cooking from upstairs, they had figured out how to use the gas burner that had been stored in the bedroom. Ruby proved adept at cooking up a quick meal with the tinned food that was lying in the cartons.

"Where did you learn that?" asked Amit admiringly. "Is your mother a good cook?"

"I don't have a mother," said Ruby, digging into the mixture of baked beans and bacon which was garnished with crisp cornflakes since there was no bread.

Amit stopped eating and looked at her with deep sympathy in his eyes. Ruby was not paying attention when he asked, "What happened to her?" in a soft voice and a different tone altogether.

"What happened to whom?"
"Your mother."

"Oh, I don't know. I mean, she died when I was very young, but I don't know how. Papa and I have been together always. He has this chain of stores, I told you, so he is really busy, but he always has time for me. I have never needed anyone else! For the past three
years, of course, I have been in a Boarding School in England."

"Wow!" exclaimed Amit.

"What is so 'wow' about it? I am far away from home, the weather is lousy and I miss Papa. I would rather be with him."

"Maybe...maybe after all this, he will decide not to send you back." Amit was silent for a moment, thinking of the changes that came in him with this separation from his family. He had wanted it—wanted to be free and on his own—and now he realized that there was no substitute for a family. Not all the freedom in the world anyway!

"When do you think you will be well enough to leave?" he asked, hesitantly.

"How do we get out of here?" Ruby countered.

"We will walk to the main road and get a lift I guess," replied Amit, not having given it much thought despite the long hours he had to himself.

"That is crazy, Amit!" exclaimed Ruby. "Why, I thought you knew everything and could anticipate difficulties and deal with them! If we hitch a ride, we could land right back in the kidnapper's arms!"

Amit flushed with embarrassment. He had not realized that Ruby was depending on his judgement so completely. He had felt that because she appeared to be older and so much more worldly-wise, she would take the lead once she was well. That was foolish. She was a stranger to this country. She did not know where she was and in which direction she had to travel to
reach her father and she was still not completely well.

He stammered. "I...I am sorry. I had not put my mind to it. I guess I was too busy sorting myself out."

His low tone attracted her attention. "Amit!" she cried. "I am the one who should be sorry! I have been so full of myself and the kidnapping and the horrible experience of being tied up, and then that snake and everything that I never asked you how you came to be here! Why are you here alone? Is this your parents place and where are they? How do you know this area so well?"

"Hold on, don't go so fast. It is a long, winding and slightly foolish story. I mean, I have been rather stupid. Very stupid. The good part is that if I had not stayed here, there would have been no one to help you."

Amit narrated the story of the camp and his decision to stay back and not return home. When he told her how he had accomplished it, she frowned. "That was foolish. Your parents will be frantic. Right now they must be as anxious about your safety as my father is about mine."

"I wish I could have your confidence in your father's love," said Amit ruefully. "From my father's lectures and punishments, I only get the feeling that I am a great trial to him. I don't think he will really be happy to have me back. And of course, he will never be proud of me the way he is of Suhasini and Arun. But I miss home. I miss Ma. I even miss Arun and those two brats, the twins."

"What about your father? Don't you miss him too?" asked Ruby.
Amit shrugged his shoulders, unwilling to commit himself. He felt a great lump in his throat when he thought of his father and mother and their reaction to this last escapade of his. What would they have to say about his behaviour? He seemed to be on a never-ending downward spiral of bad, worse and even worse conduct! When would he win their approval?

Two mornings later, bright and early, the pair set out for home. Amit had left his sleeping bag behind and stuffed Ruby’s clothes into his backpack. "We will take turns with that," she said, as they went down the secret stairs and let themselves out of the back door. It seemed the best way to get out and not leave the house open to burglars, because, even if someone entered the back door, they would not be aware of the secret entry into the stairwell and the library.

Although it was a week since Ruby had escaped from the clutches of the kidnappers, her terrible fear of being caught again by them was not over. She did not want to walk on any main roads or paths where they were likely to meet people. "But we may get their help!" protested Amit.

"We don't need it!" declared Ruby stubbornly. "We have managed very well on our own so far, have we not?"

Amit had to agree. There had been no further intrusions on their privacy in that huge old house, and they had felt so secure that during the last two nights they had slept outside on the balcony, confident that there would be no unwelcome visitors. Out on the open highway, it was a different story.
"We could take a bus or a train," suggested Amit, "but I don't have enough money for two tickets. Do you have anything with you?"

"Nothing. Those creeps have even got my handbag with my passport."

"We can't walk all the way back, Ruby. Apart from it being too difficult for you with your ankle the way it is, it would attract too much attention."

"I know," acknowledged Ruby. "So let us get a train. We can surely evade the ticket collector. After all, we are not being deliberately dishonest—we can pay whatever we have to, when we get back to our parents."

Amit was doubtful. "Knowing my luck, I will get caught and be taken back to my family with handcuffs on and that will be the end, the very end, for them!"

He had a brain wave. "I know!" he exclaimed. "Jeetu and I used to sit on a rock near the railway line and watch the trains struggling up the ghat. Let us get onto a goods train from that spot. The trains are very slow there and we can manage it easily. In fact, sometimes they even stop here to allow other trains to pass."

"Super," enthused Ruby, and Amit warmed to her praise. She had the happy knack of making him feel good; of putting her faith in him and hereby making him live up to her expectations. 'What a strange thing that is,' Amit thought. 'I should get nervous and worried when she leaves it to me. Instead, I use my head and everything works out well.'

So now he led her through the trees in the direction of the railway tracks. The path was steep and at one
place, they had to cross the main road. There was a long line of traffic even though it was still so early in the morning.

"Where could all these people be going?" asked Ruby, from behind the trees. "To Mumbai," said Amit proudly, as if, in some way, he was responsible for attracting them to the city! "We have got to take the chance and cross over," he added. "I don't think anyone will bother about us."

"I guess not," admitted Ruby, though she still looked fearfully at the driver of each vehicle.

At last there was a lull in the traffic and the two of them darted across and down the steep path on the other side. Soon they were climbing again and finally they were at the spot Amit had spoken of. There was a curve in the railway lines and there was a steep gradient. Trains passed so slowly that anyone could walk alongside and hop on.

"Now we shall wait for a suitable train," said Amit, settling himself comfortably on the ground with his back resting against a tree.

"What do you mean?" asked Ruby.

"Well, we can't get onto a train with cattle for instance, or one which is fully open, or one which is locked and bolted. We have to wait for a nice, slow one that has space for us."

"Great!" scoffed Ruby. "Next you will say that we ought to get a permit. "Let us just hop onto the first thing that comes along."

"A short while ago you were the one who was scared
to let anyone see you, and now you say, 'Let us hop on the first thing that comes along.' Make up your mind!"

"What do you mean? Who will see us on a goods train?"

"Oh, the driver, the guard, you never know who else..." replied Amit with a mysterious air, determined not to let Ruby have the last word. Suddenly he laughed.

"What is so funny?" asked Ruby, curiously.

Amit swallowed his mirth, but a smile continued to play around his mouth. He did not say anything for a while. When he looked in Ruby's direction, he saw a frown on her face and he realized that she was waiting for a reply. He laughed again, but this time, before she could say anything, he confided, "You know, I have never talked so much to anyone in my life! You and I seem to be talking all the time!"

"Well, what is funny about that?" asked Ruby. "Everyone needs someone to talk to."

"I don't...at least I didn't...and maybe I would not in the future."

"That must be a very lonely state of affairs," sighed Ruby, settling herself beside Amit affectionately. "Not to have friends around or someone to share your thoughts with is awful."

"Oh, I have plenty of people around to talk to—I just don't enjoy talking to them."

"But you have enjoyed talking to me—at least you have seemed to," said Ruby.

"I guess that is because we have shared so much together in such a short space of time—and you are
easy to talk to. No one in my family is easy to talk to. They expect too much out of me. Even silly Arun, my kid brother, expects me to be a hero which I can't be."

There was a surprising vehemence in Amit's voice.

"Maybe you have been trying too hard," Ruby said after a pause. "Maybe the things which you thought they wanted from you did not come naturally. Look at the way you have been with me! Are you not a hero? Look at the way you have been a winner against the kidnappers! Is that not heroic too?"

Amit stared at her, wondering if she was teasing. "We have not won yet!" he said shortly, "we have still to get home safely."

"You know," said Ruby chattily, "what I like best about you is that you don't think you are a great guy for outwitting those creeps. You keep saying 'we' when actually, it has all been your effort and those fellows don't even know that you exist! I think that is some achievement!"

Amit was too embarrassed by Ruby's praise to say anything. "I will just have a look around," he said after some time. Getting up, he moved to keep the topic away from the past week in the Camp House. He could not agree with Ruby. Somehow he knew that he would come a cropper. He had no business being in that house and was in for a lot of trouble. No one else would have the same opinion as the kind-hearted Ruby, who was so grateful for his company that she did not see the dark side of his nature. He had told, how he had come to be in the camp in the first place, and he had told
about his family, but she did not think he would get into trouble once he got home. She thought as in her case he would be welcomed with open arms.

The hours dragged for the two children. Several passenger trains passed, but they were too scared to risk being seen by people. Ruby talked about her school in England and Amit enjoyed listening to her. She was two years older than Amit and a year senior. They exchanged views on the syllabus of each school. They found that in the middle of a perfectly normal conversation they would strongly disagree on a minor point, and just as abruptly laugh in agreement over something as trivial.

"You would be a great brother to have!" exclaimed Ruby. Before Amit could reply, there came a sound of a train chugging up the steep slope.

"It is late afternoon," said Amit, looking at his watch. "Maybe we should not get onto this train. We will reach after dark and be stranded in Mumbai."

"Can we not get home safely during the night?"

"I have never travelled by bus or train on my own at night. Maybe we should better spend the night here and try our luck tomorrow."

Ruby pouted, but said nothing. Amit peered out from the shelter of the trees. He could see that the approaching goods train was just the type he had been waiting for. He made a quick decision. "Let us give it a try!" he cried excitedly. "We can risk reaching at night, after all. Come on, let us go!"

As he spoke, he was busy lifting his backpack and
shrugging into it. He picked up the stick and looked back once to see if Ruby was following, then pelted down the slope to the railway line.

**Back in the city**

The engine had already passed and no one had seen them run towards the train. Its speed was at the minimum, but Amit now saw that they could not jump in as easily as he had imagined. There were no leg holds for the carriages. They would have to cling to the open door and use their arms to lever themselves in. On a stationary train it was possible; on a moving train it was impossible even when it was moving as slowly as this one. Would they make it?

Amit was slowing down, ready to tell Ruby to forget about it a/id wait for another train, when the wagons grounded to a halt. "Quick, this is our only chance," he gasped to Ruby. "Come on, grab hold and get in!" She was limping after her run, but she managed to pull herself in.

Amit threw the stick behind her and the backpack too. Then he grabbed hold of the door and swung himself in. He looked around in the carriage into which they had landed. There was straw on the floor and in one half, gunny bags filled with something were stacked waist-high. It was fairly clean and since the doors were open on both sides, there was a cool breeze blowing through.
"How long will it take to reach Mumbai?" asked Ruby very tiredly.

"Just a couple of hours," said Amit, leaning against the sacks and making himself comfortable. It was an hour before the train began to chug along at a snail's pace. Twice it stopped for hours at a stretch. Each time Ruby asked, "Have we reached?" but when Amit looked out, they were not yet in the city. Finally the slow, gentle motion of the train rocked them to sleep, and they did not know when they arrived at the shunting yard.

It was the heat that woke them. Dark clouds had gathered in the sky, but there was no rain. It was sweltering inside the carriage, although it was only nine in the morning. "Wake up, wake up!" said Amit, shaking his companion's shoulder. She stirred in her sleep, then opened her eyes and looked confusedly at him. "Where are we?" she muttered.

"Almost home I guess," he replied, peeping out of the wagon. In the distance, there were voices, and above that, there was the roar of city traffic. "Yes, we are closer home," he repeated, confident they would soon be able to find their way back. "Let us get a move on. Someone may come to unload the wagons and catch us."

Quickly, Amit began to round up their belongings. He dragged the backpack to the door and left it there, returning for the stick which had landed in the opposite corner where he had thrown it in last evening. As he lifted it, he saw that the top had been knocked off. It must have hit the hard side of the carriage with more
force than he had realized when he had tossed it in.

Suddenly he stopped. The stick was hollow! There was something soft stuffed inside! "Hold on a minute," he said to Ruby. "Let me have a look at this."

Gently, he pulled out a thick, soft piece of leather, rolled into the hollow of the stick. His heart was beating fast. What was it? Unrolling it gently, Amit gasped. Ruby just stared at what lay in the palm of his hand—a small heap of some very shiny stones.

"Diamonds!" breathed Amit. "They have got to be diamonds! Why else was the leader so angry because his stick was gone?"

Ruby was puzzled. She had no idea what Amit was talking about. "Is this the same stick that I grabbed from that creep?" she asked in amazement.

"Yes," breathed Amit. Quickly, he told her what he had seen through the window and how he had heard the men talk about the stick, and so he had gone to retrieve it from where it had lain in the bush, after she had fallen into the gully and passed out. "Now I am frightened!" exclaimed Amit, looking out of the wagon to make sure no one was about. "How do we get these things home?"

"Here give them to me," said Ruby, stretching out her hand for the diamonds. She pulled out the handkerchief Amit had given her earlier and dropped the glittering stones into it, tied two knots and thrust the little bundle into the front pocket of her jeans saying, "We can throw the stick away now and avoid getting spotted."
"No, I can't do that. We will have to show the stick to the police. We had better keep it. It is our evidence."

"Forget all that," said Ruby. "Let us just get home and let our fathers sort it out."

She alighted from the carriage and Amit followed with his backpack in one hand and the broken stick in the other. In one corner of the yard, a group of men were busy doing something. They paid scant attention as Amit and Ruby made their way out onto the road.

Amit heaved his backpack on to his back and tucked the stick into his belt. They emerged onto a busy road. Amit could not make out where they were. Trusting his instinct he guided Ruby to the left and began walking slowly under the trees. "Let me come to a familiar place, then we can ride a bus and go home."

"Your home or mine?" asked Ruby.

"Where is your father staying?" countered Amit. He did not want to tell Ruby this, but he would much rather take her back to her father, then go home and face the music with his family. He was not so sure he would not get a sound thrashing before any questions were asked! How could he take that in front of Ruby?

"Some hotel or the other," replied Ruby thoughtfully. "I didn't pay much attention to what he told me before I left, although I have it written somewhere in my purse..."

"And the purse is somewhere with the kidnappers now," Amit finished for her.

"Yes," sighed Ruby. "You see, Daddy said he would be at the airport for me and I never for a moment thought he would disappoint me!"
Amit stopped suddenly. "I know this road. Gaurav stays somewhere here. I have been here before! If we take a few short cuts, we will be home in no time."

Amit had forgotten that when he had gone to Gaurav's house eight months ago, he and Milan had been training for the Annual Sports events of the school. They had run all the way in fifteen to twenty minutes. Now, Amit had his backpack, which seemed to grow heavier by the minute. To make the situation grave, Ruby's ankle was aching and her limp soon became more pronounced and she lagged behind. Amit was also increasingly aware of the package she carried in the front pocket of her jeans.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "Do you think you can walk just a little more?"

She nodded gamely, but she was tired. Neither of them had anything to eat or drink since last evening when they had jumped onto the train. All through the night, while they were asleep, the lack of water had not bothered them, but now, in the sweltering heat of Mumbai, they felt dehydrated and parched with thirst.

Amit dug into his pocket and pulled out his purse. After a quick look he spoke. "I have thirty-seven rupees. We can stop at that shop and have a drink and something to eat. You will feel better."

Ruby nodded, too tired to speak. The two of them walked into the small general store and Ruby sat down on the only stool available. She opened out her hair and ran her fingers through it, all the while wishing
that she had a brush to untangle the knots and get her hair back into shape.

She did not notice the man in uniform who stared hard at her as she took the cold drink gratefully from Amit and downed it almost in one gulp. Amit handed her a packet of buns and whispered, "It is all we can afford. Eat it."

Neither of them had tasted bread during their hard days together at the camp. Now they bit into the fresh buns with relish and savoured every morsel.

Someone entered the shop and asked for a packet of cigarettes. Amit did not turn and the man ignored him. But unknown to the children, he was watching Ruby in the mirror. He took out his wallet to pay for the cigarettes, and quietly withdrew from it a newspaper cutting. He looked down at it, while pretending to be searching for a suitable note with which to make payment.

As he stood there, he seemed to reach a decision, for when Amit and Ruby left the shop, he waited a few moments, then followed them.

**On the trail**

Amit was supporting Ruby gently as they walked. He had his hand under her elbow. She lagged behind a bit and he had to keep adjusting his speed. To the man who was watching Ruby so keenly, it seemed that Amit was forcing her along. The man wanted to
intervene, but he checked himself. 'Let me be very sure,' he thought.

P.C. Mohite was accustomed to following suspects and these two children made no attempt to cover their tracks. Who was the boy and what was he up to? Was the girl drugged? Was she really the Roopchand girl? He had put the newspaper cutting into his wallet just the previous day, confident that the girl was dead and her body would not surface on his beat. No, such things did not happen in crowded areas like this. They happened on lonely roads and in lonely stations.

And yet, here it was, happening in front of him. The Roopchand girl was being led somewhere by a slip of a boy and she was not protesting violently. He was pretty sure it was the Roopchand girl. She had a slight accent when she thanked the boy for the cold drink. What were children coming to nowadays? According to the newspapers, her father had got a phone call demanding a ransom for her, but to him, it seemed as if she went willingly. The evidence was before him. She had seen him in the shop. If she wanted his help, why had she not signalled to him.

The children ducked into an alley and constable Mohite hurried behind them. He could be wrong, of course. This may not be the Roopchand girl. Yet, why let opportunity slip out of his fingers. A reward of one lakh was not something to be scoffed at!

Amit was urging Ruby to hurry. "There is a policeman behind us. I don't want to be caught. So let us hurry!"

"Why should we? Having a policeman on our heels
is a lot safer than having some gangsters following us," said Ruby, reasonably. "He makes me feel safe. Let us stay within sight of him."

So they kept going and constable Mohite plodded behind, convinced by the behaviour of the children that they had something to hide. At last, they entered the gates of the Housing Colony and Amit bumped straight into Mr. Shah!

His glasses went flying and were shattered. "Oh, No!" exclaimed Amit, certain now that there would be hell to pay. "Of all the people to meet, why did it have to be Mr. Shah," he wondered.

As the older man groped on the ground for his spectacles, Amit pulled Ruby with him and ran behind the first building towards the rear ones, where his home lay. "Wait, wait, how can you run off like that?" Ruby asked. "Let us stay and help him! At least let us apologize."

"You don't know Mr. Shah. He makes you feel like a criminal for every little thing you do! I am not going to hang around there to listen to a lecture and get dragged home by my ear! I will just say it was not me and that is it!"

Ruby was silent. She was seeing a different Amit and she did not know what to say.

Constable Mohite came hurrying into the parking area where Mr. Shah was muttering to himself. "That boy will be the death of me! Did you ever see such unruly, disgraceful behaviour? He knocks my spectacles off and then runs away! No apologizing, nothing."
Mohite helped Mr. Shah to locate the fallen spectacles and asked, "Who is that boy? Where does he stay?"

"That is Amit Borkar. He is the hooligan of this colony and a disgrace to his family!" Suddenly he stopped and peered at the policeman, balancing the broken spectacles on his nose. "Why do you ask? Is he in trouble with the police now? I will not be surprised at all. Why, only a few days ago, I heard a rumour that he was missing from home. My wife said he had run away. But there you are. Such children always turn up again. Bad pennies."

Mr. Shah went on muttering to himself and it took a while for constable Mohite to find out from him the block in which Amit lived. He helped Mr. Shah back to his own first floor flat and then hurried away in the direction of Block D. He looked through the list of names that was painted on a board that hung near the lift, inside the building. "D 5/1 and 2. Now it is time to get to the bottom of this," he said.

Home at last

Ruby allowed herself to be led into the lift and up the fifth floor. As they ascended, Amit seemed to undergo a change. His air of confidence melted. He began to slouch and dig his hands into his pockets as if he would like to disappear into those dark pouches too.

Ruby touched his arm. "Are you not happy to be returning home? We are safe at last!"
Amit did not reply. Yes, she was safe. And so was he. At least from the kidnappers. But what would his father have to say? And his uncle? And added to that, there was Mr. Shah ready to cause an uproar all over again. It had been an accident after all! But Mr. Shah would never look at it that way.

They were in front of the door. Amit put his hand up to ring the bell, but did not press the button. Ruby pressed it instead, giving him a V for Victory sign.

The door opened and his mother stood here. For a moment, she just stared at the two children. Then she gave a small shriek and folded her son into her arms. "Amit! Amit!" she sobbed, "we have been so worried about you. What happened?"

She has not said, 'Why did you run away?' Amit thought, and tears of relief, happiness and regret came to his eyes.

Anju closed the door and without inquiring about Ruby, took the two of them into the dining room. Breakfast was long over, but a stooped figure bent over a cup of coffee. Hearing the excitement in his wife's voice, he looked and stared. He could not believe his eyes.

Amit stopped. His mother was speaking fast, her words tumbling out in excitement! "See Mukesh. He is back. My Amit is back. I knew he would. I knew it!"

The terrible anxiety of the past week had left dark circles of sleeplessness around her eyes, but now Mrs. Borkar was smiling and her eyes were shining with happiness.

Mukesh Borkar stood up. He did not speak. He could
not speak. He just held out his arms and Amit rushed into them, blinded with tears. "I am sorry Papa, I am sorry," he cried.

There was a long silence as the two adults clung to their child. They had feared that they would never see him again, and now, here he was, none the worse for his disappearance.

At last Amit spoke again, "I am hungry, Ma. Both of us are hungry."

His parents looked at Ruby and for the first time noticed how tired she seemed. "Come and sit here," Anju Borkar said, drawing out a chair and making Ruby comfortable on it. "I will just get some parathas for both of you." She hurried to the kitchen before Amit could introduce her properly to Ruby. Just then the doorbell rang.

Both children gasped and gave a start—Ruby, because she was still afraid of the kidnappers, and Amit, because he thought Mr. Shah was out there waiting to complain about him.

Mr. Borkar went to the door. A moment later, he returned to the dining room looking puzzled. He stared hard at Ruby. "Are you Roma Roopchand?" he asked. She looked up at him and nodded.

Before he could question her further she said, "I would like to contact my father and tell him I am safe." When Mr. Borkar did not reply she added, "I was kidnapped and Amit saved me. I owe my life to him."

Mr. Borkar looked even more puzzled. "I can't figure out exactly what happened with the two of you, but
there is a policeman outside who says that he recognized you from the photographs in the newspapers. He wants to know what you are doing here."

Ruby laughed. "It is such a long story and I am so hungry!"

Mrs. Borkar stepped out of the kitchen with two steaming plates. Ruby took hers eagerly, then said, "Amit seems to have become tongue-tied since he returned home; so I will tell you what happened to me as we eat. That will give you an idea of what Amit has been up to."

Mukesh Borkar called constable Mohite in. The three adults listened as Ruby explained how she had been kidnapped and taken to the house on that ghat. The way she told it, Amit was a knight in shining armour and a hero to outdo all other heroes. Amit squirmed in his seat, growing red in the face with embarrassment. He could not say anything as his mouth was full!

Ruby reached the part where the kidnappers had left the house for good, when the doorbell rang again. Mrs. Borkar went to see who it was this time, and before the others knew what was happening, Mr. Shah had burst in, waving his broken spectacles and shouting, "That boy! Your boy! He deserves a thrashing!"

Very firmly, Mukesh Borkar led him away, back to the front door and out of the flat. "My boy, who in your opinion deserves a thrashing, has saved a young girl's life. We can talk about your problems later. Maybe next week, when you are able to talk about it without
losing your temper. Right now, we have too much on our minds. Good day!"

Mr. Shah was flabbergasted! What was Mr. Borkar up to, condoning the behaviour of that son of his and pushing him out of the flat? He stomped into the lift and made off, too angry and amazed to do anything but open and close his mouth.

Inside, Ruby continued with her story. Then she brought out the handkerchief with its glittering contents and Amit presented the driving licence and address book. Constable Mohite asked to use the phone, and within what seemed like minutes, there were three more policemen inside the flat, taking down notes and asking for frequent repetitions of their tale.

Ruby's father arrived and there was a joyful reunion between the two of them. Ruby introduced Amit as her rescuer and Mr. Roopchand hugged him and hugged Mukesh Borkar as well. "Thanks to you I have my precious girl back, safe and sound. She means more to me than everything and anything else in the world!"

The Borkars understood exactly what he meant because they had gone through a similar experience as he had that week, when they had not known where their child was. The son they had considered such a great trial had suddenly dropped out of their lives, and their sense of loss had been terrible. Now they knew that he had deliberately stayed back at the camp without anyone's knowledge—and they knew why he had done it. He had just not thought himself good enough to be a part of this high-achieving family. Now it was up to
them to make him feel loved and wanted and needed; not to put pressure on him unthinkingly, by holding up the achievements of his siblings for him to follow. Amit was in a class by himself, as he had so wonderfully shown. He had done what few others could have!

It was well beyond lunch time before the excitement died down and the police left. Amit had earned such wholesome praise for his actions that he was in a daze. He had returned home with trepidation, expecting to be scolded and berated for having stayed behind at Kasara without informing anyone, and for deceiving the Sathes. Instead, he had been received with more love than he felt he rightly deserved!

That evening, when Amit's aunt and uncle returned from the shop, they too were full of admiration. "Our Amit has proved himself," they said. "We will have a lot to tell Arun and your cousins when they get back from Goa. You will be like a movie star for them!"

Ruby—or Roma as her real name was—had left with her father, but she was back again the next morning. The leader of the gang, prominent businessman Shankar Sahu, was arrested. It had long been suspected that he was connected with smuggling operations and other crimes, yet there had never been any evidence against him. But there was now, his little address book revealing a gold mine of information, and he was in custody. Conflict of business interests had prompted him to kidnap Mr. Roopchand's daughter. He thought that her disappearance would compel Mr. Roopchand to change his plans for setting up stores in his 'beat.
The Sathes had also been brought into the picture by the police, for their house had been used for the crime. Amit and Ruby were taken back to the house on the ghat to show the police exactly what had happened and where. The rooms were dusted for fingerprints and quietly, in a free moment, Amit showed Mr. Sathe the secret room, the secret stairs and the various entrances and exits.

"It will remain our secret, Amit," Mr. Sathe said. "I will not reveal it to any of the other children who come to our school when we start in July."

Without thinking, Amit breathed, "Oh, sir, can I join too? Please! It is what I had planned to wait for, here. I know I was wrong to have hoodwinked Mrs. Sathe by sneaking off the bus, and I was even more wrong to think that I was unwanted at home; but I really and truly wanted to stay and study with you. I will be a model pupil, I promise. Not like the way I play around in my present school."

Mr. Sathe laughed. "You better say all this to your parents, Amit. Mrs. Sathe and I will welcome you to our school if your parents allow you to join us."

Amit was ecstatic. Step one was over. Now for step two. To his surprise, someone else was one step ahead of him. Ruby had already convinced her father to let her stay on in India for a year. "I will stay with Amit," she had said. "I have always wanted a brother and now I have one. We can go to the Sathe School together and do so much else. It is a wonderful outdoor life, Papa."
Mr. Roopchand was not able to refuse his daughter anything and it was settled—a year with the Borkars and the Sathes. It was Mukesh Borkar who suggested it to Amit. "Ruby will be staying in India for a year with us. She will go to school with you and we would like both of you to attend the new school the Sathes are setting up. It is all up to you."

It was a dream come true for Amit. "Oh, yes, yes, Papa! I will love it. This is what I have always wanted!"

He ran out of the room to tell Ruby what had been decided and together, they flew round and round the balcony, shouting their happiness to everyone.

"See you at Kasara ghat, folks!"
Now or Never.
An opportunity, it is said, knocks only once.
Hesitant, apprehensive, Amit grabs it...
The fallout is a typical case of cause and effect.
Yet, could the problem have been solved any other way?
How much was it the work of Ruby, an altruist?
Read on...the happenings form part of an exciting camp adventure!

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