These stories are largely a collection made from the prizewinning entries from the Competition of Writers of Children's Books organized by Children's Book Trust.

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Text typeset in 13/16 pt. Bookman Old Style

© by CBT 2005
Reprinted 2006

ISBN 81-7011-970-7

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Published by Children's Book Trust, Nehru House, 4 Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi-110002 and printed at its Indraprastha Press. Ph: 23316970-74
Fax: 23721090 e-mail: cbtnd@vsnl.com Website: www.childrensbooktrust.com
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It was summer and the mango tree was heavy with plump, ripe mangoes. The parrots were happy. They cackled noisily as they pecked the delicious fruit. Mrs. Popatlal and Mrs. Totaben were chatting over a particularly sweet one when Mithu, Mrs. Totaben's son said, "Mummy, we have a new neighbour."

"This place is indeed getting too crowded," grumbled Mrs. Totaben. "Very soon there will be more parrots than mangoes."

"The new neighbour is not a parrot," said Mithu. "Must be a crow then," retorted his mother. "What is the difference? They eat mangoes too."

"It is not a crow either," said Mithu. "It is a funny, brown bird. It stays there," he said pointing to a small hollow close to the trunk.

"Inside the tree? What kind of a bird stays inside a tree?" asked Mrs. Totaben.

"You must be mistaken, Mithu," said Mrs. Popatlal. Mithu was not mistaken. That night, when all the birds were fast asleep, they were shaken out of their feathers by a deep, low call.
"TOO...WHIT...TOO...WHOO!"

"That must be the new bird," said Mithu to his mother. "No, Mithu, a wild animal, probably," said his father, Totabhai. "I will see who it is." He ruffled his feathers self-importantly. He happened to be the Chief Parrot. Totabhai stalked onto the branch and peered into the darkness. He could see nothing. Then, he nearly jumped off the branch in fright.

"TOO...WHIT...TOO...WHOO!" came the call again. "WH...who is that?" he quavered.

"I am Shri Ullunath, the owl, pleased to make your acquaintance," said a deep voice politely. "Well, I am certainly not pleased to meet you," retorted Totabhai still trying to focus in the dark. "What kind of a bird are you? Making such a racket at night. Waking all of us up."

By now, many other parrots and a few crows had gathered. "Yes, yes," they agreed, "this will not do. We cannot allow you to stay here. This is our tree."

"I am afraid that is not true," replied the owl quietly. "Trees belong to all birds. To all living things, in fact. This tree is as much mine as yours."

The parrots were taken aback. They had expected the newcomer to cow down but he was standing up to them. "Well, you shall not hoot then," said Totabhai, trying to regain some of his dignity.

"I am sorry for having disturbed all of you," said Ullunath. "I will try not to do so in future." Saying this, he flew off into the night. The birds settled back to sleep.

Next morning, Mithu went up to the hollow. There was no sound from within. He peered in. Ullunath was fast asleep, his head tucked into his feathers snugly. He did not emerge the whole day.
"You mean he sleeps all day?" asked Mrs. Popatlal.
"What did you expect?" sniffed Totaben scornfully. "All that hooting at night must have made him tired."
"Teacher Parakeet said owls are very wise birds," chipped in Mithu.
"Huh!" said his mother, "how can someone who sleeps all day and hoots all night be wise?"

That night, Ullunath did not hoot. But the birds did not sleep anyway because they wanted to catch a glimpse of him. They were not disappointed when Ullunath emerged. All that was visible in the darkness was his squat form with a triangular head and square shoulders.

It was only three nights later that they got a good glimpse of him. There was full moon and the grove was bathed in moonlight. Mithu had been waiting for this chance. Peeping out of the nest, he saw Ullunath perched on a nearby branch. He had a speckled, tawny brown body with a lighter brown chest. But, his most arresting feature was his eyes. Huge. Round. Amber. Deep. He looked very knowledgeable. Mithu woke Kala up and they both stared at the owl.

Meanwhile, Mithu’s mother finding him missing from the nest got up in alarm. She twittered angrily when she spotted him and Kala, but Mithu silenced her and pointed at Ullunath. Mrs. Totaben stared at the owl for a minute, then hurried back to shake her husband awake.

"Looks like that blighter won’t let us have any sleep, one way or the other," grumbled Totabhai, ambling over to see the owl.

Kala too woke his parents up and soon many birds had gathered to see Ullunath. Hearing their muffled twittering, Ullunath turned to look at them. "Oh, hello!" said he. "Glad to meet all of you. Unfortunately, all of you are asleep when I come out of my hollow."
"You bet!" said Totabhai rudely, "we are not crazy to stay awake all night."

"Ah! but I have to," replied Ullunath. "That is the only time I can hunt for food."

"What do you mean?" asked Parakeet, puzzled.

"Well, I prey on rats who scurry about at night," replied Ullunath.

"Ugh!" said Mithu.

"Why don't you eat mangoes instead of rats like the rest of us?" asked Kala.

"I prefer rats," answered Ullunath.

"Prefer rats to mangoes? Now, I am convinced you are crazy," declared Totabhai.

"That is all right," replied Ullunath benignly. "Were you to live in a tree full of owls like me, they would find you pretty odd too."

"We are not odd," bristled Parakeet. "We are far superior birds. Look at your dull feathers and compare them with our lovely, bright ones."

"My friend," explained the owl patiently, "the feathers that you are so proud of are so coloured to help you merge with the green leaves of branches you live on. I nest, in the hollow of the tree trunk. God coloured us according to our respective habitats so that we may be camouflaged and not easily spotted by our enemies."

It all made a lot of sense to Mithu, but the rest of the clan seemed unimpressed.

"Now," continued Ullunath, "since all of you are already awake, please allow me to hoot a while!" Saying this, he let out his low whistling call of "TOO...WHIT... TOO...WHOOP!" and flew off.

The next day, something happened that had everybody so worried that they forgot all about their new neighbour.
Polly Parrot was the first to raise the alarm. Many ripe mangoes had fallen to the ground the previous evening. The birds were looking forward to eat them the next day. When Polly went to nibble one for breakfast, she found that each and every mango had been gnawed through. "Oh! My goodness! The Rat Brigade has been here again," she screeched. Hearing her, all the birds started looking around. They surveyed the dozens of mango seeds scattered on the ground. Tiya, the oldest of all parrots, shook his head in dismay.

The birds were inconsolable, to lose so much of the ripe fruit to the rats! The worst was that the remaining mangoes would only ripen after a few days. What would they eat until then? And what if those, too, fell to the ground and the rats finished them before the birds could? Everyone was worried.

It was Kala who came up with a solution. "The other day, Ullunath said he preys on rats. Why not ask him to tackle the rats?"

"Terrific idea!" said Mithu. "Let us find my father and tell him."

Totabhai pooh-poohed the idea. "What can that oddball do for us?"

But Tiya and Parakeet felt otherwise. "The plan is worth a try. We could drop a few ripe mangoes to the ground and then let Ullunath attack the rats when they come."

It was decided that the three elder parents would approach the owl at once for his help.

"Do you really think he will help us?" said Parakeet, uncertainly. "After all, we have hardly been friendly to him."

"No harm in trying," said Tiya.

As expected, Ullunath was asleep. When the three parrots clicked their beaks in unison outside his hollow, he
emerged. His feathers were ruffled and he looked annoyed. "What is it?" he asked gruffly.

"We need your help," said Totabhai meekly.

"What! You need my help?" asked Ullunath sarcastically.

Totabhai squirmed. "Yes, please," he replied humbly.

The parrots then proceeded to explain their plan to the owl. He heard them out patiently. Finally, he said. "I may help you, but on one condition."

"What is it?" they asked apprehensively.

"I should be allowed to hoot every night," replied the wise Ullunath.

The birds heaved a sigh of relief. A little disturbed sleep was a small price to pay for getting rid of the rats.

Over the next few days, as the mangoes ripened, the birds dropped them to the ground. At night, they waited in suspense. After what seemed like ages, they heard the rustle of the rats.

Ullunath was ready. He soared, plunged and came back, looking content.

"There, I think he has eaten one rat," whispered Mithu. Again and again Ullunath swooped and struck till the rats went scurrying off.

The next night the rats did not come. The parrots were overjoyed.

That night, when Ullunath hooted, "TOO...WHO...TOO...WHIT...!" the parrots did not mind at all.

They chorused happily, "We love you, Ullunath!"
The Apricot Tree

M.S. Mahadevan

I have lived in the camp for close to a year now. When I remember my old home, somehow I love it more than I ever did. It was spring when we left. And the barren, grey mountains were slowly turning green. The apricot tree which my grandfather had planted as a young man was heavy with ripening fruit.

Abba and Usman were making last minute arrangements before taking our flock to the high pastures. I begged to go along with them. "Not this year," Abba had said firmly. In a kinder voice he had added, "Maybe next summer." Usman was fifteen. I was eleven. It seemed like I would have to wait forever to be as old as him. Meanwhile, there was school to attend, and Ammi and Habiba to look after.

"They are your responsibility," Abba had said proudly.

Usman, securing bags of barley flour, salt and dried meat, put them onto a mule’s back, had given me a sympathetic smile. I envied him the days of adventure and freedom that lay ahead. While I would be in school, cramming useless stuff like tables and grammar, he would be out in the mountains, fishing in the streams, sleeping under the stars. I watched them go till the flock was just a cloud of
dust in the distance and the barking of dogs, an echo in my head.

Four days later, the first shell landed on our village. It came across the ridge and shattered the police chowki. The third period had just begun. Our teacher Sadiq Ali was at the blackboard when there was a loud, dull BOOM! The walls shook. The blackboard toppled off its stand. Sadiq Ali’s spectacles fell off his nose. The rest of us looked at each other in astonishment. Before Sadiq Ali could stop us, we ran out of the school and up the road to the village square. We had barely crossed the grocery shop when another shell landed on it. When the dust settled we saw that one wall had a big hole. Through it we could see the owner cowering behind a sack. He was covered from head to toe with its contents—flour.

The bombardment continued for another hour. Six shells hit our village. Several more fell on the highway and the river beyond. A giant spray of water splashed every time a shell landed in the river.

In the late afternoon, a jeep roared up into the village square. A man got up on top of the bonnet and yelled through a loudspeaker, "You are informed that this village is under attack by the enemy (as if we did not know that already!). This is a war zone. For your own safety, you must evacuate your homes. Take only the bare essentials. Go to the camp at Drass. Make sure that all women and children leave the area." He jumped off, got into the jeep and roared off in the direction of the next village.

Our neighbours, old Suleiman and Amina refused to leave. Chacha was ninety-five years old. "I can't leave my animals behind," he said angrily. "Who will feed them?"

"Fine then, if you are not going, neither am I," Chachi said emphatically.
"Don't be stubborn," *Ammi* pleaded. "This is a matter of life and death. Come along with us."

"You go, *beti*" *Chachi* said. "Your children are small. When Arshad *miyan* and Usman come home, we will tell them where you have gone, We will take care of your animals too."

*Ammi* was unhappy about leaving them behind. But what could she do? There was hardly any time. The villagers had begun to leave; their belongings—pots, pans and bags of rations—piled on mule backs or on their own heads. "Take your school books," *Ammi* said. I was hoping she would forget but I knew better than to argue. She let Habiba take her favourite doll and a new pair of shoes. *Ammi* left a letter for *Abba*.

We joined the straggly line heading for the town. The narrow road was chock-full of army trucks loaded with soldiers. In the fields next to the river, men were scurrying about carrying boxes of ammunition, pitching tents and setting up big guns. We made slow progress. Habiba started to complain: her new shoes were pinching. She wanted to take them off and throw them away. *Ammi* picked her up and carried her. By sunset we had covered only three kilometres.

We spent that night in the open. It was very cold. The soldiers did not allow us to light fires. Habiba snuggled with *Ammi*. I had my own blanket. I thought I would not sleep a wink. It was a clear night. Around us, a ring of jagged peaks rose up to meet the stars. Somewhere in those peaks were *Abba* and Usman, thinking we were safe in our beds! Would I ever see them again? Before I knew it, the sun was up and *Ammi* was shaking me awake. She looked tired, as if she had not slept a wink. She gave me the last of the *naans* to eat. It was hard and dry but I ate all of it.
"Hurry," Ammi said, "we must be on our way before the shelling starts."

We passed two villages. They were totally deserted. There was not a single house without a roof or a wall missing. The ruined village made me sad. Everyone was quiet; even Habiba. Just as we passed the last house, there was a scuffling sound. Habiba shrieked. A big, black head stared at us dolefully out through a broken wall. It was a yak. It had a little brass bell that tinkled when it shook its head. It was a cheerful sound. The yak nuzzled its head against Ammi. Its eyes seemed to plead.

"All right," said Ammi, "we won't leave you behind. Come along." She made Habiba and me sit on the yak's back and led it by the rope around its neck. The yak was smelly, but I didn't mind. I was happy to rest my feet. Habiba started to sing. We passed a hillside covered with yellow roses. Habiba made me get down and pluck a few for her.

When the sun was just over the ridge, the shelling began. The first one landed just a few hundred yards away. It hit an army convoy truck. A huge ball of flame rolled out. Ammi grabbed Habiba and pulled me off the yak. The yak was frightened out of its wits. I could see the whites of its eyes. It dashed off into a field, its bell tinkling crazily. We scrambled into a ditch and lay low. Through the deafening noise of the shells came the shouts of soldiers, the wails of frightened children. I kept listening for the yak's bell.

At last, the shelling stopped. The convoy started moving. "I must go and look for the yak," I said to Ammi.

"No," she said, then, seeing my face, "all right, go. But be back in ten minutes. It may be..."

"Dead?" I said, interrupting her, "but what if it is not? What if it is alive and scared and waiting for us?"

"It is only a yak," she said gently.
It sounded cruel to me. Only a yak!

I clambered out of the ditch and ran into the field. There were huge craters where the shells had landed, as if a giant hand had clawed out the earth. The yak lay on the edge of one crater. It was still. Beneath it was a growing pool of blood. I had never felt so sad as I did then, looking at that poor, gentle creature, now dead. I looked up at the mountains that had always seemed friendly. Hiding in their folds were men who had so casually destroyed my whole world. What harm had we ever done to them?

I heard footsteps. It was a soldier, tall and strong. With a beard and a black turban. His rifle was slung across his shoulder. He looked fierce, but when he spoke, his voice was not unkind. "Your mother is waiting. It is not safe for you to be here. We will give you a ride to town." Then he saw the dead yak. "Your friend?"

I nodded glumly.

Bending down, he took the little brass bell off the neck. "Keep this," he said gently, "to remind you of your friend."

He lifted me across his shoulder and walked back.

We reached the camp without any mishap. The first person I spotted was Sadiq Ali.

"So you have made it," he said in his cool, precise voice. "School starts tomorrow."

"But we don't have a schoolhouse!" I protested.

"We do," he grinned, pointing at a big, shady tree. "Class begins at 9 a.m."

Since then, we have been living in a tent. It is crowded but cosy. Abba and Usman have joined us. So have old Suleiman and Amina. The winter has come and gone.

Abba went to see our house recently. "We will have to build a new one," he said. "But the apricot tree is fine, it is in bloom."
I begin to get the feeling that Christmas is around the corner when Ma starts making the sweets and the smell of burnt sugar and baking fills the house. The countdown begins and, every day there is some new activity—the lights of the Christmas tree to be checked out, the wiring for the star to be fixed, the thatch of the stable for the nativity scene to be mended, last minute chopping of the dry fruits to be done... Then, before we know what is happening, we start our rounds of carol singing, meet old friends and make new ones... Oh, the entire month is fun.

This year, however, the first of December announced itself with an early morning phone call. Ma shook me awake and I looked at her with bleary eyes. "I have to go to the hospital, Reeta," she said worriedly. "Grandpa has met with an accident." That made me jump up.

Grandpa is my favourite person in the world after my friend Latika. I can tell him anything, even grumble when I think his daughter, Ma, is being unfair to me. Because Grandpa cannot see, he is never distracted when I talk and I feel that he is the only person who gives me full attention. Simon does too, but that is different.
When Grandpa began to lose his eyesight some years ago, he got himself a trained German shepherd, a guide dog, and named him Simon. "Because I have to do what Simon says," he joked, telling me how he used to play 'Simon Says' when he was a boy. Because of Simon, Grandpa could manage to live on his own. He could go for walks; he could even do some shopping now and then when he wanted to surprise us with gifts.

"I am coming too," I said, jumping out of the bed and pulling on a sweater.

"You had better stay at home, Reeta. See that Jay has his breakfast and gets to the bus stop on time. And you can't miss the biology test."

"The test isn't important, Ma..." I cried, but she had already left.

It was tough to concentrate on the questions on the blackboard and I did badly, I think. But biology was the last thing on my mind. I kept wondering how Grandpa was. When Jay and I burst into the house after school, Ma was back from the hospital. She tried to smile at us and talk normally, yet I knew that the news was not good. "Simon took Grandpa straight into the path of a car and he was injured badly. He was awake for a while when I went, but with all the drugs and painkillers, he fell asleep again. All he could say was 'Simon'."

We brought Simon back to our place but he moped around the house, barely eating, almost as if he knew that he was responsible for Grandpa's condition. He could not sleep at night and walked about the house, which was strange to him, making an annoying clicking noise with his claws on the polished floor. I was in charge of Simon and we went for long walks. I tried talking to him and telling him that I was praying for Grandpa to get better, but he did not pay any
attention to me. I thought he was just depressed and missing Grandpa, but when I came home from school and he sat in kingly splendour in front of the mesh door and did not respond to the sound of the rickshaw or my voice but continued to stare straight ahead at Ma who was in the kitchen, I realized that Simon was almost deaf.

"Simon! Simon!" I called loudly, and at last he turned, then rose and came trotting to me with his tail wagging and that special look on his face, which I had learnt was a doggie smile. "He is deaf, Ma," I said. "That was why he led Grandpa into the path of the vehicle. He could not have heard it approaching."

Ma began to calculate. "Well, Simon is now ten years old, so I guess it is quite likely that he is going deaf."

Simon looked at our faces in that intelligent knowing way, and guessing that we were talking about Grandpa, he put his head down and went into a corner of the room. That was his moping place. He refused to eat his food that day. The next morning, when I took him for a walk, his legs gave way beneath him and he sat down heavily on the grass.

"Ma! Ma!" I yelled, after I had tried to lift Simon up and failed. "Ma, something has happened to Simon! He cannot walk!" At last, with Jay's help, we managed to carry Simon to the car and take him to the vet. Simon was running a fever and was severely dehydrated. Immediately he was put on a drip. I stayed with him through all that, and for the next few days spent all my time at the vet's battling for Simon's life because he seemed to have given up the struggle for himself.

It was a week before I could visit Grandpa, and I was shocked at the way he looked. He lay with a tube in his nose, bandages all over, and he was so still that I thought
he was dead. Then I noticed that his eyes were open and he tried to smile when he heard my voice. "We are pals, aren’t we?" he whispered hoarsely as I held his hand. "Get me out of here."

It seemed that he was after Ma for the same thing. "How is Simon?" he asked.

I muttered something, hating to have to tell him that Simon looked weaker than he did. But he seemed to read my mind, for he said, "He will feel good if he sees me. He must be thinking I have deserted him." Then he added, "I don't want to die in the hospital. Take me home and let me go with some dignity, without all these tubes stuck in me."

It took Ma two weeks to be convinced and to work on the doctors, and at last, Grandpa was brought home in an ambulance. Simon rose shakily to his feet when he realized that Grandpa was back. He began to bark and almost dance around, coming under our feet as we tried to get Grandpa in. The attendant who was helping to carry Grandpa told me brusquely, "Keep the dog away; he will jump on the old man and hurt him!"

But Grandpa put up his hand and said hoarsely, "Simon is too smart to do that," and I smiled.

Just because Grandpa is blind, people think that he cannot hear or speak and they talk over him, as if he isn’t there. Anyway, right then, I was actually happy that Grandpa could not see how thin and ill Simon looked and that Simon was a dog and did not realize just how weak Grandpa was.

There were just a few days left for Christmas and we now had two patients to look after. I was so scared that Grandpa would die in his sleep that I took to creeping into his room early in the morning to check if he was still breathing. And
after Simon’s collapse, I thought it was just a matter of time for him as well.

I told you that Grandpa did not really need his sight to be aware of what was going on. He knew there was something wrong with Simon just by patting his head when the dog lay beside his bed. On Christmas Eve, I found Grandpa clicking off the cellphone. "I thought you were my pal," he whispered to me. "Why didn’t you tell me just how ill Simon is?"

I was speechless. It was obvious that Grandpa had managed to contact the vet. I was scared by the look on Grandpa’s face. Would he be able to take the loss of Simon?

The next morning, when I sneaked into the room bright and early to check on them and to bring the gifts I had picked up from below the tree we had hastily decorated the previous night, I found Grandpa’s bed empty and Simon nowhere in sight. What had happened while I was asleep? I was rushing out of the room to alert Ma when Grandpa walked in unsteadily from the verandah with Simon leading him as he always did.

"Grandpa!" I exclaimed, running to him and hugging him. "You are able to walk!" and I added, "Merry Christmas!" as an afterthought.

"And to you too," said Grandpa, sitting down with Simon beside him.

"How, Grandpa?" I asked. "How did you do it?"

"I needed to get strong for Simon, didn’t I? He would not last long if I went, and he says he is not old enough to call it a day right now."

"You are playing ‘Simon Says’ again, Grandpa!" I cried happily, as I thrust a packet into his lap and he opened a chewy for Simon. As far as I was concerned, that was the best game in the world!
Alladin sat beside the oasis one sunny Saharan day. 'Allah be praised,' he said to himself, 'thanks to my genie, I have everything a man could wish for—a palace for a home, treasure chests overflowing with gold *mohurs* (coins), a fleet of the best Bactrians and a loving family. I should be happy.' He sighed.

A small dark puddle appeared near his feet. Alladin brushed the sand aside and discovered...a black hole? No, it was only a cylinder of onyx, so dull it seemed to be sucking up the light from around it.

' Hmm, if I polished it up a little, it would look good on my...let me see... Would it be 356th or...aah, my 357th in the curio cabinet?'

He pulled a corner of his silk robe and began to rub the cylinder.

Phweesh! A small wisp of smoke emerged from the top of the cylinder. "Not another genie, I suppose. I must be some kind of a genie magnet!" said Alladin, shaking his head.

The wisp turned into a tiny creature with pointed ears and beady eyes. It had impossibly long nails on impossibly
small fingers and was dressed in a flowered shirt and a tutu.

"Nope," it squeaked, "I am not a genie, I am an eineg."

"A what?"

"An eineg, of course, e-i-n-e-g! Don't tell me you have never heard of an eineg?"

"Well, can't say I have," Alladin scratched his head.

"I knew those genies were getting away with all the glory!"

The eineg hopped on one foot and pulled its ears. It looked very cross.

"And what do einegs do?" asked Alladin. He was not sure he would have space in his underground vault for any more treasure chests.

"Why, take away wishes, of course!"

"What?"

"It is very simple, really," said the creature, stroking its chin, "you tell me three things that you have and I will take them away! And, sorry, they have to be things that you like. No use telling me to remove that exasperating itch or that worrisome wart."

Alladin began to laugh. "And you wonder why you are not more popular! Begone...! Back to your cylinder... Shoo!

"No, you can't shoo me, retsam. I have got to stay with you till you finish your wishes or your wishes finish you! Ha! Ha!"

Alladin threw the cylinder back on the sand and called for his camel to return home. He was still trying to figure out what 'retsam' meant when...

"Pssst...decided yet?"

Alladin looked around wildly. The voice seemed to be coming from inside his head. "Who is that?"

"It is me, eineg, of course, retsam. Well, I have decided to stay in here till you make up your mind about finishing
your wishes. Less scary for the general public. Right?"
"You mean you are going to stay in there till..."
"Yes, retsam," squeaked the voice in his head.
After dimmer that night Alladin sat down in front of the entertainment center and tried to concentrate on the antics of the jugglers and the clowns. But instead of the popular number sung by the famous Velma of the Veils, all he could hear was one word drumming in his ears, "Decide! decide!"
By the next morning, Alladin had forgotten about the squeak in his head. He went for a leisurely camel ride about his estates in the morning, had lunch at the Magic Lamp Tavern with his friends and in the afternoon went for a swim.

When he returned home, his wife was in tears.
"The children won't get away from the entertainment center," she lamented. "They have been watching Mirza Monkey and his Marvellous Magic all day. Our son's teacher thinks he would be better off staying home instead of wasting his time in school."
"Nonsense," said Alladin robustly, "I paid for that school."
But he was worried. He pulled and tugged, wheedled and cajoled, but the children were glued to the stage. 'I wish we had never got that entertainment center in the first place,' he said to himself.

Poof! The entertainment center vanished in a puff of smoke.
"One down, two to go, retsam," said the voice in his head.
The children began to cry.
"How about a family ride on the magic carpet to go get some honeyed figs," said Alladin quickly to distract the children. Later, they all sat down and played Snakes and Ladders with real gold coins.
The next morning Alladin woke up early and headed
for his camel stables. His stable manager came running to him. "A thousand apologies, master," said the nervous man, "but the camels are refusing to work today."

Alladin walked over to his favourite camel and tugged at its reins. "Get up, you flat-footed, furry-eared, noisy beast," he yelled.

"Brrmph!" went the camel as it spit gooey glob in Alladin's face.

"These camels cost me a treasure chest full of gold coins in dates and oats every day and I can't get a ride when I want one?" Alladin howled as his servants rushed over with towels and scented water. "I never wish to see these bad-tempered, obstinate, spitting, kicking, greedy hogs...er...camels again!"

Swoosh! His stables were empty! All that was left was a little swirl of sand creating a miniature cyclone on the desert floor.

"Not bad indeed!" said the genie, peeking out of Alladin's ear. "One more wish and I will be back inside the old black cylinder."

"Oh, no!" cried Alladin, "how am I going to get to the bazaar now?" he walked back sadly to his castle.

"Here is your shopping list, dear," said his wife, handing him a slip of papyrus that read:

- 46 loaves of bread
- 78 pounds of prime goat rib
- 156 pounds of oatmeal
- 300 pounds of dates
- 765 toothpicks

"Well, remove the oatmeal and dates, we won't need those anymore," said Alladin sadly, "but who eats all the rest?" He was outraged.

"Don't forget," replied his wife soothingly, "we have
50 servants, who have 50 servants of theirs, not to mention
the laundry maids and the kitchen maids and the camel
drivers and the flag bearers and the fan wavers and the...
"I get it, I get it," said Alladin.
He called 38 of his servants and set off for the bazaar.
Colourful stalls sold carpets and many goodies. Street
vendors fried pastries and grilled meat. "Mmmm, they
smell delicious," said Alladin, "I wonder why I never noticed
them before?"
"Maybe because you were high up on one of your smelly
humps of lard," squeaked the eineg, from his perch on
Alladin's head.
The entourage settled at a coffee shop. "Aaah, this is
life!" He looked up from his cup of coffee and saw all his
servants clustered around him, looking at him hopefully.
"Coffee for everybody," he announced grandly.
"Thank you, master!"
"Humble thanks!"
"You are the kindest master!" the servants chorused.
On the way home, the servants set up a noisy squabble.
"I get to walk behind the master!"
"Out of my way, I was working for him when you were
an infant in a soggy diaper!"
Crash! Thud! Alladin looked around to see his servants
rolling on the road, wrestling. He raised his eyes skyward.
"Do I really need these bickering bunch of baboons?"
"Are you ready for your third wish?" asked the eineg,
peering out of Alladin's pocket.
Well, I can always hire them again,' thought Alladin.
Aloud he said, "Yes! I wish I did not have any servants."
Shwhoomp! Alladin stood alone on the desert road
surrounded by piles of meat, bread and other groceries.
'Maybe I should have waited till they carried all the stuff
home. How am I going to cart all this stuff?’ thought Alladin.

He picked up a loaf and a bag of goat meat and set off towards home. His head felt lighter now that the eineg had vanished. But where was his palace? All he could see was a tiny hut in the middle of the desert. He hurried over to it. His wife and the kids came rushing out. "Everything has gone!" she cried.

The kids clapped their hands and danced around. "Magic, magic! We want more!"

"You really did not think you could just buy some more stuff with your piles of gold, did you?" said a familiar voice. "No gold, no shopping. Bye-bye!"

Well, that is the end of this story. But don’t feel too sad for Alladin. He still has his magic carpet for rides around the town and his magic ring for emergency cash. His children now regularly win the state spelling bees (only gold-plated ones) and Alladin’s daily walks to the bazaar have restored his boyish good looks. He still pokes around the oasis once in a while to see if he can find the cylinder. He knows a few of his rich ex-friends who could do with eineg’s help!
"This has got to stop immediately," Justice Mathematics said in a stern voice, rapping the hammer for silence in the court. He pushed back the horn-rimmed glasses up his nose and glared first at Manu and then at the crowd in the court.

Everybody respected him, even Manu, so a pin-drop silence fell in the court instantly.


"Your Honour," began the lady, in a trembling voice, "when I came to this house, I wore a lovely pink and grey dress, shiny and unmarked. And, Sir, just look at me now." Everybody gazed at her. Her dress was unrecognizable. Covered with ink and grease spots, mercilessly dog-eared and two corners chewed away, she looked a wreck. Tears rolled down Ms. English's cheeks.

Offering her a handkerchief, Justice Mathematics asked gently, "How did it happen, Ms. English?"

"Well," sniffed Ms. English, "this boy," she pointed at Manu, "brought me home a few months back but never
bothered to cover me properly with the nice brown paper his father had brought."

"Did Manu not get scolded and punished in the school for that?" Justice Mathematics enquired.

"Oh, yes, he was, repeatedly," said Ms. English in a tearful voice, "but all the punishment and scolding slipped off him like water off a duck’s back!"

"Not only did he ruin my looks," she continued, "he also ill-treated me."

The audience was stunned, ill-treating a delicate creature like Ms. English! How terrible!

By now tears had started rolling down Ms. English's big eyes. And stopping only to sniff delicately in the handkerchief, she told everyone about how Manu dropped her carelessly, stuffed her anyhow in his crammed bag, sometimes next to the lunch box dripping with oil!

Manu turned red as many pairs of eyes glared at him. Oh! why had he not listened to his mother, who had told him many times to take care of his books! He was otherwise a good boy and even managed to stay within the first five ranks of the class. But he was extremely lazy.

"Manu!" the stentorian voice of Justice Mathematics brought him back to reality. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

Manu managed to mumble an apology, "I am sorry, Sir!"

"What do you mean by saying 'sorry'?” screamed Justice Mathematics. "You have to undo what you have done. Do you understand?"

He looked above the top of his glasses and seemed as if he would like to bite Manu. "Next!" he barked at the peon.

Mr. Geography stood up shakily and went to the witness box. He was in a worse condition than Ms. English. He had no cover, the 'Contents' page was hanging in on its last
threads but the worst part was the maps. They had been filled in mercilessly with all the colours in the paint box!
"Yes!" prompted Justice Mathematics.

"My story is quite similar to Ms. English's," Mr. Geography said in a broken voice. "All my fellow brothers laugh at me whenever Manu pulls me out of his bag. I especially envy my brother who belongs to Sushmita. She has not only covered him neatly, her handling is so gentle that he always looks as if he has just stepped out of the bookseller's shop, and," he added, "she fills in her maps with a pencil!"

And so it went on with all the books, copies, pencil box and even the school bag complaining about Manu's negligence. They looked battered and the worse for wear. Justice Mathematics' face became dark when he heard that Manu tore off pages from the copies to make paper planes. Manu withered under his murderous look.

Mr. Pencil Box complained that Manu never cleaned it. As a matter of fact, he had covered the court floor with pencil shavings the moment he had stood up for witness and accidentally opened himself! This was not all. Manu chewed him whenever he got stuck for an answer! He pointed at his pock-marked body for everyone to see.

The elderly and ponderous Mr. School Bag lumbered to the witness box with his broken straps and buckles dragging behind him. "I might as well be a sack of cement," he began in a grave voice, "as that is how I am treated. Manu never packs me the night before as all sensible children do but leaves it till the very last moment. And then, naturally there isn't any time to do anything but cram everything in anyhow. With the result, neither my friends inside nor I am happy."

"Your Honour!" piped a small voice, "I also want to say something."
Justice Mathematics looked carefully and found that the voice belonged to a small notebook, much in the same condition as others.

"All right," he nodded, "please come to the witness box."

The young Master Notebook marched to the witness box and took the oath, "Your Honour, it has become a regular practice and I don't know how long I will be able to bear it..." he stopped, all choked up.

"Do go on!" prompted Justice Mathematics gently.

The Master Notebook got hold over himself and continued, "It started a few weeks back. Manu was solving some problems in Mathematics, one of them was tougher than others and he failed to solve it. Can you imagine how he vented his anger? Well, he threw me against the wall!"

A shock wave rent the courtroom and everybody started talking at once. Justice Mathematics went red with anger as he banged the hammer loudly, and you could see that he was wishing that the table were Manu. Manu, meanwhile, stared at his boots. Was he really that cruel? He felt really ashamed of himself.

"I intensely dislike such children who do not take proper care of their books," Justice Mathematics said in a serious voice, all the while eyeing Manu sternly. "However, this court is different from the other courts. Here the punishment is decided by the victims and we decide by majority if the verdicts are more than one."

He looked at all the bedraggled books and notebooks, pencils and pencil box, and the school bag in the court. They, in turn looked at Manu, each and every one of them in terrible anger. Manu trembled in his shoes.

"Let us thrash him first and then throw him against the wall as he threw me!" this was the Master Notebook, his voice shrill with fury.
"No! no! Let us all bite him and let him see how it feels to be chewed!" This, obviously was Mr. Pencil Box. He became so agitated that he once again opened himself and spilled some more pencil shavings on the floor!

"I suggest dragging him around the courtroom a dozen times will be a good punishment," said Mr. School Bag.

"Why don’t we all jump on him together till he yells for mercy?" exclaimed Mr. Geography, rubbing his hands in anticipation.

This appealed to all of them and even Justice Mathematics got up from his chair to join the gang!

Menacingly they all advanced towards Manu, who looked around frantically for somewhere to run to, somewhere to hide... Nothing! There was no place to run to!

The mob was almost upon him when a soft voice rose above the frightening silence, "I say, stop it! Please, do stop!"

Amazed, everybody turned around, even Manu opened his eyes a crack which he had shut in fright.

Then the petite Ms. English rose from her seat and spoke to Justice Mathematics in a firm voice, "I don’t mean to interrupt, Your Honour, it is just that I feel that everyone deserves a second chance and, after all, this is Manu’s first offence, he deserves a little consideration."

Manu looked at her in admiration, he could have hugged her! She was the one who had been treated most shamefully by him and look at her! Standing so staunchly by him!

The others too saw reason and slowly backed off, agreeing to give Manu a second chance,

"Manu, see that you never ill-treat a book again!" was Justice Mathematics' parting shot.

"Manu! Manu!" a hand started to shake him and he jumped. Had the others changed their minds about not punishing him?
"Oh! Manu, do get up. You will be late for school!"

Slowly Manu opened his eyes. Why! He was in his bed! Yes! There was the battered bag on the floor, the books, half on the floor and others stuffed in the bag. But what was this? The English book was lying near his pillow and seemed to smile at him!

Manu’s mother was astonished to see him rushing through the chores and then sitting down to glue and cover his English book that very morning!

Next year Manu Sharma got the prize for the ‘Best-Looked-After Books’.
Nobody seemed to want Akhil around. *Dadi* had just shooed him out of the kitchen, and now Mummy wanted him out of the way of her cleaning. Everybody was busy getting ready for Diwali.

"I wish there was something I could do," moped Akhil. "I will tell you what, Akhil, why don't you do the *rangoli* this year?"

Akhil's face lit up. "Oh! Mummy, can I? But," he continued doubtfully, "I have never done it before."

"There is always a first time," encouraged his mother. "Besides, you have seen me do it so many times, I am sure you will be able to do it."

"What design shall I make?" wondered Akhil.

"Make whatever you like, Akhil," urged his mother, getting a bit impatient with him. She wanted to get on with her work.

Akhil chose the same spot where his mother drew the *rangoli* every year, right at the front door. Just above, hung a picture of Gandhiji. Akhil somehow liked the picture. The smile on Bapuji's face reminded him of his own Bapuji, his Mummy's father. He settled down with the steel tray
full of little packets of different colours. He loved dipping his fingers into the colours and seeing them come out covered with pink, blue and purple powders. He sat on the floor, thinking of what to make...a lamp! Yes, that would be the most appropriate design for Diwali! He began tracing the outline on the floor.

"Can I help you?" asked a small voice.

Akhil looked up. Mumtaz, the girl who lived next door, was standing in the doorway. He hesitated as he did not know her very well. She and her mother had come to the building just a month ago. They kept mostly to themselves. Before Akhil could answer, Mumtaz sat down and began dipping her fingers into the powders.

"I like doing that too," said Akhil. "Come, you make your design that side. I am making a lamp here."

Mumtaz nodded.

Both the children worked in silence for some time.

"Where is your father?" Akhil asked, as he filled the outline of the flame with orange powder.

"He was killed in the Bombay riots," replied Mumtaz without lifting her head. Her deft fingers were trickling green colour on the floor.

Akhil felt embarrassed and sorry he had asked. He did not know what to say. Finally, he asked, "What are riots?"

"When people who hate each other kill one another," answered Mumtaz, in a very grown-up voice.

Akhil was puzzled. "Why should people hate each other?"

"Because they are different," replied Mumtaz.

"Well, everyone is different," argued Akhil. "Tall, short, fat, thin...how can everyone be the same?"

"Ammi says it is because we are Muslims," said Mumtaz. "I don't hate you, I like you," said Akhil.
Mumtaz did not say anything. She just peeped at him through her eyelashes and smiled shyly at him.

"There! how does that look?" she asked, dusting the purple colour off her fingers.

"It is beautiful!" exclaimed Akhil, admiring the design. Mumtaz had made a castle with domes.

"It is Alladin's castle," she said.

"And what does this mean?" asked Akhil, pointing to something she had written under the castle.

"This means Diwali Mubarak (Happy Diwali). I have written in Urdu," she explained.

They were so absorbed in what they were doing, they did not hear Mumtaz's mother come out of her flat to look for Mumtaz. Seeing Mumtaz busy with the colours, she scolded her, "Mumtaz, don't meddle with his rangoli!"

"She is not meddling, aunty, in fact, she is helping me," Akhil explained.

"Let her be, they are enjoying it," said Akhil's mother, who had come out upon hearing voices.

"You are sure you don't mind?" asked Mumtaz's mother.

"She...she has written in Urdu..."

"And he has made a lamp," smiled Akhil's mother.

"What better way is there to show that festivals are for coming together?"

"There, we have finished," said Akhil. "Do you like it, Mummy?"

"Of course, Akhil!" assured his mother, drawing him and Mumtaz close, "I could never have made such a beautiful and colourful rangoli."

She smiled at Mumtaz's mother who smiled back. "See, Akhil, even Bapuji likes it!"

And indeed Gandhiji's smile did seem a bit wider as he looked down at the rangoli from the wall.
‘I am supposed to be going home,’ thought Aparna to herself. ‘But why do I feel that I have left home behind?’

She and her parents had visited India after twelve years. It was Aparna’s first trip to the country of her origin. Financial constraints and visa problems had prevented her parents from visiting the country of their birth for so long. Finally, they had planned the trip and now they were on their way back.

Aparna gazed out of the window into the blue sky stretching endlessly in front of her. Home to her had always been the city near Dallas, in America, where she had been born. As a child, she had felt no different from the other fair-skinned, blue-eyed children. Only when she had entered school did she realize that she was not one of the majority. And as her horizons widened, she had found out that she lived differently from the rest of people who occupied her small world.

"I want sausages and eggs for breakfast like Susan," she would ask of her mother.

Her mother would patiently explain to Aparna that they were pure vegetarians and they did not eat meat.
"Maybe when you are older and are able to make your own decisions you may decide to become a non-vegetarian," her mother had added gently.

Rice and other Indian food were her diet which upset her and she longed to eat the food her friends ate. They openly did not make fun of her, but she knew that behind her back they laughed at her. The suspense when she opened her lunch box embarrassed her! She would stare mortified at the 'idlis' or the 'upma', sometimes even rice. She would long to see sandwiches like her school friends brought! Daily battles with her mother did ensure that she got sandwiches, but only once in a while!

Her accent was faultless and American, but she knew she was different! Her colour was different; her name was different, and difficult to pronounce too! And when she filled in forms etc., she qualified under 'Others'. Why was she not just one of the crowd? She began to dislike anything related to her origin that made her different. She was ashamed that she was not an American! She refused to speak her mother tongue at home and always created a fuss when asked to join in Indian cultural activities and festivals her parents took her to. They all made her stand apart, and she did not quite like it! She really wanted to belong here! After all, she knew no place else but this, and this was her home!

Aparna was ashamed of her parents! They spoke English in such a different way. Even after living in America for so many years, her father had an Indian twang that never went! Her mother always wore saris and a nose ring!

"Why can't you wear jeans?" she had asked of her mother. "Mohan's mother wears jeans, and her hair is cut stylishly! You don't fit in with your long plait and bindi!"

Her mother had smiled gently at her. "It is difficult to
Mama, why so sad?

Mama, we lost the factory.

Oh, dear, Mama, why so sad?

Mama, we lost the factory.
change if you don’t want to,” she had said softly. "It is always so easy to give up your individuality and become a part of the crowd. To dress like they do, and talk and act like they do! But we are Indians and I was brought up in a certain way and it is difficult to give it up. Neither do I want to! Just because we live here, it does not mean we have to become like Americans! Like you have been brought up as per American life style, so you are different from us."

Aparna was mortified when her mother attended the Parent-Teacher meetings or when her father participated in the workshops with her. They both just stood out! They were not like the other parents who belonged! She was ashamed of her feelings about her parents.

She was proud of them in her own way. Her father had come to America to study and by sheer brilliance and dint of hard work had landed a job. He had sent money back home to help his family, not allowing himself the luxury of visits. He had gone only once to marry, and after that they had scrimped and saved to provide for their only child, Aparna. They gave her all the luxuries they never had!

The trip to India had materialized after a long time and Aparna had been mortified as well as excited. She had been hugged and kissed and exclaimed over. But what had amazed her was that she felt that everything was so familiar! She was not very fluent in her mother tongue but could understand it well. All the same, the way her parents jabbered in, it amazed her!

Aparna had been surprised to learn that her father could speak five other Indian languages and her mother three. 'I never knew there were so many Indian languages and that Mummy and Daddy knew so many!' she thought.

And her mother had never looked more beautiful to Aparna as she dressed up in exotic silk saris, with flowers
in her hair, her diamond earrings and nose ring shining. Her father's laughter and loud voice boomed at home in these surroundings! He was in his element here and how much her uncles and cousins looked up to him. They almost revered him, she thought!

The trip had been an eye-opener. She saw her parents in a new and different light. This was where they belonged. This was their home! Here they were in their environment and they shone like bright stars! They were 'at home' here! And then, she understood how difficult it must have been for them to adjust and settle down in America. Especially when they were so different and had a different culture and different set of values. Yet, they had never stopped her from doing what she wanted to and had never forced her to feel that she was different! They had never tried to force her to do what she did not want to, and though they must have been hurt at her attitude and rebellion to anything Indian, yet they had never taken it out on her.

Aparna grew up suddenly, during her visit to India, and matured beyond her years. She was proud of her parents and realized that she had been unfair to compare them with the parents of her American friends or even of other Indian children. She was ashamed of the feelings she had harboured for so long!

Her mother leant over and smiled at her. "Glad to be going home? Missed America, didn't you?" she teased.

Aparna smiled at her in reply. She was determined that she would also be as Indian as her parents. And she would learn to read and write her mother tongue and actively take part in all the Indian cultural activities which she had shunned for so long! It should not be too difficult to fit into two cultures! Had her parents not done so? And satisfied she settled down for a snooze.
There was once a man named Satya. He was gentle, kind and honest. The motto of his life was to spread happiness. Now Devil, sitting in Hell, really hated him. Why? Well, the answer is simple. Satya was exactly the opposite of what Devil stood for. Devil symbolized Evil. Satya epitomized Good. Devil’s ambition was to strengthen the forces of hatred while Satya worked to harness the power of love. While Devil’s aim was to undermine God, Satya’s goal was to spread His message.

Suddenly, one day Satya died. His soul moved towards Heaven. Devil who had been watching the developments on the earth swooped down and picked up Satya’s soul.

"You will suffer for being so noble," he said. "In a few days, you will forget about being good and start following my evil ways." Devil had a wicked grin on his mean face.

"You are mistaken," said Satya’s soul. "Nothing will make me stray from my path whatever you do or wherever you throw me."

"All right, we shall see about that," Devil fumed. He then thought for a moment and spat out, "I will turn you into a pebble and throw you on a beach. You will be stepped
upon and kicked around, day and night. That will teach you a lesson for being good. It will make you forget your precious God and his goody-goody ways."

Devil lowered his head and mumbled a few words. The next moment, Satya found himself on a beach.

•k -k -k

It was late evening. Twelve-year-old Debu was walking along the beach with his basket of groundnuts when somebody beckoned him. Three young men clad in jeans and T-shirts were sitting on a mat having a picnic.

One of them yelled, "Hey, you! Give us some groundnuts."

Debu happily walked up to the men and measuring five cupfuls in a packet, gave it to the fellow who had shouted.

The young man put a few in his mouth and started munching. He nodded, "Quite tasty." He then looked at Debu. "Why are you hanging around? Get lost!"

"My money, saab," Debu said boldly.

"Money? What money?" the man asked, looking at his friends in mock surprise.

"Money for the groundnuts, saab. Five rupees."

"You rascal, how dare you ask me, Joe Mathai, for money? Do you want a whack on your silly head?"

"Saab, I am only asking what you owe me."

"Don’t you know me, boy? I am the Police Commissioner’s son. How dare you ask me for money?"

Debu was not a fellow who could be bullied easily. "I will not move till I get my money."

Joe stood up.

"You stupid scoundrel! You are arguing with Joe Mathai. Wait, I will give you your five rupees," Joe slapped Debu hard sending him flying in one direction and his basket in the other. As Debu scampered to pick up the basket, there
were peals of laughter. The groundnuts were now lying scattered on the sand.

Debu was seething with rage. He walked away and sat under a palm tree. That part of the beach was quite lonely. Apart from Joe and his howling gang no one else was there. To his right, partially hidden by the trees, was a grey-coloured car. As he watched, he saw one of Joe's friends walk up to the car, unlock it and take some eats from the car and run back to the group.

Suddenly an idea came to Debu's mind. He decided he would smash the windshield of the car and run. It would serve the great Joe right. He waited till Joe's friend had settled down.

Debu got up from where he was sitting. He looked around. He saw a pebble. It was oval in shape and just the right size. He picked it up. It was sparkling white and silky smooth to his touch. He placed it against his cheek. It felt as cool and gentle as his mother's loving hand on his forehead when he slept. Debu felt all his anger and frustration ebb away.

A few moments later, he noticed a movement near the car. Someone was crouched near the door. The man got up slowly and moved forward keeping himself hidden behind the trees. As Debu neared the car and peeped from behind a tree, he saw a figure, tinkering with the lock of the car. Debu hesitated for a second and then took a decision. He put the pebble in his pocket and then slipped away without making a sound. He ran as fast as he could, straight to the place where Joe and his friends were still busy chatting.

"Joe saab! Joe saab!" panted Debu.

Joe looked up irritated. "You! You have not had enough?" bellowed Joe getting to his feet to thrash him once more.
"Please listen, saab. A thief is trying to fiddle with the lock of your car and..."

"What! Oh, no! come on," Joe said jumping up and setting off immediately, followed by the other three.

Joe and his friends made such a racket that the thief was startled. When he saw them racing towards him, he fled, disappearing from the sight in seconds.

Joe was the first to reach the car. He scanned the interior.

"Thank God! Nothing is missing. The stereo is a brand new one. It cost me almost thirty thousand rupees. My Dad would have skinned me alive."

Joe turned towards Debu. "Hey, thanks. After what I did to you, anyone else in your place would have helped the thief rather than rush back to inform me."

He removed his wallet and took out a five hundred rupee note. "Here, take this."

Debu shook his head. "No, saab. Only Rs. 255."

"Rs. 255?" Joe asked puzzled.

"Rs. 250 for the groundnuts which you spilled and Rs. 5 for the ones you ate."

Joe patted him on his back and handed him the money. "You are a very honest fellow."

As Debu turned to go, Joe asked him, "By the way, what is your name, boy?"

"Debu Maharana," he said shyly.

"Where do you stay?" Joe Mathai asked.

"In Nayabasti, saab."

"Okay, come with me. I will drop you home." Joe was eager to do something for Debu.

Joe parked the car in the garage and looked at his watch. It was past midnight.
'I hope Dad is not awake,' Joe thought to himself.
As he got out of the car, he saw something shining on the front seat. He picked it up. It was the pebble, white in colour, oval in shape and very smooth to touch.
That kid must have dropped it. It is cool,' he said to himself as he held it in his hand and walked out. He felt a sudden surge of happiness and a feeling of contentment coursing through his body.
He unlocked the door of his house and went in. It was dark. As he tiptoed his way to his room, the lights came on suddenly and he found himself staring right into the eyes of his father, James Samuel Mathai. He was a tall man with broad shoulders. He had a thick moustache and a gruff voice.
"Is this the time for a civilized young man to return home?" he thundered, his face turning red with anger.
Joe was not scared of his father. He considered him a pompous fool. Normally, Joe would have reacted in as insolent a manner as possible. And soon there would have been a big fight ending with Joe's mother coming in between them and crying her heart out. But today Joe felt different. He felt a deep sense of guilt and shame.
"I am really sorry, Dad," Joe found himself telling. "It...it will never ever happen again." He looked at his father and seeing the surprised look on his face continued, "I mean it, Dad. I swear. I have decided to mend my ways. I will give up all my bad habits. I will turn a new leaf, Dad!"
Joe then told his Dad about Debu.
"A child growing up in a slum is exposed to the worst crimes imaginable," Joe explained. "Yet, Debu exhibited such ideal values today. Isn't it a lesson to people like me who come from educated and cultured families? Should we not try to rise above the level of animals?"
For a couple of minutes, James Samuel Mathai just stared at his son, unable to believe his eyes. Then reaching out he grabbed Joe and enveloped him in a bear hug.

"Joe, my child, I am so happy that you have decided to change...I...I love you, son," James said, his eyes wet.

"I love you too, Dad." Joe's voice was choked as he felt his father's tears.

Devil who was watching all this, suspended between Hell and Heaven, was furious.

"At this rate this goody-goody fool is going to turn everybody into honest and God-fearing specimens. I better despatch him straight to Hell before he does more damage," Devil mumbled and then paused, scratching his head. "Wait, that fellow is such a good man he might even turn Hell into Heaven. I think I will get him up here and then send him packing to his lord and master, Mr. God himself.

Devil mumbled something under his breath and the pebble came hurtling at him. He caught it in his hand and opening his palm looked at it.

It was really a beautiful pebble—cool, smooth and pearly white. All of a sudden, Devil felt a strange sensation, a kind of peace he had never experienced before.

"Why should I despatch it to Heaven? I will send it to Hell. All the people in the Hell will turn good. Then I will go and make friends with God. He is quite a nice fellow... I wonder, why should I keep picking up fights with him...!"
Sneha's bicycle was stolen.
It had rained heavily and their school compound had become a waterlogged muddy quagmire. So everybody had to park his or her bikes outside. A thief had promptly taken advantage, selecting Sneha's red and gold racer. A police complaint brought no result.
To prevent further thefts the principal did her best to get the rainwater drained. It was found that polythene bags and Styrofoam cup debris had clogged the rainwater drains. After the removal of the blockage the water drained out and the school compound became dry.
"But my bicycle is gone forever!" Sneha kept on wailing.
"It was the best bike in the world!"
Without her bicycle she would have to walk to school with her heavy school bag. Without her bicycle she could not meet Ritu to share her grief. Oh doom!
Preksha dropped in to ask how Sneha's essay on 'How to Protect Our Environment' was progressing. Their class teacher had asked Sneha, Preksha and Siddharth to participate in an essay competition, as the three were good at writing. The first prize was a whopping Rs. 2001!
"I have already finished!" Preksha said smugly. Preksha was the class scholar.

"I don't think I can write without my bike."

"I did not know you wrote with your bike!" Preksha squealed with laughter. Sneha gave Preksha's braid a sharp pull in revenge.

It was all right for Preksha to crack such jokes as she came to school by a car. She did not have to worry about time lost and fatigue caused by walking a long distance.

"Well, who has time for essays?" Sneha said feigning indifference although she wanted to write.

As she walked to her tuition that evening, thinking about the essay, she had to negotiate many mud puddles and cow pats. A lorry swerved so near her that she had to jump plumb into a quagmire of mud and dung. Thick, black diesel fumes momentarily choked her.

When she finally reached her class (late!) all noticed her smelly feet!

"Today we will study how the ozone layer is affected..." the teacher began and Sneha pricked up her ears. This might help in the essay. Could she win the prize? There was Preksha who had a computer to write and check her spellings and a printer to print her essay. Sneha felt she had no chance of beating Preksha.

"...So don't use CFC perfume sprays!" the teacher concluded the lecture.

"What horrid perfumes some girls use!" pretty and smartly dressed Priya said pointing at Sneha's feet. All boys and girls laughed. Sneha felt her ears burn. Priya took out a perfume spray and spattered herself with it. A pleasant whiff of jasmine wafted.

"At least I do not spoil the ozone layer with CFC," Sneha said pointedly and stamped out.
Back home Sneha asked her Dad if he would buy her a new bicycle.

"Not possible now, dear," he said. Sneha knew they were not so rich.

"But my back will break if I carry my school bag, Dad!"

"We will buy you a second-hand bike soon," Dad assured.

Late that night after finishing her homework Sneha had just begun jotting down some points of her essay when her Grandma reminded her about evening prayers.

"What about my essay?" Sneha pouted. Grandma smiled and gently reminded her that they had to remember God at least once every day. Sneha reluctantly began prayers.

The next day Preksha and Siddharth showed the rough drafts of their essays to their teacher, while Sneha had not even begun.

"You can read my essay after I have won the first prize," Preksha said in a teasing tone when Sneha asked to see it.

"Bought a new bicycle yet?" she further asked.

Telling Preksha about her financial difficulty would have made her show false pity and sympathy. Better to try something that would silence her.

"I am not going to buy a new bicycle because I do not want to damage the environment."

"How can buying a new bike spoil the environment, silly?" Preksha asked.

"Ore for metal will have to be dug, spoiling topsoil. Then refining ore will give off C0₂. " Sneha said. "Plus toxic colours will have to be used. Rubber for tyres will use poisonous elements like sulphur..."

"All bunk!" Preksha jeered.

"What she says is true. To make one ton of steel we have to burn many tons of coal." Siddharth said.

"Where did you learn all this?" Preksha asked, concerned.
"While doing research on my essay on environment," Sneha said, pleased that she had had Preksha worried.

Sneha was dog-tired after school as she trudged home slowly with her heavy satchel. Heaps of polythene junk, removed from the school’s blocked drains awaited removal.

"From where does this garbage come?" Sneha wondered. Then she remembered how during the lunch recess the whole school gathered near the snack bar and ate sandwiches and drank colas. Every food item came wrapped in polythene and liquid in Styrofoam or plastic cups. Most children threw their refuse in the garbage cans but some garbage accumulated and was washed into the gutters, which gradually blocked them.

Sneha was very tired when she reached home. I will feel better after eating,' she thought, but she was in for a rude shock. Her Grandma offered her only a banana.

"It is a Friday, dear, you have to fast."

"Oh, mother!" Sneha wailed but knew she had no choice.

"Of what use is fasting?"

"Fasting is a self-imposed discipline. It helps us become better persons. All religions have days when one must not eat."

Sneha, poor dear, was so exhausted. On top of it, hunger made her doze off into Grandma’s lap. But after midnight hunger pangs awoke her.

She thought, fasting was a type of religious discipline. Without discipline we would become animals. But the way we were spoiling our environment was not good discipline.

Why did most people all over the world voluntarily remain hungry once a while? Christians, Jews, Muslims, Jains, Buddhists and Hindus—all fasted. All also undertook holy pilgrimages. All regularly prayed and followed certain codes.

However, no one had any rules about preserving the
environment. Sneha sat up in indignation. The whole society was to blame. Look how cows were allowed on the city roads. Look how lorry drivers drove smoky vehicles. Look how industries emitted poisonous gases. Look how nations used nuclear fuel and made toxic garbage.

There was only one solution. If religion could be combined with the protection of environment, it would be an ideal discipline. Sneha quickly grabbed a flashlight and began scribbling.

Sneha's rules for A New Religion:
1. The sun is our father because he gives us energy.
2. The earth is our mother because she sustains us.
3. Trees are our elder brothers and sisters who give us oxygen, food and shelter.
4. Animals are our younger brothers and sisters who also help us.
5. Thus we must help and protect our family.

Sneha paused, liking what she had written but wondering whether it was good for her essay.

'I might as well write what I like because Preksha is going to win the competition anyway!' Sneha thought despondently. How could she ever compete with Preksha?

Sneha wrote furiously through the night. She was convinced that unless she finished her essay in one sitting she would never be able to complete it. All kinds of thoughts overcrowded her mind, but her fingers quickly recorded everything.

The next morning her mother found Sneha asleep in her chair, her head on the table, her pen lying on the floor and the discharged flashlight tightly clutched in her hand.

Sneha had fever. Over exertion had taken its toll.

The doctor was summoned and the treatment began. Grandma began chanting the name of Rama.
Sneha’s classmates came to visit her the next evening as her fever was still very high. Preksha pattered about her essay. Priya and Ritu changed the wet cloth on Sneha’s forehead. Siddharth told her about the new computers in the school.

As soon as Sneha was better she searched for her essay but could not find it. All helped but without result. Someone probably had thrown it away as waste paper. The loss of the essay was a great disappointment.

"It was my best writing!" Sneha said sadly.

After a month Sneha and her friends came to know that someone from their school had won third prize in the essay competition.

"Of course, the essay that I submitted must have won," Preksha kept on saying. "I am surprised it didn’t win the first prize." All booed Preksha for being arrogant.

The next morning during assembly the Principal called Sneha to the dais and declared that she had won the third prize of Rs. 1000!

"How come...!" Sneha was silenced by the thunderous applause. The Principal read out Sneha’s essay to the school and declared that they would enforce Sneha’s rules right away.

"I am surprised. I had not even submitted my essay, so how could I have won the prize?" Sneha said later as they slurped ice-creams.

"Didn’t I say the essay that I submitted would win?" Preksha said revealing the suspense. "When I came to visit you during your illness, I read your essay. I found it was far better than my essay. So, Sneha, I tore off mine and submitted yours."

Sneha hugged her friend, tears rolling down her cheeks.
The sound of footsteps awakened Radhika. She sat up and looked around, but there was no one in the room. "Is that you, Rahul?" she whispered, looking over at her brother's bed. He had not stirred. She reached out and put on the light. Thirty minutes past four, the clock said. Already she could hear the sound of traffic in the distance. Usually that never disturbed her. Why was she rising so early recently? What was disturbing her? Was it only the thought of having to move out of the house she was used to? She stared right ahead of her at the framed family photographs on the wall. There! Again the photograph of Dada and his brother in their graduation robes was crooked!

All their lives, Radhika and Rahul and their parents had lived in the double-storeyed house at the crossroads of the main shopping area. It was such a central location that their grandfather had started a restaurant on the ground floor that had done very well and was still run as a family business. But now the roads were being widened and the building was to be demolished. The family had been offered handsome compensation by the government for this prime land but Radhika had known
no other home. What would it be like in some spanking new place?

Their father had had a worried air for a long time and Radhika wondered why. Then one evening, she overheard him saying to her mother, "What do you think? From out of the blue, my second or third cousins, that is, my father's elder brother's grandchildren, have come to know about the compensation and have written to me asking for their share in it. They seem to think that this is an ancestral property, which belonged to the two brothers jointly."

"Did it?" asked Mrs. Shetty.

"My grandfather gave the elder son another piece of land in the heart of town. His children, my cousins, sold that and went abroad. My father was given this building and he left it to my sister and me. I just can't understand why these cousins are making a claim now."

"Show them your father's will," suggested Mrs. Shetty. "That should clear any doubts about whom the property belongs to."

"I wish it was that easy," said her husband. "They say that the building itself belonged jointly to both brothers, so what we need is not my father's will but my grandfather's and the title deeds, or else we could be forced to split the compensation and then we won't have enough money to take over that place we want to shift the restaurant to."

Radhika moved away from the doorway, wondering how she could help her parents. She had understood one thing from the conversation. If the missing papers were in this house, they would have to find them fast because they had been given sixty days' notice and then the building was to be razed to the ground.

As Radhika helped her mother pack and clear up the accumulated possessions of generations, she found many
wonderful things in the cupboards, but there was no time to admire them. "Do you think the will could be hidden somewhere here?" asked Radhika.

"What do you know about that?" said her mother sharply.

"I heard Papa telling you that we have to find his grandfather's will..." Radhika paused, afraid that she would be scolded for eavesdropping.

"Yes, we have to," said her mother thoughtfully. "Well, we have looked among all the official papers and neither the will nor the title deeds are there. Even the bank locker had nothing."

"Do you think it could be in some secret place?" asked Radhika excitedly. "Maybe there is a hidden space behind one of the cupboards, or in the wall..."

Mrs. Shetty smiled and said nothing and Radhika decided that she would search the house from top to bottom in the short time they were left with. When nothing was found and three weeks had passed, Radhika began to fret. Where could Papa's Dada have kept the papers? If they were not in any of the official places, they had to be somewhere he had thought safe but no one else knew about. She gave it a great deal of thought but no answers came.

Somewhere around that time, Radhika began to get disturbed at night by the feeling that there was someone in the room—someone moving around and talking.

"Did you come into my room last night?" she asked her mother.

"I wanted to..." said Mrs. Shetty. "I was busy in the study..." Then she stopped. "That is strange. I heard the sound of somebody talking from your room and I wanted to check, but when it was not repeated, I didn't bother. I thought it may have come from outside."

The next night, Radhika heard a crash and she jumped
up. When she put on the light, she saw that one of the pictures that hung on the wall opposite her bed had fallen and the glass had smashed. She collected the glass pieces in the morning and hung the picture again. But somehow, whenever she looked up, the picture was crooked.

Maybe without the weight of the glass it had become unstable, she told herself now. The light was still on and Radhika was debating whether she should go back to sleep or revise for her Mathematics test when suddenly, she felt something cool on her arm. Nothing moved but the cloth of her nightdress, like someone had touched it in passing. Then, straight ahead, Dada’s picture began to swing to and fro on the wall, almost like a pendulum. The other pictures remained still and there was no breeze to explain the movement.

Radhika’s hair stood on end. "Who is it?" she whispered hoarsely. "What do you want?"

The movement stopped but the picture stayed crooked. Radhika jumped up. She grabbed the picture and turned it over. 'Maybe the will is in here,' she thought excitedly. She began to dismantle the frame.

By 5.30, it lay in segments on her bed, but there was nothing behind the photograph, nothing but old hardboard and some paper as padding. As best as she could, she reassembled it and hung it back on the wall.

"You are misleading me," she said accusingly. "Wills are always hidden in the backs of pictures or in secret drawers—where is the one I am searching for?"

She turned and was getting back into bed when there was a sound behind her. She spun around. The picture was at an angle, swinging as though someone was playing a game with it.

Radhika looked hard at the photograph wondering
what was it trying to tell her. Then it struck her. "Ma," she cried, running out of the room and forgetting how early it was, "Ma, wasn't Dada's brother much older than him?"

Mrs. Shetty sat up in bed groggily and looked at her daughter in amazement. "Why are you up so early? What are you talking about, Radhu?"

"Ma, I have figured it out," said Radhika excitedly, waving the photo frame in the air. "All this time, I thought that the photograph was of the two brothers. But just now I realized that both of them are in graduation robes. So one is Dada, but who is the other?" Again, she opened up the frame and both of them looked at the rear of the photograph. On it was written in faded black ink, "Nagesh and I, Graduation, 1945."

Mr. Shetty entered just then from his morning walk. "I remember Uncle Nagesh. He was my father's best friend. He went on to do Law after graduation, and used to advise Dada about the business and all the legal stuff."

"That is it!" cried Radhika. "That was what Dada had been trying to tell me! He wanted us to contact his friend Nagesh. Yes, I am sure!"

"But Uncle Nagesh died two months before Dada!" said Mr. Shetty. "He met with an accident."

"It can't be!" muttered Radhika. "Someone has been trying to tell me something about this picture, that is why it is always crooked."

Mr. Shetty listened as she told him about her search for the will but did not say anything. Radhika watched his serious face with a sinking heart. 'He does not believe a word I have said,' she thought.

But that afternoon, when Radhika came back from school, there was a surprise in store for her. A stranger was at the dining table talking seriously to her parents as
they ate their lunch. Papa looked up cheerfully. "This is Uncle Nagesh's son Advocate Prakash Rao," he said to Radhika. "He followed his father's footsteps and today, he has all the documents I need. They were in his office all the time."

Radhika could not stop herself. She jumped out of her chair and ran to hug her parents. "I knew it! I knew it!" she cried.

"But how did you know?" asked Prakash Rao. "What made you come to me?"

"Dada told me," Radhika whispered, and neither parent contradicted her.
Climbing A Hill
Devika Rangachari

My grandmother had been with us for little over a month and already it seemed as if she had lived with us all our lives. Short and plump with the same sort of ringing laughter as my mother's, she seemed to be everywhere at once—in the kitchen with my mother making the most delicious food ever, in the garden bullying the gardener into growing her favourite plants, and best of all, with me in my room telling me stories and asking me about my school, my friends, my teachers and my special subjects. Sometimes we would talk late into the evening oblivious of the growing shadows around us. Then my mother would walk in and snap on the light with an exasperated, "What have you been talking about for hours?"

And my grandmother would smile mysteriously and say, "That is between my granddaughter and me."

My favourite stories were of my mother when she was young and lived with my grandparents in a village in the hills. I tried to visualize her in frocks, skipping about the place and being naughty, but my imagination was not equal to the task.

My grandmother was always ready to explore new things
and places, to face new challenges. Whenever a trip was proposed to the park or to the shopping mall, she would be ready at the door in a starched clean sari, her hair neatly drawn back in a bun, her eyes aglow with excitement. There was no end to her energy and enthusiasm and, in some ways, our family grew closer than ever before for, somehow, she managed to infect each and every one of us with the same spirit.

Until the day she fell in her room and refused to walk again. She had been walking towards the bed when, suddenly she fell in a confused, crumpled heap on the floor. Hearing her shouts, we rushed. She clung tightly to my father as he levered her back on to the bed and then lay there looking white and shaken, although she said she felt no pain.

"It is all right," my mother patted her. "You must have slipped or something. There is no need to look so worried."

My father echoed her words before leaving for work. I remained by my grandmother's side, because I was puzzled by her behaviour. It was a Saturday so there was no school. I changed my original plan of going to the library. Books could wait, I thought. My grandmother was more important.

"Patti (that is what I called her), come, let us go to the garden. Ram Kumar is digging up all sorts of things. See there," and I pointed to the window.

However, she showed no sign of interest in what I said and remained immobile on her pillow.

"Patti, come on," I said impatiently. "It is only nine in the morning. You can't lie down now."

My grandmother, however, shook her head. "If I get up, I will fall again. My knees feel so wobbly."

"It is nothing, Patti. Actually, you just slipped."
"No, I didn’t," she said fiercely. "My legs just gave way under me." There was a silence and then she continued, "It is natural at my age. I have been fearing this all along. Everyone tells me that I am too active for my age and that I will break my legs one day and never get up again."

"But you have not broken your legs!" I protested. "Come on, Patti, all this makes no sense. Nothing will happen to you. Please get up now."

Yet my grandmother remained in bed all that day and the next. When she had to go to the bathroom, she would call for us and we would have to escort her there and back to the bed. My mother began to look really worried but my father reassured her, "Some irrational fear has got into her head. Old people often get it. She will be fine."

A week passed, my grandmother still showed absolutely no signs of resuming her normal life. My mother pleaded with her, cajoled and scolded her but to no avail. My grandmother could be as obstinate as a mule. If she had got it into her head that she could not walk, then she would not—and no amount of talking would change her mind. Eventually, the doctor was called to examine her legs. She lay stiffly in bed, her eyes darting about angrily while he hovered about her. Then he drew us aside.

"There is nothing wrong with her," he said. "In fact, she is in astonishingly good shape for her age. The fall must have shocked and upset her. And ever since, there is a fear in her mind that makes her think she cannot walk. Give her time and encourage her to get out of bed more often. She will get over it. Maybe you should buy her a walker. That will give her more confidence."

We told my grandmother she was fine but she completely scorned the idea. "I know what I am feeling," she declared in an irritating tone. "Things have changed. I really feel
old and I will not be able to walk again like I used to."

Life changed for us to a very great extent because of my grandmother’s stance. There was an air of depression and boredom that hung heavily about the house. It felt as if all the fun had gone out of life and I was not even excited at the thought that my birthday was around the corner.

"Be patient," the doctor had said. "Don’t force her to get up and walk. That might make her more obstinate. Encourage her gently."

So my parents and I took turns to talk my grandmother out of her fears, but it was like chasing someone in a dream. You ran as fast as you could but you never achieved the goal and ended up feeling very frustrated.

The walker idea was a failure as well. My father had bought one with three firm, black legs.

"You cannot fall if you use this," he had told my grandmother. "The legs will support you."

Yet day followed day, and the walker remained by her bedside, unused. Meanwhile, my grandmother was fast becoming a shadow of her former self. She actually looked her age now—a ripe old 75 years. Her face was wan and tired, and her hair was so listless that I felt like crying at the change. No more stories, no more discussions, no more outings and, at the rate at which she picked at her food, there would be no more grandmother soon. I had to do something, but what could I do?

Then one night, about three weeks later, I was telling my grandmother about the preparations for the Sports Day at school to distract her.

"Your mother loved racing," she said suddenly. "When she was ten, she and I would run up the hill slopes. Sometimes we climbed the Chamunda Hill, the nearest but the most difficult, a very rough, steep slope and we would see
wild creatures behind the rocks and bushes." Her eyes showed some signs of animation after a long time. "Not many dared to do this," she said slowly. "They climbed the easier ones." Her eyes had a faraway look in them.

"I don't believe you," I said suddenly and clearly. "I don't believe you did all that."

Her eyes swivelled round to mine. "I did," she said looking surprised and hurt. "Go, ask your mother."

I drew a deep breath. "Well," I said boldly, "that sounds really dangerous and you had to be very brave and determined to do it. But here you are, too scared to get out of bed even though the doctor says you are fine. So how do you expect me to believe you?" My grandmother looked so distressed that I did not trust myself to speak further and ran off to my room. I found it difficult to sleep that night. What had I done? How could I have said all those hurtful things? What if I had hurt my grandmother so much that her condition worsened?

I woke to my mother's beaming face in the morning. "You will never guess," she said triumphantly, "Patti has started using the walker! She did not call for us in the morning so I went to see and she was hobbling about the room with it."

From using the walker, it was a short step to walking normally again. I will never forget the day before my birthday when my grandmother walked into the kitchen in her usual brisk manner. We stared in delighted surprise as she strode up to us and said, "So, what is the menu for tomorrow?"

Needless to say, this was the best birthday present I could have hoped for. That, and the special hug she gave me, trying to blink away her tears all the while.

My parents often wonder what caused the change in her. But that is her secret and mine.
Vivek's car was out of this world. Sleek. Red. Shiny. It jumped to a start and veered this way and that as Vivek operated it with its remote control. If anything came in its way, the car neatly reversed and went round the obstacle. The lights came on. The horn honked. It was the loveliest car that Raju had ever seen.

"Can I do that just once?" pleaded Raju enviously, as Vivek pressed the remote and the car zoomed forward.

"Four tattoos for five minutes," replied Vivek, not taking his eyes off his car, nor his finger off the remote. Raju was confused. The car siren came on: "See-Me-See-Me-See-Me", it teased him.

"What?" asked Raju.

"Four tattoos for five minutes," repeated Vivek. "Look," he explained, on seeing Raju's perplexed expression, "why should you get to play for free? Get me four tattoos and you can play for five minutes. For ten minutes eight tattoos. Four tatoos for every five minutes..."

"OK! OK! I got it," said Raju, irritated. "But I have only two tattoos."

Raju walked off in a huff. Fancy Vivek charging you to
play with his car! But that was Vivek Gupta for you—absolutely loaded with the latest toys and very selfish about sharing them.

Raju sighed. How he wished he had a car like Vivek’s. However, it was out of question. His parents would never buy him such an expensive toy. If only he had the money! Wait a minute! Why could he not do the same? Why could he not also start charging for lending out his books and comics? Raju was so excited by his idea that he could hardly eat his lunch.

“What is up, Raju? You seem preoccupied!” observed his father.

“I am going into business,” announced Raju grandly.

His father burst out laughing. “And what business might that be?”

“Toy and book lending,” replied Raju, annoyed by his father’s reaction. “Vivek does it, so why can’t I? Only, he asks for tattoos and I am going to charge money. Real money. And soon I will have enough to buy a car like Vivek’s,” declared Raju, thumping the table decisively. His parents exchanged amused glances.

By evening, Raju had a placard that said:

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<td>BOOKS</td>
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<td>COMICS</td>
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<td>TOYS</td>
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</table>

“Suppose someone loses your book?” chirped Minnie, his younger sister.

Raju hesitated. He had not thought of that.

“Or breaks your toy?” persisted Minnie, seeing that she had made a point.

“They will have to replace it,” decided Raju. After all, that was the rule at the lending library.

Raju’s closest friend, Suresh, was his first client. “Hey!
Raju," he said, "may I borrow your new Phantom comic?"

"Sure," said Raju stretching out his palm and pointing to the placard. Suresh read the rates.

"You mean I have to pay to borrow your comic?" asked Suresh incredulously.

"Yes," replied Raju, "down payment, please!"

Suresh dug out fifty paise from his pocket, took the comic and stomped off, clearly offended.

News of Raju's business spread fast. By the end of the week he had earned six rupees. 'If only I had thought of this earlier,' thought Raju, 'imagine how much money I could have earned by now."

"Coming to play," called Sunil.

"No, you carry on," replied Raju. "Evening is when everybody comes to exchange books and toys. If I come to play, my business will suffer."

By next week, the business fever had caught on. Everyone was into toy and book lending. Raju's profits slumped.

"You look worried, Raju," noted his mother, "what is the matter?"

"Business worries?" his father teased gently.

Raju nodded. "No one is coming to borrow my things. There are so many chaps lending now, and they have already finished reading all my stuff."

"Ah! The market is saturated! And your stock is old! You will have to bring in new things if you want customers back!" advised his father.

"Bring new books...? How do I pay...?" Raju looked at his father helplessly. "Dad, will you buy me...?"

His father shook his head before Raju could finish, "No, my boy, I run my business, you run yours."

So it was that Raju ended up spending half of what he had earned to buy a few new comics. Half the money was
gone! How would he ever buy the car at this rate? To add to his worries, his dog tore to shreds a comic Raju had borrowed from Asif. And Asif reminded him, when Raju tried to wriggle out of replacing the torn comic. So there went another fifteen rupees.

Soon the business expanded to the park. It was their weekly cricket match. Block A versus Block B. "Each of you has to pay Re. 1 if you want to use my stumps and bat," announced Sunil. Everyone was taken aback.

"Hey! Come on, Sunil!" they protested.

"Get your own gear then," said Sunil firmly.

"Be a sport," cajoled Girish.

"Why?" challenged Sunil, adjusting his spectacles on his nose.

"I had to pay 0.25 paise to play with your gun. Why should I let you all use my gear for free?"

"Be a sport, I say!" growled Girish menacingly.

Sunil was adamant. Soon there was a fight and both boys were rolling on the field. Sunil broke his spectacles and Girish got a black eye. Sunil did not come to the park next day.

"Father has confiscated his cricket kit," his sister Anu informed them. "Girish's father complained to him about the fight. Now Sunil is grounded for a week and the cricket kit has been taken away."

"What a bore!" groaned the boys.

"Who cares?" shrugged Girish. "I am fed up of cricket anyway. We will play football," he said dribbling his football, "World Cup Soccer!" Girish punctuated his words with each bounce of the ball.

"Great idea, Girish!" responded Raju, enthusiastically.

"Re. 1 per head per hour!" drawled Girish.

"Oh, no! Girish! Not you too!" protested Asif.
"Why not?" demanded Girish. "All of you charge when you lend your toys. Imagine, I would lose Re. 1x10, ten rupees per day, seventy rupees a week, two hundred and eighty rupees a month...if I let you chaps play for free."

"Oh, all right!" exclaimed Raju, throwing a coin at Girish in annoyance. Girish caught it nimbly, whistling non-chalantly as he collected money from everyone.

The game started. The boys of Block A were bigger and soon scored a goal. Soon after, Block B had a chance on a penalty.

"Stop! Time up!" yelled Girish (he was part of Block A), waving his watch in the air.

"But we have a penalty kick..." objected Asif.

"Sorry, one rupee more for the next hour," Girish held his outstretched palm.

"Forget it!" said Raju in disgust. "Greedy pig! You deserve another black eye!"

"Whom are you calling a pig?" hissed Girish, rolling up his sleeves threateningly. "Wasn't this whole thing your idea?"

There was silence for a moment and then Asif said, "Yes, Raju, you are the one who came out with this crazy scheme. We used to have such fun before everyone decided to start charging for their toys and books!"

"You have become just like Vivek Gupta!" accused Suresh, still sore about having to pay for reading his best friend's comics.

Sensing trouble, Raju beat a hasty retreat. That night, he thought long and hard. It was true! In trying to get himself a car like Vivek's, he had become like Vivek. And along with him, the whole gang had stopped sharing toys.

He took out his money-box and counted. There were eighteen rupees. Too little to buy the car he had set his
heart on, but enough to buy the guys a treat. He thought of Vivek’s car. Suddenly, it did not seem important anymore. He wanted to play with his friends the way they used to. Since they all became businessmen, they had done nothing but fight.

Next evening saw Raju come into the park carrying a giant packet of chips. "Here, friends, have some," he offered it around.

"How much are you charging per chip?" asked Girish sarcastically.

Raju shook his head. "I have wound up my business. It is not much fun. Besides, I figured, I liked Vivek Gupta’s car, but not enough to become like him!"

For the next five minutes, the boys digested Raju’s announcement along with the chips.

Then Girish threw his ball up into the air. "Come on, let us play!" he yelled.

"No fee?" enquired Raju, who was quite broke now, warily. "Yes, no fee at all for friendship!" shouted Girish happily.
Ghazala rushed to her school. "Be careful!" came her mother’s voice.

Ammi is always worried when I leave for school. You can’t blame her. Once Bataloo in Kashmir was a beautiful town of peace-loving people. But not now. Since militancy started in the valley, bomb blasts, shoot-outs, killings and violence have become an everyday feature.’

Ghazala’s school too got threats from militants, every day, to close down but it was surviving only due to the grit and courage of its principal Sarala Kaul.

Sarala Kaul and her husband Dr. Krishan Kant Kaul were living in Bataloo since generations. They were also under constant threat from the militants. Militants wanted them to leave the town like other Kashmiri Brahmins. Dr. Kaul was the only doctor left in the town and he knew that if he too left, the people would have no medical help. They would be at the mercy of quacks. And he never wanted this to happen. So he and his wife were still in Bataloo despite continuous threats to their lives. Sarala Kaul was called Aapa by one and all affectionately.

Ghazala increased her pace, when suddenly she heard,
"Hey, slow down. There is still enough time." It was Hameeda, her friend. Ghazala slowed down and waited for her. They could see the school building at a distance. Hameeda joined her and they walked leisurely towards the school, chatting merrily.

"Boooom!" came a deafening sound. Ghazala and Hameeda both ducked under a shop and shut their eyes in panic. For a minute there was complete silence and then all hell broke loose. People screamed and ran in panic. The girls opened their eyes and were horrified to see smoke coming from their school building. They remained at their hiding place for a while when suddenly Ghazala sprang up and ran out.

"Hey, stop. Where do you think you are going?" shouted Hameeda.

"To school, where else?" Ghazala said.

"Are you mad? Can't you see that the militants have blown up the school? Let us go home. Ammi will be worried." Hameeda tried to stop Ghazala.

"You go home and tell my Ammi that I have gone to school," said Ghazala and rushed.

A huge crowd had gathered in front of the school. They were throwing water on the fire to extinguish it. Making way for herself amidst the crowd, Ghazala reached in the front. The school building was almost destroyed. The roof was blown away and the walls were on the verge of collapse.

"Ghazala," came a voice from behind. It was Sarala Aapa. "Go home. Everyone has gone back."

"Oh, Aapa! Why this?" Ghazala burst into tears. "Where will we study now? What will happen to our final exams?"

Sarala Aapa hugged her and tried to console her. After a while she said, "Ghazala, listen to me, go home. Your Ammi will be worried."
"Where will we study now?" Ghazala mumbled. Aapa had no answer.

Next morning, Ghazala woke up early. She put on her pheran, covered her head with a shawl and crept out of the house.

The sun was coming out of the hills when Ghazala reached the school. The fire had died down completely. The stink of burnt wood was still lingering in the air. Ghazala stared at the burnt school building. Then with a determined look on her face she entered into whatever was left of the school building.

She wandered from one classroom to the other till she entered into her class, Class X-B. There were half-burnt chairs and tables. All the charts and paintings on the walls, done so painstakingly by the students, had been turned to ashes.

Ghazala moved out of the building into the backyard. In the far-off corner, she saw the small cottage that was used for storing the school junk. The explosion had not touched it. A smile came on her face. She quickly rushed to Sarala Aapa's house.

Sarala Aapa was sitting in her lawn having tea.

"Aapa, I have found a place in the school where we can have classes," Ghazala blurted out before Sarala Aapa could say anything.

Sarala Aapa looked at her, "Have you gone mad? Why are you out so early?" she asked.

"I went to school, Aapa. You know what, you can start classes from today."

"Where?" Aapa was surprised.

"In the cottage at the back," said Ghazala excitedly.

"That cottage! But that is used to store junk. It must be in no condition to hold classes."
"You just say yes and we will clean it. Our Board exams are around the corner, Aapa, and we have to study. If not the whole school then at least Class X can have classes. We cannot let 'them' have the satisfaction of spoiling our year."

Sarala Aapa saw the fire and determination in Ghazala's eyes and said, "Fine then, we can't reopen the whole school but yes, Class X can have their classes. Ask the girls to reach the school immediately."

When Sarala Aapa reached the school, all the tenth class girls were there. They started the 'operation cleaning the cottage'. Soon all the junk was out and the cottage was clean enough to start the classes. Some tables and chairs, that were still in workable condition, were taken into the cottage and the classes began.

Time passed. Days changed into weeks and weeks into a month. Everybody settled down and the 'school' functioned smoothly. The situation remained the same with the militants and the security forces, having the occasional skirmishes.

Ghazala and her friends were happy that now they would be able to appear in the final exams. But no, their travails were not over.

One night some militants, chased by security forces, broke open the cottage door and hid inside. The security forces warned them to come out, instead, the militants started firing. The security forces also opened fire and after some time to smoke them out, they set the cottage on fire.

The next morning when the girls came, instead of the cottage they found black burnt wood and soot.

Once again they had lost their school.

Ghazala stared at the burnt cottage. Her eyes burnt with unshed tears. "Sarala Aapa, they can destroy our school but they can't destroy our resolve to study and appear in
the Board exams. We can have our classes in the school playground now." Sarala Aapa was impressed by her spirit. "All right, if you all agree, I am ready to take classes, but not here, at my house. And we can start from tomorrow itself." Sarala Aapa said.

From next morning, the classes started at Sarala Aapa’s house. The classes were going on smoothly. Things were peaceful. However, once again trouble erupted. One morning when Ghazala was getting ready for school, her Ammi rushed into the house. Her face was white and she was trembling.

"Why? What is the matter, Ammi?" Ghazala asked.

"Dr. Kaul has been kidnapped by the militants!" Ghazala’s Ammi spoke in a hoarse voice.

"What?" shocked, Ghazala looked at her mother. "When?"

"Yesterday in the afternoon he had gone to see a patient in a nearby village and had not returned the whole night. In the morning, a small boy brought a note from militants saying 'they were kidnapping Dr. Kaul for disobeying their diktat'."

"And Sarala Aapa?" Ghazala whispered.

"She is leaving Bataloo. Her son is coming from Delhi to take her. What will she do here alone? Poor woman!" Ammi wiped her eyes.

"No, she is not alone!" shouted Ghazala emphatically. "All of us, the whole town is with her. We all love the Kauls, don’t we, Ammi?"

"Yes, that is true. Dr. Kaul is an angel. He has put his life into danger because of us."

"Then go and collect as many people as you can and reach Sarala Aapa’s house immediately. We have to convince her that she is not alone. Ammi, promise me, you will do your best."
"Yes, of course. I will do anything for the Kauls." The mother and daughter both went out.

Soon a big crowd reached Sarala Aapa's house. She was sitting in the verandah. She was amused to see the crowd. Ghazala came forward and said, "Aapa, don't go. I am sure Doctor saheb will return. Nobody can harm him."

Sarala Aapa sat silently.

"Aapa, you are not alone. We all are with you. Please, Aapa, don't go." Ghazala folded her hands in request.

Sarala Aapa looked at her, then at the crowd. It looked like the whole town was there. Slowly, a smile broke on her face. "Yes, I am not alone. I am sorry that I even thought of going. I forgot that Doctor saheb never wanted to leave this town where he was born. Also, I have to prepare you for the Board exams."

People were happy at her decision. They started to leave when a car came in.

Dr. Kaul stepped out of it.
"Doctor saheb is back!" the crowd shouted.

Sarala Aapa ran to her husband. She was crying and laughing at the same time. "Thank God, you are back. They let you come, those dreaded militants!" she said.

"Dreaded militants? They are boys, Sarala, just boys. I have treated most of them in their childhood. I reasoned with them the whole night. I told them, 'Look, if we leave who will treat you and your family? Who will teach your sisters?' They listened to me." Dr. Kaul paused, then continued, "They are hardly out of their teens—a bunch of misguided youths in need of a proper talk. I told them I am not leaving, come what may, and they let me return."

Dr. Kaul took off his glasses and wiped his eyes.

Ghazala took Sarala Aapa's hand in a tight friendly grip. She was happy Sarala Aapa was not going.
Vineet had wanted to be the first in everything. He had been the first from the village to go to the government high school at the district headquarters in Mirzapur. Although he had not been able to complete high school, he had been the first to ride a tractor in the village, which the family had rented to plough their field. He had been the first in the village to buy a bicycle and had also driven an old motor car belonging to his friend, Saurav. He had done everything and, like Alexander the Great. He was about to bemoan the limits of possibilities, when he saw an aeroplane. At that moment, he found a new goal—he would fly.

That evening, he went to his cousin Rohit in Mirzapur. "I want to travel in an aeroplane," said Vineet, announcing his intentions as soon as he reached Rohit's house.

"Where do you want to go all of a sudden?" asked Rohit. "Is it so urgent that you cannot reach on time by train or bus?"

Vineet shook his head. "I don't know where I want to go, and I don't care as long as I get to travel on the aeroplane."

Rohit looked at Vineet wondering whether he had gone crazy, but he did not say that to his face. Rohit could make
out Vineet's intentions. "Let us talk to one of our friends, who is a travel agent," he suggested. "We will try to take a ticket to a nearby city and back, or maybe you can travel to that city by plane and come back by train. And that will help to save money, as the flight ticket is very costly."

Vineet liked the suggestion because all he wanted was to be the first person from the village to travel by air—the less money spent in the effort the better it would be. In his mind he framed the sentences that he would use to describe the flight: "It is simply great, unbelievable. Everything on the ground gets smaller and smaller and then you get into the clouds and then..."

The visit to the travel agent was depressing. There were no short distance flights from Mirzapur. There was only one flight, that too, once a week, to Bombay and the ticket would cost Rs. 6,000.

Vineet felt cheated; all he had wanted was to be taken up in the air and brought back. He had nothing to do at Bombay for he did not know anyone there. The sum of Rs. 6,000 was not a small amount. If his father heard of his plans, he would be skinned alive; no, he could not afford this flight. He went back dejected to his village. He dreamt of flying but kept his plans close to his heart and did not reveal them to anyone.

It was a discussion with the village carpenter that gave Vineet fresh cause for hope. The carpenter, Bhola, who had been in the Army, was recounting tales of helping the officers practise gliding in the Kangra Valley.

"You mean you can fly on the glider?" asked Vineet with great interest.

"One can fly," answered Bhola diplomatically, "but it does not go up by itself; one can fly for a short distance if one jumps from an elevation."
"That will do!" Vineet almost shouted. "Where can one get a glider?"

Now Bhola gave him the bad news. A glider did not come cheap and was not easily available.

"But you told me that it is made of just canvas and rods, how can it be costly?"

Bhola could not answer that question, but he repeated, "It is costly."

Vineet had a flash of inspiration. "You must have worked on the glider?" he asked Bhola.

"Many," answered Bhola with pride.

"So why don't you build one for me?" prompted Vineet.

Bhola suddenly had doubts in his own abilities. "I did not really work on the glider," he pleaded. "What I meant was that I had seen others working on gliders."

However, Vineet was not one to give up easily. "That is sufficient for an expert technician like you."

Bhola made one last bid to escape, "I won't be able to make it according to the exact specifications."

"You need not," encouraged Vineet. "After all, it is me and not you who will be flying the glider."

Bhola knew that he was trapped. "I need a lot of material, it might cost up to a thousand rupees!" he said, hoping that this would dissuade Vineet.

However, this amount seemed reasonable to Vineet who was sure of managing that much from his father on some pretext or the other.

Thus Bhola was commissioned to start work from the next day. In a week, the craft was ready. Bhola had managed to keep it a secret, as he did not want to be held responsible if Vineet were to crash and break his neck.

When Vineet saw it, he too thought that it did not look like any flying machine, but he decided to keep his doubts
to himself. A lot of money had already been spent on the ‘glider’.

Early next morning, before dawn, Vineet carried the glider to the top of the hillock facing the village. He did not want anyone to spy on his preparations. Of course, he wanted the entire village to be a witness to his feat, but that would be when he would be flying majestically over the village, waving his hands to the people of the village who would stand with their mouths agape. Since Bhola knew about Vineet’s plans, he decided to stay indoors, waiting for the fateful news.

Vineet waited on the hillock for a while. When he was sure that the village was awake, he prepared to take off. He climbed on top of a huge boulder and looked down. Half his resolve vanished at the first sight of the steep fall. The glider in his hand looked clumsy and inadequate to protect him from such a steep fall. He felt sorry for himself, for his dreams that were continuously being thwarted. He also knew that if he looked down again, he would never be able to make the jump. Vineet closed his eyes and jumped.

When he opened his eyes, he had not crashed. The glider was working! The immediate feeling of relief, which he felt, was replaced by frustration when he realized that the glider was not flying towards the village settlement. There was nothing he could do to change the mind of the glider, which was single-mindedly moving towards a clump of trees near the village.

By the time, he came up with some bright idea, the glider crashed on a tree and he found himself hanging by the shirt from the tree. His first impulse was to free his shirt from the branch and he tried to shake himself free, but immediately regretted doing so. His shirt tore away from the branch and before he could get a hold, he had tumbled
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from the tree on to the top of a buffalo, pleasantly strolling in the grove.

It was difficult to say which of the two was more terrified. But the buffalo was certainly the first to act. Before Vineet could decide whether or not to alight from the back of the buffalo, the animal had started running at a brisk pace and all that Vineet could do was to hold on tightly to the back of the buffalo.

The buffalo was running towards the village settlement and Vineet felt that the short distance travelled gave him more experience than what he could have got on ten trips by the aeroplane. The buffalo rushed into the Village Square and came to a sharp stop, throwing Vineet, with a disdainful air, into the compost pit of the village.

All the people, whom Vineet had hoped to wave from the glider, now witnessed his fall. He lay for a while in the compost pit, wondering whether it was worth coming out.

Vineet walked back at the head of a procession to his house with half the village following him. His grandmother refused to allow him to enter the house till he was washed and purified.

It irked Vineet to hear that Bhola had broken two coconuts at the village temple to thank God for bringing back Vineet with his bones intact. From that day, Vineet did not want to be the first in anything. He also did not want to talk about flying, but some of the villagers did discuss among themselves about his foolish venture.

Vineet overheard the village urchins saying: "Did you see him fly straight from the back of the buffalo into the cesspool?" Vineet merely walked past as if he had not heard.
Bhooloo
Bani Majumdar

That particular day everything seemed to go wrong. I was in a foul mood, so, to avoid any kind of argument or disagreement, I decided to stay aloof. I went upstairs and started cleaning and arranging my almirah. Suddenly, a photograph fell from my old photo-album. It was a black and white photograph of me, a six-year-old girl and my Bhooloo.

Bhooloo was my dog. I could remember vividly his coming to me, a cute fat little puppy. I was only five years old then. My father loved to buy fresh vegetables himself. He had taken me with him to the market that morning to buy vegetables. It was a very cold January morning. I was wearing a long overcoat. Papa was buying vegetables and I was looking at a fat puppy. And little later, I saw the puppy coming towards me. He looked like a chocolate ball rolling. He stopped near my feet, then looked up and started wagging his short, half tail. I could not resist myself and scooped him up. My long overcoat had enough space to hide him.

When we came home and I took the puppy out of my coat, my whole family was aghast. Dadi, my grandmother,
did not like dogs. She started shouting hysterically. Ma was shocked that I touched such a dirty puppy and held it so close to my body. Dada, my nine-year-old elder brother, commented that it was just like me to find a mongrel puppy fit to be a pet. My college-going cousin brother promised me a terrier puppy if I let the dirty puppy go. In short, everybody was against keeping the puppy.

My cute little chocolate ball puppy looked so helpless and scared. He pressed his little body more close to my feet. I could not think of throwing him out of our house. I started crying. I promised that I would look after the puppy and he would not create any trouble to anybody. All this while, I was crying nonstop. I was determined to keep the puppy.

At last everybody relented a little. Dadi warned me that if the puppy created even a little trouble, he would go. Ma called our servant, Shankar, and ordered him to take the puppy out in the garden and bathe and clean it thoroughly with a carbolic soap. I was ordered to take a bath quickly. The puppy was then taken to the veterinary hospital for anti-rabies injection.

The puppy was of a strange mixed colour. He seemed to be wearing white socks as his paws were white. The colour around his eyes and ears were of chocolate with golden brown streaks. His face, chest and abdomen were white. Rest of the body was of a mixture of golden brown and chocolate colour. He seemed to understand my words and gestures. I pointed to him the places he should not go with my finger and he seemed to understand it. I forbade him to go to puja room, kitchen and Dadi’s room pointing my finger to the places. He would look at me, then at my pointed finger and listen. After that he did not cross those invisible boundaries. Toilet training was also not very
difficult. The only thing he took more time to learn was to locate the door to go outside. He would run to the doors of all the rooms before he could locate the correct door. That was the time when I named him 'Bhooloo' meaning forgetful. Everyone in the house wanted him to have a sophisticated name but he responded to the name 'Bhooloo' only. It gave me a secret pleasure.

In six months' time, Bhooloo grew up to be quite a big dog. When he stood, he reached up to Papa's waist. I could barely touch his head standing on my toes. His face was heavy and his look was ferocious. More so, as he now had chocolate-coloured stripes on golden-brown body. It made him look somewhat like a Royal Bengal tiger. God knows what was his lineage. He was extraordinarily strong for a dog. He looked ferocious but in reality he was very gentle and loving. He roamed freely in the house and never attacked anyone. His growl was sufficient to freeze any intruder. Still, for visitor's reassurance, we often chained him. He endeared himself to all by his behaviour. Even Dadi loved him. She distributed prasad to us after her puja. Bhooloo would also wait patiently for his share, a biscuit instead of sweet. If she forgot to give his share, Bhooloo would put one paw on the border of her puja room. Dadi would smile and give him a biscuit.

He was a favourite of Dada and his friends also. When they played cricket, Bhooloo would be an extra fielder for the fielding side, whichever the team be. The moment they shouted his name he would run and fetch the ball. Bhooloo loved Papa and Ma and obeyed them, but he loved me most. He would see me off as I got into the school bus and when I returned, I would find him waiting for me near the gate. He liked to go for walks with me. Bhooloo was so strong that with one jerk, he could make me fall, but he would
never do that when I held his chain. If anyone shouted at me, he would growl and bare his teeth menacingly. If I were unhappy or cried, Bhooloo, my friend, would come and console me by licking me all over.

I can never forget that day in my life... On that day we had gone to a party. While returning, Papa's childhood friend, our Doctor Chacha had offered to drop us at our residence in his car as he had to attend a patient of that area. He stopped his car on the opposite side of our house. We were waiting to cross the road, when I saw our servant taking out Bhooloo for his walk. I could not resist myself. To reach them quickly, I ran across the road without looking carefully. A truck was coming from the left side and a car from the right side. The drivers of both the vehicles tried to avoid collision with me. The car screeched to a halt a little away from me. The truck was slowing down but it was sure to hit me.

Suddenly, I saw Bhooloo jerk himself free from our servant. He came flying towards me with his chain dangling. He jumped at me with such a force that I almost flew and fell near the footpath. The impact of the fall stunned me for some time.

When I came to my senses, I saw people standing around Bhooloo and me. His chain was stuck under the tyre of the truck and Bhooloo was very badly hurt. He was lying there looking at me. He could not get up and tears rolled down his eyes. Papa with the help of others brought a big wooden plank and put Bhooloo on it. Doctor Chacha examined me to make sure that I was not hurt seriously. Ma was shocked and was crying.

Bhooloo was brought inside our compound and kept under a shady tree. I had some bruises but Bhooloo was badly hurt. He had internal injuries. Doctor Chacha called
his veterinary doctor friend for Bhooloo and then went on to attend his patient.

Bhooloo's hind legs and spine had fractures. The doctor suspected that two of his ribs also had fractures. He was in great pain. He snapped and growled at anyone who tried to go near him. He allowed only Ma and me to go near him. The doctor told us to feed Bhooloo liquid food by syringe. He gave sedative to add to it so that Bhooloo could sleep and feel less pain. Bhooloo allowed only me to feed him. According to the doctor, Bhooloo had no chance of recovery. It was decided that he would be given an injection the next day to make him sleep forever. I did not like the idea. I sat near him holding his head and caressing him. He grunted then slept due to the effect of the sedative.

I prayed to God for his speedy and natural death. It hurt me extremely to pray for my beloved best friend's death. I did not want him to be killed out of mercy. I wanted him to die naturally. I sat with him like that for a long time. Bhooloo passed away peacefully putting his head on my lap.

Bhooloo lived only for three years but as long as I live, I will remember him. I loved him and he returned my love by sacrificing his life for me. I owe my life to him, my dear Bhooloo.
Amar looked at the calendar. It was exactly two years since he had come to Nagpur with Baba. Two years and two weeks ago Amar had been so happy with his family in their little home in Bhuj...

Nine-year-old Amar lived with his Bapu (father), Shailesh Rana, and kid sister Priya in a slum. Shailesh was an artist who painted hoardings and signboards. Their mother had died when Priya was still a toddler. All the same, Shailesh had looked after them very well.

On the morning of January 26, 2001, their little world was completely destroyed. Bhuj was ripped apart by a major earthquake which left in its wake death and devastation. That fateful day Amar and Priya were playing in front of their house. Their father had gone to the building opposite their house on some work.

Amar did not even know what happened. There was a strange kind of sound and something fell on his head and he lost consciousness. Later when he opened his eyes he found himself in a large tent. All around there was
complete confusion. People were lying in makeshift beds. Some were weeping, some crying out in pain, while a few were sitting and staring straight ahead numb with shock.

Amar looked around. His eyes desperately searched for his Bapu and Priya. They were nowhere to be seen. He got up. His head, which was bandaged, was throbbing. Despite the pain, he went out and started looking into each and every tent. Neither Priya nor his Bapu could be seen. Finally, in one of the tents, in a dark corner he found Priya sitting and weeping. On seeing him, she jumped up and rushed into his arms. Luckily she had escaped unhurt. Together they started searching for their father in vain. They felt miserable.

However, the next day they met Baba. He was an old man, tall and slim with a kind and gentle face. He had come on a visit to Bhuj and had lost his entire family.

"Children," he said, "this earthquake has wiped out my wife, my children and my grandchildren. And you have lost your dear father. I have no one in this world and neither have you. I belong to Nagpur. Why don't you come and stay with me in Nagpur? We have to get on with life." Baba said looking at Amar.

Amar had still not given up hopes of seeing his Bapu. Seeing him hesitate, Baba continued, "We have looked everywhere possible. Children, come with me. Amar, you can help me in my work. I own a shop which sells frames. I also frame photographs, paintings and certificates. You can assist me."

That was two years ago. In the last two years, a lot had happened. Priya and Amar had come with Baba to Nagpur. He lived in a small house, quite close to his shop. He
admitted Priya and Amar in a nearby school. They would leave at seven and come back by one. In the afternoon, Amar helped Baba in his shop. Amar liked the work and lately, according to Baba, he had become quite an expert.

Though Amar was quite happy with Baba, he missed his Bapu very much. Every now and then his mind would go back to his home in Bhuj. He would miss his Bapu the most during festivals. His Bapu was an excellent cook, and on Diwali he would make Amar and Priya's favourite halwa and laddu. In the evening, they would burst crackers which were again made by Bapu. On Holi, all of them would douse each other with colours and end up looking like rakshasas.

One day, after school, when Amar reached the shop, Baba said, "Today a man came with a painting. It has to be framed and given by tomorrow morning. I will start work immediately. You can take over later, after you have eaten and rested."

"Where is the painting, Baba?" Amar asked.

Baba patted his head affectionately and said, "It is there on the table."

Amar went up to the table and looked at the painting. It had been done on canvas. As he looked at it, he felt a strange kind of excitement course through his body. His heart started beating wildly and he had to hold on to the edge of the table. It was a beautiful painting—simple, yet expressive. It showed a small house in front of which two young children—a boy and a girl—were playing. A man was sitting on the ground watching the two them. Amar looked at the right hand corner of the painting. Yes, the initials were unmistakable: S.R. His Bapu had created this beautiful piece of art. There was no doubt about it.
His heart thudding against his chest Amar rushed to Baba, "Baba, see, this painting has been done by Bapu."

"Are you sure, Amar?" Baba looked at him incredulously.

"Yes, see carefully. This boy is me and this is Priya."

Baba leaned forward looking intently. After a few moments he said, 'You are right, Amar. This definitely must have been painted by your father."

"But Baba, I am not sure whether this painting was done before or after the earthquake."

"You mean you are not sure whether your father is alive or not? Don't worry, the person who came with this painting was telling me that he had picked it up at an exhibition in the Chitrakala Academy. And the artist whose paintings were being exhibited was very much there."

"Baba, are you sure?" Amar clutched Baba's arm excitedly.

"We can find out, son. The exhibition is on right now. Let us rush to Chitrakala Academy.

Twenty minutes later they were standing in front of the Academy building.

"Come, let us not waste any time," Baba said taking Amar's hand and leading him inside. It was a large hall. Its walls were lined with paintings. Around 20-25 people were there. Amar looked around. He was praying madly, hoping against hope that he finds his Bapu there.

In one corner he saw a man, with his back to them, talking to a lady. Instinctively, he knew it was his Bapu. He gripped Baba's arm tightly, his nails digging into his flesh. He pointed in the direction of his father, unable to utter even a single word.

"Bapu! Bapu!" Amar yelled, unable to control his emotions any longer.
"Amar, my son!" his father's face lit up as Amar rushed into his arms. Everyone in the hall was dumbstruck. They stared mesmerized as father and son hugged each other.

"Where is Priya? I hope..." Shailesh asked when he found his voice.

"She is safe. She is at home, Bapu."

"Home!"

Amar introduced him to Baba and quickly told him how they had come to Nagpur.

Later in the evening when they were comfortably seated at home with Priya perched on her Bapu's lap, he told them his story: "The earthquake destroyed almost everything. The building where I was then, collapsed and I was buried under the rubble for almost twenty-four hours. I don't even know how I survived. I vaguely remember being taken to a hospital. When I regained consciousness, I frantically searched for both of you. But there was no news. Probably by that time you had left with Baba. I was only hoping and praying that you would be alive and well.

"I left Bhuj and went to Baroda. There I managed to get a few assignments for painting hoardings. One day, when I had finished one of the hoardings, a man approached me. 'I am Ajit Parekh,' he said, 'I own an art gallery. I live across the road. I have been watching you paint since the last few days. I can recognize talent when I see it. I am quite impressed by your creativity. I would like to give you an opportunity to exhibit your talent.'"

"Naturally I was thrilled. Parekhji gave me all the material I needed and left me free to work for six months. Soon after, an exhibition of my paintings was organized by Parekhji, in his art gallery. My work was appreciated and
all the paintings were sold. Since then Parekhji and I are together," Shailesh finished his story.

"Bapu, I have one request."

"What, son?"

"Bapu, now that we are going to Baroda, can we take Baba with us? He has no one to call his own and today if we are with you alive and well, it is because of him."

"Of course, son. I shall always be grateful to him. He gave you a roof, a sanctuary, when you needed it most."

Meanwhile, Baba who had gone to get some sweets returned just then.

"Baba," Shailesh said getting up and touching the old man's feet. "You must have heard of a father adopting a son. I want to be the first son to adopt a father. Will you please be a grandfather to my children and come and stay with us."

Baba hesitated and then seeing the expression of hope on the children's faces slowly nodded his head.

"Yahoo!" Amar hugged Baba and Priya jumped onto his lap hugging him.

"Shailesh, I too can't stay without them," Baba said.

In the next exhibition of Shailesh Rana which was held at Baroda, the painting that fetched the highest price was a watercolour. It showed an area completely ravaged by an earthquake and an old man picking up two tender saplings. The title of the painting was 'Sanctuary'.

I have to admit I am not the star pupil in my class. That single honour goes to Ajai Sharma. I am just about 'average' in studies except for English and History in which I am reasonably good. I have never failed nor have I topped in anything ever in my life. 'Could do better' is the sort of tepid remark that you will usually find at the bottom of my report card. Hardly guaranteed to spread joy and good cheer at home.

The thing is that my parents give great importance to marks. When they talk about so-and-so's brilliant son or daughter who has scored nothing less than cent per cent since lower kindergarten, I feel sorry for them; there is such wistful longing in their voices. All their friends and acquaintances have potential Nobel Prize winners for children. And my parents have me. (The fact that I have the largest collection of matchboxes does not really count.)

To be honest, I don't like being around the house when the report card arrives by the post. It triggers off such a depressing atmosphere of gloom and doom at home that it gets even to me. Mother does not say a word. That is her forte: saying nothing. Her long-suffering sighs and
reproachful looks are enough to make me feel like the biggest criminal since Jack the Ripper. And Father? Not trusting himself to speak, he simply shakes his head. Again and again he shakes his head till I fear that it might just drop off. However, self-containment is definitely not in him. Before long he explodes: it is all about competition, ambition, purpose of life, etc. I tune out most of what he says but it is the attitude that gets me. For days I am treated like a bad smell.

Now, I always make sure that when the report card arrives, I am at a safe distance.

My grandmother's house at the other end of the town is relatively safe. And it is to this haven I repaired that weekend after school closed for the winter holidays. I am particularly fond of my grandmother. She is quite eccentric. I cannot think of any other word to describe a person who loves cats as much as she does. She has seventeen of them. 'Billi mem' is how the neighbourhood addresses her. With her small crouched figure, wispy grey hair and puffy cheeks she looks rather like a tabby herself. Her tongue of course can be sharper than a cat's claws.

"How did the exams go?" Dadi asked when I reached her house. "Another stellar performance?"

"One of these days, I will surprise you," I said. "I will come first, you just wait."

"I am seventy-eight," she retorted, "how much longer do you want me to wait?"

"Only seventy-eight?" I teased. "You don't look a day younger than hundred and eight!"

She chuckled. That is one good thing about my grandmother. She has a tremendous sense of humour.

The other good thing is that she is a superb cook. I looked forward to a weekend of gormandizing.
It was Friday morning. By mid-day, the post would arrive. My parents would have that night and two whole days to absorb the shock. Of course, the aftershocks would carry on for some time, but from past experiences I knew that I could handle that. In the meantime, I had to keep myself occupied. So, I walked down to the local video library to pick up my favourite Tom and Jerry cartoons.

Guess who I met there? Ajai Sharma, 'Mr. Albert Einstein' himself. He raised his hand in the kind of *nobilisse oblige* greeting Caesar reserved for the *hoi-polloi*. A totally bogus smile flitted across his features.

"What are you doing here?" he asked in an obviously disinterested tone.

"Psst...I am on a secret mission for James Bond," I mumbled through the corner of my mouth. The humour of course was lost on him. Ignoring me, he said to the attendant.

"Will you reserve that cassette for me? I am going away till Monday."

"Where to?" I asked.

"To our farmhouse."

"Have fun," I said though I meant, break a leg."

"Thanks... Before I forget, best of luck to you."

"Whatever for?"

"The moment of truth," he said, baring his teeth in what I assumed was a smile. "The report card must be in the post."

I walked back feeling strangely glum. It was not very nice to be a fugitive from one’s own home. But what could I do? I could not possibly face my parents. I would run out of excuses. Studies were incidental in my life. Though I tried hard, I just could not pay attention long enough in class. At home, I usually never opened my books till the
evening before a test. I wondered, what must it feel like to actually look forward to showing off one's report card? For a fleeting moment, I envied Ajai Sharma and the rest of his ilk.

"Cat got your tongue?" Dadi asked. I looked up from my plate. We were having lunch in the garden. The afternoon sun was pleasantly warm; the chrysanthemums were in bloom. The cats were dozing around.

When I did not smile at her little joke, she said, "I asked you if you want a second helping of matar-paneer?"

"No, thanks."

"There is gajar halwa, too."

"No, thanks."

"I have never known a mere thing like a report card to affect your appetite," she said drily.

"Is it particularly bad this time?"

"No more than usual," I said. "I just hate the whole thing so much. Marks are not the only measure of intelligence, are they? Then why am I treated like a lower form of life?"

Dadi just reached out and covered my hand with hers.

Dadi went in to have her nap. The sun's warmth had made me sleepy. I lay down on a durry in the garden. I must have been fast asleep because I did not know when the car arrived. The slamming of its doors woke me. I saw my parents. I remember thinking, why have they come here? This must be worse than I imagined.

"Ah, son!" my father began. But as usual, emotion rendered him speechless. He kept shaking his head. However, there was something very odd. Ma was smiling. Breaking away from her usual pattern, she kissed me and said, "Beta, you have done us proud." Opening a box of sweets, she stuffed a laddu in my mouth.

For a moment I felt I was dreaming. Were these my
parents? Was I their son? They held out the report card. Was this my report card?

I ran my eye down the column: 90%, 95%, 92%, 97%...Rank: First

"You have brightened the Sharma family name, son!"

Father finally managed to say it.

That was when the penny dropped.

Sharma is to India what Smith and Jones are to England—the commonest surname. Just look into the phone directory. There are pages and pages of Sharmas. Dadi says that in India all you have to do is shake a tree and a Sharma will drop off.

Ajai Sharma. My name is Ajay Sharma, too.

The school office had made a real mistake. They had mixed up the names and entered the wrong marks. These belonged to Ajai Albert Einstein' Sharma.

These are not my marks,' I wanted to say immediately. However, the sight of my parents' faces was too much. I could not bear to burst the bubble yet. Though in time, I would do it.

Attractive as they were, these were not my marks. As I basked in the approval of my parents, I saw it for what it was: simple pride. Nothing more. I looked at the marks again. Something in me changed. A wish was born—to do well not just to please my parents but to earn these marks for myself. It would take time. But I would do it, I determined.

As Mother ran in to tell Dadi the 'good news', I had a sudden picture of Mr. Brain and the shock he would get when he opened his report card! I laughed.
Rahim walked as carefully as he possibly could, holding the tails of his now heavy shirt. Wonder why Dadi asked me to bring 100 pebbles?’he mused. He gave a small shrug, Anything Dadi asks I will do without asking any question.’

Rahim and his Dadi lived in a small hamlet near Lucknow. Dadi had got married when she was only 15, and within two years Rahim’s father had been born. Rahim thought sadly to himself, 'If only Dadaji had not died of typhoid after Abbu was born, life would have been so different…'

A young widow, Dadi had to toil in the fields to earn some living for herself and her tiny son. Time passed and Abbu grew up to be the most handsome and sturdy lad in our village. Dadi got him married to Ammi, the prettiest girl from the neighbouring village. Their marriage was an affair to remember. Happiness filled their lives when I was born, until that fateful day…' Thinking about his parents, Rahim broke down and sobbed uncontrollably, he lifted his hands to wipe his tears. The pebbles rolled down. He sat on a rock, pebbles temporarily forgotten. What did we do to make God so angry? Why did Abbu and Ammi have
to die?' Rahim's parents had drowned while crossing the Gomti River in a boat. 'Poor Dadi! She was heartbroken once again. She had to raise me all by herself and that too in her old age,' he sniffed. After a few minutes, Rahim said to himself, 'Enough, I had better return home soon. Dadi will worry. I don't want her to see my tears, she will feel bad.' He picked up his pebbles a second time and ran as fast as his legs could carry him.

Meanwhile, Dadi was waiting anxiously. 'It has been over two hours, where is my precious one? I hope he is all right. Has he been upto mischief again?' she wondered. 'It is all my fault. I have pampered him. The whole village is full of complaints about his pranks.'

Rahim was her only reason for living and she showered a great amount of love on him. As a result, Rahim, a loving and considerate child, was, at times, prone to petulant behaviour. Dadi knew that Rahim's pranks were increasing. Why, just last night he had climbed onto the roof of the neighbour's house and lowered a Diwali cracker with a long fuse. He had lit it after he had scurried down, and it had burst with a deafening roar, after he was safely in bed. Nobody would have known if Bahadur, the village watchman had not seen this from afar. In spite of herself Dadi smiled indulgently and thought, 'If only he put his intelligence to proper use. Never mind. It is not too late. That is why the pebbles. I...'

Her thoughts were interrupted by a chirpy voice calling, "Dadi! Dadi!"

"Where were you, Rahim? I was sick with worry. Were you upto some prank again?"

"No, Dadi. Promise! I went to fetch the pebbles."

"Beta! Why is your face red? Have you been crying?"

"No, Dadi, some pollen went into my eyes."
"Come inside, beta, have a wash and eat something."

Once inside, Rahim asked excitedly, "Tell me, Dadi, why did you ask for the pebbles. Does it have to do with my birthday?"

Dadi said, "Wait, don’t hurry me. I will tell you in good time. First, tell me what do you want for your birthday. Whom are you going to invite?" In the excitement of his impending birthday party, Rahim forgot about the pebbles. Besides he had his own little planning to do.

The great day dawned and Rahim rose early all by himself. He brushed and bathed, wore his new clothes and ran to Dadi for her blessings. Seeing him all shiny and new, Dadi’s eyes grew moist. ‘So much like his father!’ she said to herself. She gathered him into her arms and kissed him on his forehead, "May Allah bless you with good health and happiness, my child!"

"Thank you, Dadi, now where is my gift?" Rahim was impatient. Dadi smiled at his eagerness and gave him a box. Rahim opened the box with bated breath, "Wow! new shoes! Thank you, Dadi!" he yelled and before Dadi could react he was out of the door. Dadi shook her head and set to work. ‘If I know him well, the whole village will be at my doorstep for dinner!’

The evening was a success. All of Dadi’s neighbours gave a helping hand. Everything went well except...

"Dadi! See what Rahim has done. He has put tiny frogs in the carry-home gift bags of all the girls," complained Chachi. The girls ran helter-skelter, shrieked and were on the point of fainting. The fate of the poor frogs was the same too!

Dadi decided it was time to take out the pebbles and explain their function. At night, she called out to him, "Beta, come here, and bring that bag from the cupboard. See,
what is inside it." *Dadi* asked Rahim to carry two empty jars too.

"Not very interesting. Two old jars. Are they a gift too?" Rahim asked excitedly.

"A gift you will remember lifelong. Listen carefully. This is a red jar and the other one is a green jar. Every night before you sleep recollect all the good things you did, and for every good deed put one pebble into the green jar, and..."

"I know, *Dadi*. I know. For every bad or wrong act I should put a pebble in the red jar. Right?"

"Yes, *beta*. That is all. Simple, isn't it?"

"OK. Goodnight, *Dadi*," a tired Rahim wished his granny as he fell asleep on her lap. *Dadi* gently put him on the bed. She then took two pebbles and put one in each jar. The good one for all the assistance he gave her and the bad one for the frog incident. Even *Dadi* could not resist a smile thinking of Rahim's pranks.

Days passed and though in the beginning *Dadi* had to remind Rahim about the pebbles at the end of each day, soon he learnt to do this without her reminding.

After a few weeks, Rahim began to observe that while the green jar had only a few pebbles the red jar was almost full. That night sleep eluded Rahim. He began to ponder over his behaviour. Why is only the red jar full? Do I really trouble so many people? He started crying and ran to his grandmother. "*Dadi*, do you love me though I am bad?"

*Dadi* caressed his head, "Who dares to call my child bad? Allah, me and the whole village love you."

That night Rahim made a resolve: 'I will behave in a more responsible manner.'

The next day Rahim got up early on his own and went up to *Dadi* as she was drawing water from the well. "*Dadi*, you sit. Here, let me draw the water for you. From today
I will do it every day. I will help you in the fields too."

_Dadi_ just smiled. She knew there was more to come.
And Rahim became a very busy boy.

"Chachi, I am going to the market. Can I bring anything for you?"

"Maasi, I am sorry about the fire cracker the other day. Can I come in the evening and repair the broken vase and the table?"

"Hari Kaka, don’t come home to deliver the milk. I am younger and stronger. I will come myself to collect it."

"Chotu, drop by. I will help you with your mathematics."

Time passed. Hari Kaka said one day, "Didi, you are so lucky. Allah gave you such a wonderful grandchild."

"Maasi, your Rahim is equal to ten boys," said another.

Rahim forgot all about the pebbles but _Dadi_ dutifully transferred all the pebbles from the red jar to the green one. In a matter of days, the green jar was full and the red one empty.

Next day, as Rahim saw _Dadi_ walk over to her neighbour’s house with a bag, he smiled to himself. He knew what was in it. Chotu was a real naughty fellow!

Even to this day, in this small village near Lucknow, the two jars and the hundred pebbles are passed on from family to family.
The string of small multi-coloured bulbs that twinkled like stars were yet to be switched on. It was late afternoon and an hour still to go before the evening shift started. Chotu Ram was taking a breather. The circus which made its yearly sojourn to this big city during the winter months was performing to packed houses.

The travelling circus raked in a lot of money as he understood, and what he earned was decent enough to be sent back home to support his entire family which consisted of his mother, two older sisters and three younger brothers. His father had died soon after his youngest brother was born though Chotu was not really sure how old he himself was. Actually, the people in the circus were his family now. It was one big family. True, not everybody got along with everyone else but after so many years it was okay. He was used to all the fights and the fun too. In sickness and in health they were all together. It was like nobody really left the circus. If they happened to leave, they returned sometime or the other. Where would they go anyway? He kept hearing that times were hard. Chotu's own needs were met for he did not bother to keep any
money for himself. The circus clothed and fed him and occasionally, he even made some extra money by running errands for those who worked in it, the *burra sahibs*, as he jokingly referred.

Chotu was a dwarf, lovingly christened by his circus mates. He had forgotten what he was called at home, maybe Munna or Chunna or something.

He was always the clown—on the stage and off it, along with Kanha, who had joined the circus almost at the same time as Chotu. They fooled around on the stage drawing loud laughter from the audience who relaxed on seeing them in between the tense moments of the trapeze and the animal acts.

That day as Chotu studied the last rays of the sun, some children pointed out to him and squealed. He was used to this. He did not mind. Rather, he waved to them and doffed his invisible hat at them. They laughed even more. Just as he bent down to adjust his shoes, a stone hit him real hard. It came flying across at him, hurled by someone whom he could not see. ‘Must be those street urchins who lived near this public park,’ he fumed. After the pain had passed, he felt a different kind of hurt. He was no freak. He had two legs, two hands and one head like any normal human being. Then why...?

Chotu was walking down a long road, a long stick in one of his hands. He was wearing a suit that he had seen Mr. Kumar wear. Everyone was waving at him and he was waving back amid loud cheers. He felt very different though it was him all right. He pinched himself. Yes, it was him. He was led to a room where all kinds of eatables were spread on a big table. He was asked to help himself and as he piled his plate with samosas and *laddus*, he felt a big jerk.
“Wake up, Chotu,” Kanha said, “it is almost time for our first show.”

He was again back to his old self—a clown.

He woke up, felt the lump near his ear where the stone had hit him. It was still paining.

He suddenly asked Kanha, “Kanha, tell me, what is your biggest wish?”

Kanha was indeed surprised. He thought for a while and replied, “Maybe I want a big house. No, no, I think I want good food—chicken curry every day,” and then he added, “I think I want to travel, see places.”

“Are you not doing that already, going from place to place with this circus,” Chotu reminded him.

“We don’t get to see the temples, the big places,” Kanha said. “As soon as we finish our show, we pack up and leave. Only the didis go. They go to the markets and buy so many wonderful things.” Then Kanha thought for a long time and said softly, “You know, Chotu, I pray to God that in my next life he makes me a burra admi—a big man!” With those words ringing in his ears, Chotu made his way to the pavilion.

The show went on but Chotu was ill at ease. Call it sixth sense. He felt as though something was to going to happen.

It happened at four that afternoon. The afternoon show was just ending when Moti, the lioness, refused to jump through the ring of fire. Mr. Kumar, the brave ringmaster cajoled her. Moti just sat stubbornly on her stool.

From the wings, Chotu could see Mr. Kumar’s face turning crimson. He could sense the anger and the tension in the air.

Chotu and Pinky didi shared an intense love for animals of any kind. Pinky was kind and considerate to all who came her way. And Chotu was extremely fond of this
trapeze artist. For, most of the time, she was all ears to Chotu’s dreams and aspirations as well, not that he had too much of the latter. At other times, they were always sheltering stray dogs and cats that they fed with leftovers. Puppies and kittens were their favourites. These had to be left behind once they left whichever town or city they came to perform in. However, the big cats, the six lions belonging to the circus, were another matter altogether. They occupied the pride of place in the circus.

Chotu often heard that the government was trying to ban the use of animals from circuses but he did not quite understand why. The people who came to the circus to see them enjoyed themselves fully. Chotu himself enjoyed the show, clapping all the way when the lions, one by one, jumped through the fire with loud music playing in the background. The manager also reasoned that he suddenly could not let go off the animals. He simply could not disband the circus for that would mean unemployment to so many people who supported large families.

All this Chotu did not fully comprehend. He just saw to it that the animals were looked after by all means. He saw to it that their cages were cleaned and that they were fed well and had enough water to drink. No one told him to do it. He just felt compelled to do it. Of course, he could not pat the lions for they, except Mr. Kumar and the cleaner, were told to stay away from the cages. When Chotu had joined the circus, they were already trained, so he was spared to see the caning they were subjected to when young. Mr. Kumar did beat them once in awhile but Chotu was too small to do or say anything to such a tall and powerful man.

That day the first show did end amid thunderous applause. Moti, when being led away, looked tired and
listless. This bothered both Chotu and Pinky. But not Mr. Kumar. He was livid. Never in his twenty years as a ringmaster did he get such disobedience from one of his 'pets'. He looked for a big cane to beat her.

Chotu, on seeing this, implored Mr. Kumar not to beat Moti, almost jumping up and down to make his point. But to no avail.

That night, Chotu was very disturbed. He stayed awake for most of the time and thought of how he could lessen Moti's pain. He knew that Mr. Kumar wanted all six lions to perform or nothing.

The next morning dawned bright and clear. It was winter, and it was icy cold, but once he woke up and washed himself, ate his bread and tea, Chotu felt nice. He quickly made his way towards the cages. There in one corner of her cage lay Moti looking very ill. As he stood there, he was joined by Mr. Kumar who also studied her. He did not say a word, so preoccupied was he with his own thoughts.

Then all of a sudden, Chotu took a decision. He said to Mr. Kumar, "Kumar saab, supposing we rest Moti and do some other act..."

"What? I don't know any other," the man replied gruffly. "Let me tell you something, Chotu," he continued, his tone softening, "I came to this circus when I was a young orphan boy. I slowly rose in the ranks and now I am almost next to the manager. I have saved enough money so that I can retire but I do not want to. I want to continue and work with my lions.

"Kumar saab," Chotu's voice shook, "please, why don't you rest Moti? She is not at all well."

Mr. Kumar looked as though Chotu was some lowly creature or had gone out of his mind. "If I rest her, the other lions will also not leave their cages. They will feel
disturbed. I know enough about animal behaviour to say they move together."

However, Chotu felt as if Moti was imploring him, 'Please let me be.' He became emboldened. This was the time to strike, Chotu thought. He blurted out, "Can I take the place of Moti?"

Mr. Kumar almost threw a fit. "You?" he shouted. "People will laugh!"

"Exactly," replied Chotu drawing on his inner strength and his courage. "I am here to make people laugh. I will lead the lions and jump first through the ring—I am sure they will follow. It will make people laugh to see me..." Chotu went on and on till Mr. Kumar was convinced.

Mr. Kumar assured Chotu that he would talk to the manager about it. Chotu felt happy that, for once, he had stood upto someone twice his height. He confided only to Pinky didi who also thought it was a bit dangerous but anything for Moti's sake.

After an early lunch, Chotu was summoned to the manager's tent. Both he and Mr. Kumar, who was present, asked him if he could pull it through.

"Can you do it, after a couple of rehearsals, today itself?" the manager asked.

Chotu nodded.

Chotu's legs shook as he stood in the middle of the stage with all the lions. Of course, Mr. Kumar reassured him that he would personally ensure that no harm came to Chotu who could not bring himself to disclose that he was afraid of fire. Also outside their cages, the lions looked fiercer. They were so much bigger than him! Since he had committed himself, there was no going back. For Moti's sake.

For the show, Chotu was given a costume made of lion-
The lions were led in one by one. After the fourth one jumped in, Mr. Kumar 'discovered' the fifth one had turned into a dwarf drawing shrieks of laughter from hundreds of children who came to see the circus. He asked Chotu if he had the courage to jump through the ring to which Chotu first shook his head. And after many mock fights with Mr. Kumar and much persuasion, he joined the other lions in jumping through. Sometimes, to make it hilarious, he went towards the ring and backed off. He made signs of communicating with God above and then quickly jumped through the ring! The audience was in splits.

This item at the circus became a big hit while Moti rested in her cage.

Chotu was soon a changed person. He had not grown. He was still a very tiny man—a dwarf, but he had found a new meaning to his life. The lions responded to him; the other inmates of the circus respected him. Also, he could send more money home. His life was complete. He told Kanha one night while lying on the grounds below the stars, "You know, Kanha, I may be a dwarf but I can at least express my feelings—my joys and sorrows. The poor animals cannot do that, not even the huge animals. They may feel the pain but they cannot talk about it. That is why I feel very big inside for having helped Moti."

Chotu Ram walked like a very tall man from that day onwards and never felt any humiliation, even when an odd stone was hurled at him!
The TV screen leaped to life with images of nature’s fury but Anusha hurriedly changed the channel and settled down to watch a movie. She had had enough of the earthquake. Since the day it had happened in the small town of Ajitpur a week ago, nobody talked of anything else. Anusha had unearthed some unused clothes with her mother’s help. She had even sold tickets for a charity show in her school for the affected people. She did all that to see if she could outdo Preeti in this regard.

At home, Anusha heard from her parents, both doctors, about people coming from Ajitpur to seek treatment at the city hospitals. And the TV channels were spilling over with earthquake news, predictions of future tremors and updates on relief. It was scary to see the huge buildings with ripped-out parts, the twisted roads and uprooted trees but after a while, it ceased to bother her. In fact, it had all become a little boring now.

Anusha thought happily of her plans for the week’s holiday ahead. There would be no studying since the exams had just finished. She and Preeti would see movies and visit each other often. Anusha’s chagrin, that night, when
she was informed of the change in plans, was complete.
"Papa and I have to go with a medical relief team to Ajitpur," said her mother. "We can’t leave you anywhere for a week. So you come along with us."
"Can’t I stay with Preeti?" pleaded Anusha. "What will I do in Ajitpur? I will be bored to death!"
There was a slight change in her mother’s expression, a more thoughtful look came to her eyes. "Maybe it is a good thing that you have to come with us," she said, ignoring the mutinous expression on Anusha’s face.
However, Preeti was all sympathy. "Of all places to go!" she said, "I mean, I do feel sorry for the people there but..."
Ajitpur was like the TV screen come to life. Anusha’s mouth went dry when she saw the untidy stacks of collapsed buildings like broken cardboard toy houses. The air was thick with the dust of the stones and rubble that lay thickly on the roads. People stood around gesturing in dismay while immense cranes clawed through the mounds of wreckage. Anusha longed to go back to her secure, orderly life and could hardly wait for the week to end.
It was on the afternoon of the first day that she met Panna. While her parents worked in the medical camp nearby, Anusha, bored and disgruntled, was wandering around the guest house garden. This was one of the few buildings that had withstood the quake made all the more cruelly obvious by the heap of rubble and debris of a line of flats just across the fence. Some men were working hard at clearing a path through the ruins. And a girl of about Anusha’s age stood near them, watching intently. She was thin with long hair that blew about her face in the dust-laden wind. Anusha’s interest quickened and she strode across to join the group. The girl did not notice Anusha’s presence till the latter nudged her a little.
"Did you live here?" she asked and immediately regretted the question when the girl flinched. "I did," she said slowly and gestured towards the grim-faced men. "They are trying to find our belongings."

Anusha stayed quietly by the girl's side, a little overwhelmed by the scene before her. She learnt that her name was Panna and that she was staying with her brother and uncle at a relative's place. Her brother had hurt his leg in the quake and so she had to come alone to salvage what she could.

Anusha found it difficult to sleep that night. What if her house had suddenly crumbled and she had to scrabble in the dirt for her things? It was impossible to even visualize. Thank goodness a secure home awaited her!

Panna was back the next day and this time, the two girls talked a bit more. Panna and her brother were orphans and they used to live with their uncle in their one-room flat. His small provision store made enough to feed, clothe and educate them but the earthquake changed everything. "My uncle is so worried," mused Panna. "But I am sure we will come out of this and live as we did before."

She told Anusha about the night of the terrible quake that had lasted a few minutes but had left behind a lifetime of sadness for so many people. They had been caught unawares and had run out into the open just before the building collapsed and they were standing on the ruins of their own home. Anusha's heart tightened in sympathy. It had all sounded so distant on the TV and in school but she almost felt a part of it now.

The girls greeted each other warmly on the third day. Anusha found it surprisingly easy to talk with her new friend—so different from the others. She spoke English a little haltingly and her old, worn-out clothes told its own
story. Yet there was something about her thoughtful eyes and gentle face that attracted Anusha to her. She found herself unmindful of the heat and dirt in Panna’s company. She told Panna stories of her school. Panna talked proudly of her school too though part of it had crumbled and there would be no classes for some time. She had tried to meet some of her friends but most of them had scattered and she could only hope that they were all alive. She seemed interested in the work being done by Anusha’s parents and said, “Someday I will be a doctor like them,” a determined look came on her face as she stared out across the medical camp in the nearby field.

On the fifth day, Panna did not come although Anusha maintained her vigil till evening. Her parents returned from their strenuous work at the camp only to find her anxious and edgy. She had not yet told them about Panna and they assumed she spent her days reading or watching the TV, relieved that she did not seem as resentful as before.

“I suppose she wants to get back home soon,” remarked her mother. “Just as well that we are going in two days.”

Panna was back the following day but her eyes were red and swollen with weeping. Alarmed, Anusha questioned her repeatedly but got no answer. A little later, the men dug out a twisted toy engine and Panna darted forward to claim it. She brought it back to Anusha, tearfully.

“This is my brother’s,” she said and the tears spilled onto her cheeks. “He is leaving me soon. He is going to the village with my uncle.”

“To the village?” echoed Anusha. “What about you then?” Panna tried to wipe away her tears. “My uncle says that he can’t feed both of us now. He has a bit of land and my brother will help him with it.”

Anusha felt a lump in her throat and put an arm around
Panna's shoulders. "But what is to happen to you?" she asked sympathetically.

"There is a home for orphans here," said Panna crying inconsolably. "He might leave me there, I don't know."

Anusha's heart seethed with anger. Panna was to be abandoned just because she was a girl! She might never return to her old school or be able to live with her brother again. She stole a look at Panna's sad face and wondered what would become of her after she left.

And then a thought struck her with such suddenness that it left her gasping. That night she approached her parents with Panna's tale and they listened in silence, amazed at their daughter's exploits and caring attitude towards her new friend's plight.

"We have to do something," she pleaded finally. "It is not Panna's fault that the horrible quake happened. Can't we bring her back with us? She need not stay with us if it is a problem but we can see to her schooling and other things. And I will get Preeti and the others to help out too."

Her parents stared at her animated, hopeful face and then at each other. "I suppose we can do something," said her mother slowly. "And perhaps we could help her brother as well. But first we have to meet Panna and her uncle."

She drew Anusha closer to her. "My daughter has really grown up," she said and kissed her.

Anusha suffered many anxious moments the following morning but got her reward when, at long last, Panna's eyes shone with sudden hope and her face broke into a tearful smile. A new life awaited her and her brother—something hardly short of a miracle. She walked hand in hand with Anusha past the clutter and disorder.

"Just wait and see," Anusha remarked, "you will be a doctor some day," and Panna smiled.
"Will You Come Again, Santa?"
Ramendra Kumar

"Hey, Joe, get up."
Joe opened his eyes and looked at his neighbour, Peter.
"Joe, do you want to make Rs. 400?" Peter asked.
"Of course, but how?"
"All you have to do is to dress up as Santa Claus and go
to Delight Departmental Store. There you have to spend
two days smiling and laughing and wishing everyone Merry
Christmas." Peter informed Joe.
"For that you need a costume, I don't have one," Joe
made a face.
"I have one and it will fit you perfectly. Last year I played
Santa Claus and made some money." Peter offered help.
"Then why aren't you going?" Joe asked.
"I have some urgent work.

It was a hectic day for Joe. Initially he found it quite
odd, but he gradually got used to it. Joe liked kids and he
had fun chatting with them, giving them chocolates and
posing for photographs. At the end of the day, the Manager
of the shop gave him two crisp hundred-rupee notes.
Joe walked back to his house. He was still wearing the costume. It was past ten in the night and quite cold. The costume made him feel warm. Oblivious to the stares of the passers-by he walked along humming a tune.

Suddenly there was a loud honk and he jumped aside. A car was reversing on to the road from a driveway of a bungalow. As he watched, the car swerved and sped away. He recognized the driver. It was Bill Daniel, the owner of Paradise, a three-star hotel. His wife Sarah was sitting beside him.

Joe was a pickpocket and a petty thief who lived from day-to-day. He harboured a grudge against Daniel for having him thrown out of his hotel some time back. An idea struck Joe. He decided to break into Daniel's house and try to get his hands on something. He circled the house very quietly, keeping in the shadows. The sentry, who was on guard, had gone back to his little room and was sitting and dozing. Joe found a huge peepal tree the branches of which touched a window sill. In spite of his bulk, Joe was lithe and quick. In minutes he was on the window sill. The window had no bars but was locked. Joe removed a screwdriver from his pocket and prized open the lock.

He went in and looked around. It looked like a dining hall. In one corner was a Christmas tree beautifully decorated, its multi-coloured lights spreading radiance.

"You are early," he heard a soft voice and almost jumped out of his skin. He turned around. A six-year-old girl clad in a pink nightgown was standing behind staring at him. She had big round eyes, pink cheeks and a tiny mouth which was open.

"My Mama told me that you will come after twelve," she said.
"I...I..." Joe could only stammer.

"Santa Claus comes only after midnight, isn't it?" the girl said looking into his eyes.

Hearing her words truth dawned on Joe. Because of his costume the little girl had mistaken him for Santa Claus. He decided to play along and escape as quickly as possible.

"What is your name?" Joe finally asked.

"Tina."

"Where is everybody?" he asked.

"Papa and Mama have gone to the club," said Tina glumly.

"They will come back very late. And Simon told me he has to take his girlfriend to a party and left."

"Who is Simon?" Joe asked.

"Oh, he is our cook who makes lovely cakes and pastries. He told me he will come back before Mama."

Joe did not know what to do. He stood staring at her.

"Come on, where are my gifts?" Tina asked excitedly.

"Your gifts?" Joe was perplexed.

"You silly, are you not supposed to be carrying gifts for me. Are you not here for that?" Tina asked matter-of-factly.

"Aah...yes, what did you ask for?" Joe felt trapped.

"You are indeed forgetful, Santa. Don't you remember I had asked you to get me something which you would like to have if you were a child."

"Oh...yes, of course. Now I remember," Joe said, still fumbling. He put his hands in his pockets, desperately racking his brains. Suddenly his hands closed on something cold and hard and he realized it was his mouth organ, his favourite companion.

Joe was terrific at playing the mouth organ. He took out the instrument from his pocket and handed it to the girl.

"What is this?" Tina turned the mouth organ in her hand.

"It is a mouth organ, a musical instrument," Joe said.
"How do you play it?" Tina asked curiously.
"Come, I will show you," Joe said.

Joe took the mouth organ from her and started playing Jingle Bells. Soon the music of the carol filled the house.
When he had finished, Joe looked at Tina.

She clapped her hands and squealed. "Santa, that was beautiful. Play me some more."

Tina took his hand, made him sit on the sofa and settled in his lap. Joe played some of the tunes he knew.

After sometime he looked down. Tina's eyes were closed and there was a gentle smile on her pretty cherubic face.

He waited for a couple of minutes and then gently raised her head. He wanted to shift her so that he could make good his escape. As Joe was about to get up, Tina opened her eyes. "You are leaving me and going, Santa?" she asked.

"I...I..." Joe did not know what to say.

"I know that was what you were planning to do. Please don't leave me, Santa. I feel very lonely. Both my parents are working. They are very busy. They have no time to spend with me. I either watch TV or play with my toys. After a long time I have found a friend. Don't leave me and go," Tina said, her large round eyes filled with tears.

Suddenly Joe felt a strange sensation. It was as if someone had placed a heavy weight on his chest. He choked back his tears. He placed Tina's head on his shoulder and started playing his favourite tunes on the mouth organ all over again. After ten minutes or so Joe stopped and found Tina fast asleep. He decided he would give her some more time and then quietly leave... Soon Joe started dozing.

"Who are you?" Joe heard a voice coming from a distance, shattering the peace of the house.

Startled, Joe opened his eyes and found Daniel standing in front of him in a foul mood. Sarah stood next to him.
Joe gently shifted Tina on to the sofa and got up. Daniel glared at him. "Wait a minute. Are you not the pickpocket I had thrown out a few months ago?"

Joe looked down, unable to meet his eyes.

Tina woke up hearing the commotion. "What are you saying, Papa? He is Santa Claus, my best friend," Tina said sitting up on the sofa and reaching for Joe's hand.

"Santa Claus indeed! This rascal is a thief who must have come to burgle our house. Wait, I know how to deal with such scoundrels. A month or two in the lock-up and he will forget about playing mean tricks on little girls."

"Papa, he did not play any mean trick on me," Tina said. "The only thing he played was the mouth organ. And he played it beautifully. See his dress. He is Santa Claus."

"Shut up, Tina, and go to your room," Sarah shouted.

Tina slowly walked to her room with tears in her eyes and hiding behind the curtains she watched her parents confronting Santa Claus.

"Wait, Mr. Daniel," Joe said. "You hand me over to the police by all means. I broke into your house and that is indeed a crime. But my crime is far less serious than yours."

"What are you blabbering, you fool?" Daniel shouted.

"I broke into your house and finding a child sad and lonely, gave her company. I did not steal anything though I had the opportunity and the time. Before I could think of stealing, Tina's lonely, childlike innocence won me over."

Joe spoke with a conviction he had never felt before.

"Oh, shut up and don't look for excuses," growled Daniel.

"Sir, you and madam are educated, rich and cultured people, yet you are committing a crime every day of your life. You are depriving your child of your love, affection and time. Isn't that a crime?" Joe asked accusingly.

"What nonsense!" shouted Daniel. "We have given Tina
everything a child can ask for—the costliest dresses, the best toys and whatever money can buy. How dare you tell us about our responsibilities, you thief!"

"Yes, I am a thief, I steal what is not mine," Joe argued. "But at least I don't crush innocent hearts. You have given Tina everything money can buy. Obviously you have deprived her of one thing which money cannot buy, which is free, yet invaluable—your time. The way she clung to me this night, brought tears to my eyes. I used to think I am very unfortunate. I am poor and uncultured, a petty criminal. But today, I have realized that you are far more unfortunate than I am. In fact, I pity you, Mr. Daniel."

"What do you mean?" Daniel asked.

"Mr. Daniel, you have the greatest, the ultimate treasure imaginable in your house, the love of a sweet and innocent child. And you neglect her and go searching for pleasure outside in clubs and hotels like scavengers searching for scraps in a dustbin! This makes your condition pitiable," Joe stopped surprised at his own eloquence.

Daniel's face had turned red and he advanced towards Joe to hit him.

"Daniel, let this man go," Sarah spoke very slowly. "Are you out of your mind?" Daniel yelled at his wife.

"Daniel, he could have taken advantage of Tina being alone in the house. Yet he did not. Moreover, what he said was right. Our sin is worse than his."

Daniel opened his mouth to speak and then closed it. "You may go," he nodded curtly.

As Joe turned to leave, Tina stepped out of her room and ran to him, "Will you come again, Santa?"

Joe placed the mouth organ in her hand, bent down and kissed her forehead. Then without a word he walked out of the house.
Once there was a dog called Fluff. Though his mother had named him Fluff because of his lovely furry coat, he should have been called 'Scruff' because he was always scruffy.

One day, as Fluff played on the road, he noticed a big house. On the roof of the house was a big bone with a large, red bow tied around it. Next to it was a board saying in bold letters: "For the Best Dog in the World".

That is me,' thought Fluff. He was only a pup, and thought no end of himself. He charged at the big iron gate of the house and threw himself against it, "Let me in! Let me in!" he barked.

A serious looking Dobermann was guarding the gate. "Stop that racket!" he growled. "Did your mother not teach you any manners? We don't let ruffians like you in."

Fluff was angry and disappointed. He ran back home in a huff and burst into tears.

"Why are you crying?" asked his mother, licking his tears. Fluff told her what the guard dog had said.

"He is right, son. You should have asked him to open the gate politely," said his mother.
The next day, Fluff was careful. When he arrived at the gate, he politely asked the Dobermann, "Please let me go in." The Dobermann nodded approvingly and opened the big iron gate.

Thrilled at being inside, Fluff charged into the compound. He was so excited he ran all over the grass. He dug up the freshly-sown flowerbeds and trampled the plants. Suddenly a huge Alsatian gardener dog came barking angrily, "You careless, mannerless pup! how dare you spoil my garden? Go away and don't come back till you learn to behave."

Frightened, Fluff scampered off, his springy tail between his legs. When he told his mother what had happened to him, she scolded him too.

The next day Fluff was careful. After asking to be let in politely, he marched quietly up the drive. He pushed open the front door and trotted in quietly. No one seemed to be around. Or so he thought till a shrill voice startled him, "You dirty pup, see what you did to my clean floor!"

Fluff swivelled around. In dismay, he saw his muddy paw marks on the spotless floor and glowering at him was the maid dog, Mrs. Dachshund.

"Shoo! Don't come back here without a bath. And remember to wipe your paws on the doormat next time." Mrs. Dachshund yapped after him.

Fluff's head hung in shame as he slunk away. He could hear gardener dog and watchdog laughing at him.

The whole of that day he scrubbed and combed his fur until his coat was shiny and smooth. By evening, he was spick and span. 'No one can turn me away now,' Fluff thought to himself.

The following day, the watchdog whistled in surprise as he opened the gate to see a neat and tidy Fluff. The gardener dog looked on astonished as Fluff walked primly
to the front door and knocked and wiped his paws on the doormat. Mrs. Dachshund was pleased. "That is a good pup. I imagine that you have come for the bone. That way," she said pointing her long nose at the stairs.

Fluff trotted up slowly. He did not want to make any more mistakes. He reached the landing, and onto the terrace. At last the bone! How big, and luscious it looked. Fluff's mouth watered. He could not wait to get his teeth into it. He pounced "Grrrr..." Fluff stopped mid-leap.

Mr. Bulldog was advancing menacingly towards him. "In these parts we use the word 'please' if we want something, we ask nicely," he said sternly.

Fluff was terrified. He sped out of the terrace. 'I don't want that bone,' he muttered to himself. And that was what he told his mother.

However, his mother said, "Never give up, try again."

So there he was the next morning asking Mr. Bulldog sweetly, "Please may I have the bone?"

"Wait," growled Mr. Bulldog letting out an imperative bark. 'Now what?' thought Fluff. He jumped as the flash from a camera blinded him.

To his surprise, there was a big crowd on the terrace. All the cream of dog society was there including his parents and friends.

A Dalmatian announcer declared, "Now Lady Poodle will present Fluff the prize for the 'Best Dog in the world'.

Fluff did not know what was happening. As he took the bone from the well-coiffed Mrs. Poodle, he nearly forgot to say "Thank you".

Oh, the applause! The pride on his mother's face as she saw her neat and tidy Fluff talking politely was worth watching. How nice to be the best dog in the world! He surely deserved the bone!