

VARSHA SESHAN'S ONLINE CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAMME

WORDS

ISSUE 7 | JULY 2025

Poetry | Plays | Stories



All by writers aged 10-15

Meet the Writers

Me,
Zaheer,
Maniac,
Story writer,
Snack craver, and studophobe*. No filters. Football enthusiast, avid reader

*Invented word meaning “the fear of all forms of study”

I'm
funny,
dramatic,
nerd and foodie.
Hi, I'm **Sunandini**. Nice to meet you. Loves drawing everything she sees around

Me
Happy
Sampriti
love to sing
Birthdays and bio always make me smile!

Ronikaa
Me
Dancer
Potterhead
Books everywhere
Hindi music lover, Swiftie, writer.

“Hey!
Don't you
dare dog-ear
my books!” I say,
Nirai - spooky, kooky, penguin lover.

Nerd
Neha
Reticent
Bibliophile
Piano Aficionado, Paddler

Kid
Kabir
never fights
always playful
loves cricket, is awestruck by animals

laughs,
bad jokes,
good music,
coke cans opening:
all part of the soundtrack to **janvi's** life

Me?
Bold spark
Running free
Fast feet, big dreams
Football, friends, and fire—that's **Haasya**! Master musician, bookmark builder too!

Me
Aymen
The gamer
Dragon lover

Avani
in
nikes
and headphones
lost in her art
she's happiest--smiling, yapping, dreaming

She's
Hungry?
Dog crazy?
Overthinking?
Won't stop dancing? Yeah--that's an **Advika**.

Boy
Aarav
Always fun
Never boring
Breaks up fights, never starts them, always kind

sand
water
i'm alone
breeze in my hair
in my zone, as '**aarya**' as i can be

Me?
Awkward,
Poetic,
Kinda insane!
Swiftie, Potterhead, Demigod: **Aabha**.

What is this about?

A tetractys is a five-line poem with one syllable in line 1, two syllables in line 2, three syllables in line 3, four syllables in line 4, and ten syllables in line 5. Invented by Ray Stebbing based on a key mystical symbol for the Pythagoreans, the tetractys is a fun, short way to introduce the writers who have contributed to this issue of WORDS!



VARSHA SESHAN

WRITER | CREATIVE WRITING TRAINER

Hello!

At the end of each writing programme, I'm amazed at the kind of literature we manage to create! In this issue, you will find, as usual, poetry and stories, in addition to a few plays.

The biggest challenge this time was dealing with AI-generated texts. While I've done my best to ensure that human-generated work has made its way to this e-magazine, no AI-detector is foolproof. Some pieces that have made their way into this issue might have been aided by AI, though (I hope) not generated by AI. I'm hoping to find more ways to deal with this as the years go by.

Nevertheless, I hope you enjoy reading issue 7 of WORDS. Discover new forms of poetry, read creepy stories, and dive into the world of audio drama. Happy reading!

POETRY

6-9

Double Tetractys

Taking the tetractys (which you see in the masthead) further, we worked on the homophone and homograph double tetractys. In the double tetractys, the second tetractys inverts the form of the first, but there's another challenge here--the opening line and closing line of the whole poem form a pair of homophones or homographs!

10-15

Odes

Traditionally, odes use a steady rhythm and rhyme scheme. They are written in an exalted tone, addressing someone or something much admired. Perfect for us to explore humour and hyperbole!

16

Free Verse: What is hope?

In pairs, students explored how they would answer this question poetically.

17-23

Free Verse: When

Based on Ralph Waldo Emerson's "What is success?" and Rudyard Kipling's "If", we wrote poems in free verse titled "When".

Double Tetractys

I

Ride past.
Thin, old, grey.
I wave at her.

Wrinkles dancing across her tired face.
Full of stories, reminds me of Dida.

Her eyes twinkle
Smiling, I
Meet her
Eye

Sunandini Sen



I

Held you
Dearly in

My heart; a sign

That you were trusted. But then came the lies--

So now you gleam like a poisoned apple,

Ripe and red in

The pupil

Of my

Eye.

Nirai Iniyar

Raise

us up,

We beg, plead,

Mother Goddess,

Creator of life, death, the in-between,

Let us touch the sky and caress the clouds,

Hold the power,

Feel the light:

the sun's

rays.

Aabha Sardesai

Roots

Handcuffs

Hold me back

Made of memories

I can't escape. Can't move on. Can't let go.

But could I live with it? Never knowing ...

What could have been.

No. I'll fight.

Find new

Routes

Advika Gupta





Steel
My face
Like a mask
Took a big bite
But the pizza's cheese was lava! Burnt tongue!
Needed quick salvation, ice cream tub found,
Snatched it quickly,
One spoonful
Perfect plan:
Steal!

Neha Vidyashankar



will
we last?
deadly air,
toxic water,
a dying planet, blood on all our hands
but we trek forward, unlearning evils,
because what is
stronger than
human
will?

Janvi Barman

Meat
Juicy
Amazing
Delectable

Just the sight of it makes my mouth water
The one reason why I go to parties
Without it, why,
I wonder,
Would we
Meet?

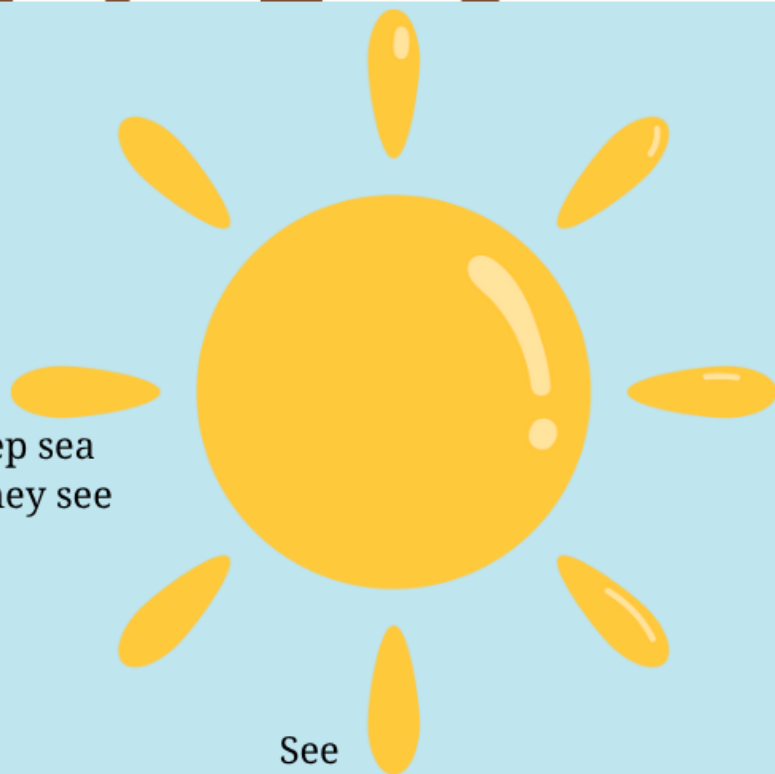
Aymen Hussaini

whole.
hopeful
laughter, love,
nothing's missing.
then the world happens, it all slips away
a sinking feeling, a consuming void
and all that's left--
an endless
empty
hole.

Avani Gupta

Odd
Daydream
Quest begins
Frozen mind waits
To explore the wonders of the deep sea
Dark as midnight, I wonder how they see
Scared squids, large whales
Sea stars glow
Serene
Awed

P Vimal Adithyan



See
Sunshine
Adventure
Watermelons

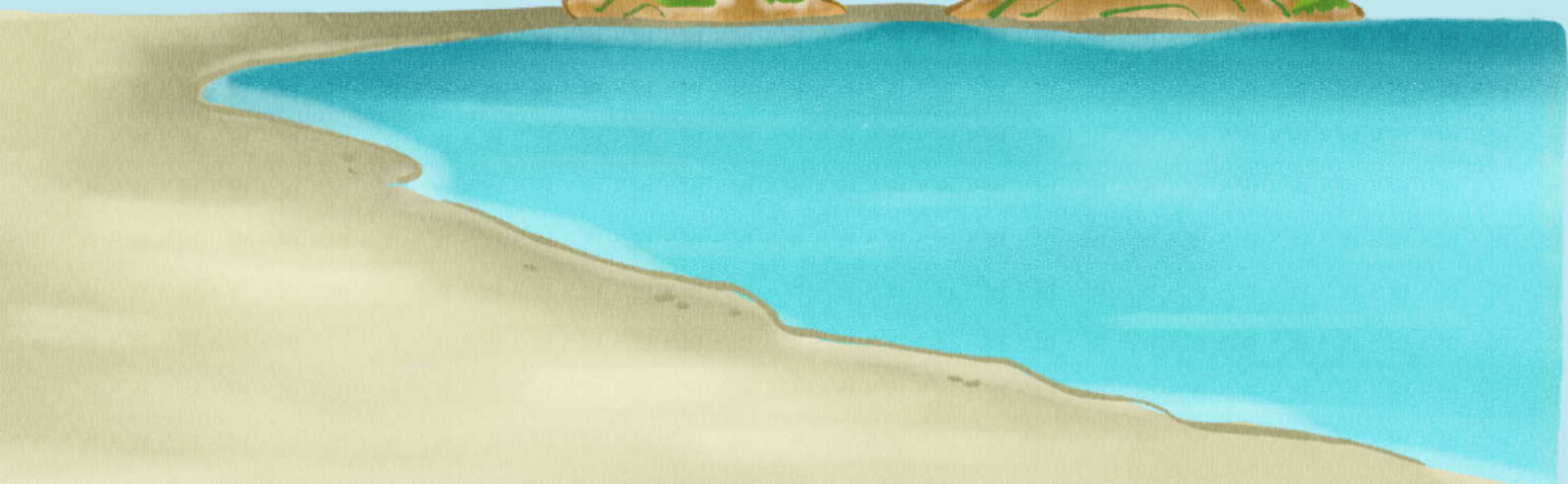
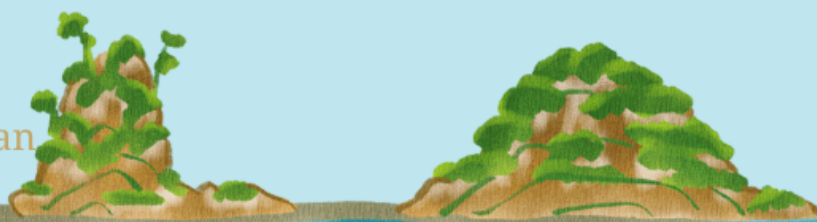
Blooming flowers, warm sand, mangoes, soft breeze
Ice clicks softly inside a tilted glass

Ice cream drips down
Travelling
Beaches
Sea

Ronikaa Vijan

Wave
Your hand
In the air
To say hello
Greet friends as you stand near the sea, say hi
A loud sound comes from the big, blue ocean
Something crashes
It is a
Giant
Wave

Kabir Srinivasan



Band
 We rock
 Day and night
 Our studio
 Is next to homes, and residents complain
 They call up the police to make us stop
 Our dreams are crushed
 Our music
 Our songs
 Banned

Aarav Khandelia

Lead
 The way
 Into the
 Big green forest
 To the crunching sounds of the scattered leaves
 Or take me to the old art museum
 To see the bust
 Of a man
 Made of
 Lead

Sinchana Prasad

knot
 in my
 stomach, tight,
 suffocating,
 sweat drips down my neck, head reeling, palms cold
 'are you going to let these feelings stop you?'
 i ask myself.
 a deep breath.
 'i will
 not.'

Janvi Barman



Hear
 your mind
 spinning fast
 with you dreaming,
 displaying your secret. You, the viewer.
 Terrified, you panic. No one helps you.
 Crushing the dream,
 you're once more
 yourself.
 Here.

Zaheer Vakeel



Odes

Ode to My Toy Monkey

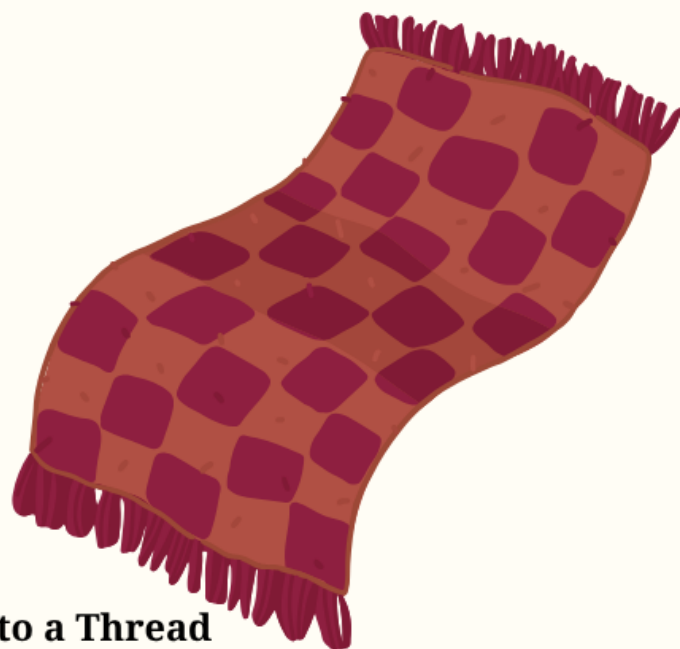
Dear soft monkey, you are the cutest of all
better than a bear and better than a doll
Your cheeks are red like ketchup drops,
You squeak so loud, my little rabbit hops!
You jump and tumble when we play around,
Then hide in my blanket without a sound.
You stay with me till I fall asleep,
Your hugs are warm and soft and deep.
So please don't go, just always stay,
Let's be best friends in every way!

Sampriti Agarwal

Ode to a Chair

oh, chair, you wait so patiently,
you hold me up, you set me free.
when I am weary, you remain,
a quiet friend through joy and pain.
you never ask, you never speak,
yet offer comfort when I am weak.
in stillness, you endure my day,
a steady rest where I may stay.
your simple form, so calm, so true,
you catch my thoughts, both old and new.
in your embrace, I find my place,
my chair, my peace, my steady grace.

Aarya Jain Baldawa



Ode to a Thread (Perspective of a Blanket)

Oh mighty thread, you keep me tethered
If you are gone, I can't hold it together
Oh godly thread, never go
stay with me, my heart will glow

Oh stringy thread, you are my life
Your vibrant colours, keep me alive
Oh beautiful thread, don't make me grieve
Stay sewed with me and never leave.

Aarav Khandelia



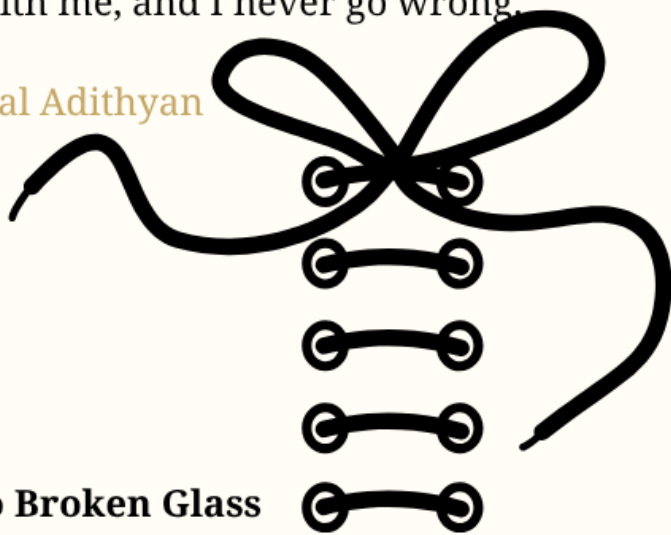
Ode to a Shoelace

Oh my dear naughty shoelace
Tied up, you help me win the race
Jump up high, skip and hop
When you're in place I reach the top.

But you're glad when I trip and fall
Swift as a boulder or a ball.
Your graceful dance and lovely dangle
Vanish when you twist and tangle.

But trip me up and raise the bar
Push me to be a rising star.
O, dear shoelace, loose or strong,
Stay with me, and I never go wrong.

P. Vimal Adithyan



Ode to Broken Glass

Broken glass, oh broken glass, you fine and mighty thing
You always manage to make my life, oh, so interesting
Your jagged edges, sharp and deadly like a canine's teeth
You made my day by infecting my tiny, precious feet
I must thank you for making my feet so very red
Obviously it's my favourite colour, it even stained my bed.

Kabir Srinivasan



Ode to a Bottle Cap

Bottle cap, bottle cap,
Twisty and round,
A bottle cap like you,
Can never be found.

Bottle cap, bottle cap,
so, so unique!
How do you stay
so shiny and sleek?

Bottle cap, bottle cap,
With your glittering hue,
How can you be perfect,
And yet so very blue?

Bottle cap, bottle cap,
Silent and strong,
Screwed onto a bottle,
Where you truly belong!

Aabha Sardesai



ode to the classroom favourite

a sheath of wax left on my fingers
from when i used to hold you close,
your subtle fragrance so divine,
on your scent, i could overdose

it hurts to live this life without you
your elegant texture, so sweet and sublime
i basked in the residue you left on my paper,
you do remind me of a simpler time

you filled my world with rainbow colours
when all else felt like a rainy day
my fifteen-pack of jumbo crayons,
what did i do to have you taken away?

Janvi Barman

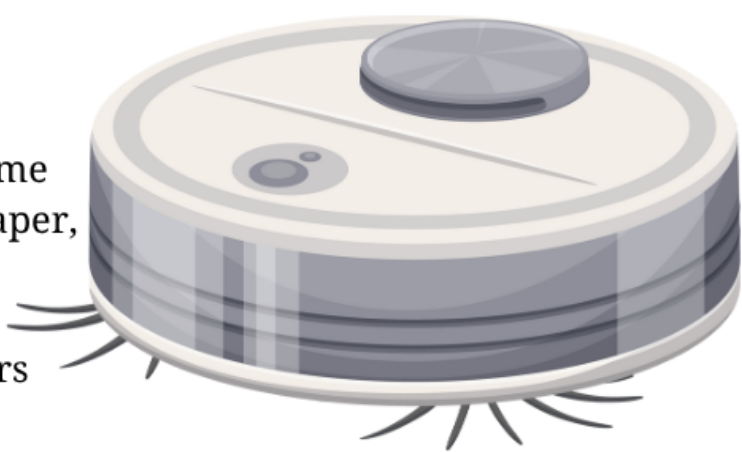
An Ode to My Phone Case

Phone case, thou art magnificent,
I cannot express in words, thy beauty,
Ah, phone case, so iridescent
Thou dost so much for me, mutely.

Oh, phone case, gallant and noble,
Guarding my phone day and night,
Fame thou wilt receive, yes, global,
For serving my phone 'til twilight.

Such is thy story, O phone case,
To witness thy sparkle they throng,
Thy shine makes thy mates gormless,
In thy world, thou canst not go wrong.

Aabha Sardesai



An Ode to the Vacuum Cleaner

Vacuum cleaner, vacuum cleaner
Powerful and loyal knight!
Without your light-speed sucking skills,
Deadly dust bits would win the fight.

Vacuum cleaner, vacuum cleaner
You always, always make us proud
Be it bread crumbs or bubble gum,
Your space is bigger than a cloud

Vacuum cleaner, vacuum cleaner
Your mighty roar gives dust a fright
When dust sees you roam all around,
It has to sadly say, "Good night."

Vacuum cleaner, vacuum cleaner
You are our best weapon that cleans
With you we will attack the dust,
And just destroy it by all means!

Aymen Hussaini



An Ode to the Volume Button on My TV Remote

Oh volume button, so sleek, so skilled,
In armour of rubber, my valiant knight,
Movies and shows, they fall at your feet,
Your frame, though tiny, surges with might .

My only hope when I'm in need,
You merciful thing, you spare me yells.
You spare me my parents' indignant orders,
"Turn it down!" "Go watch somewhere else!"

If I'm watching a corny Hindi romance,
And some Auntie is being a bit over-the-top,
Before my face can morph into a cringe,
You calm her down, put her cries to a stop.

When the rain gods rage, unleash their fury,
Determined to stop me from hearing a sound,
So effortlessly, you save the day,
Under your rule, the rain gods are drowned.

Oh volume button, patient and kind,
Though filled with power, you never gloat.
My saviour from parents, aunties and gods,
You're the greatest button on that remote!

Advika Gupta



An Ode to My Space Bar

Oh key of quiet power and grace,
You sit unnoticed in your place,
While others shout with light and flair,
All you offer is open air

The sleekest key of greatest length,
Most fail to see your strength,
Yet without you, chaos would reign,
Typing would be a royal pain

Letters would blur, a tangled stream,
No end in sight, no space between
Words would lose their identity,
Then we'd see your necessity

Between commands, between each thought,
Only with you is meaning brought,
In all twenty six, there isn't one,
That can do all that you have done

Oh gap and glue that saves the day,
The one who clears the crowded way.
A quiet hero, tried and true—
The world writes better thanks to you.

Avani Gupta



Ode to My Bed

Oh, Bed, you seductive temptress,
How dare you tempt me again?
You work so hard to impress
Oh, wait! You win again.

Wrapped in your velvet embrace,
Responsibilities fade to mist,
I drift beyond time and space.
Your softness, I can't resist.

You cheeky little empress
Origin of my dreams,
Draped in midnight's satin dress,
Time drifts like a silent breeze.

I am snug as a bug in a rug
Wrapped up as a human burrito
You are my heavenly hug
More addictive than a Cheeto.

Neha Vidyashankar



An Ode to the Nail of the Pinky on My Left Hand

Unsung hero, a worker of magic,
Life without you would truly be tragic.
The nail of the pinky of my left hand,
In my opinion, quite tall, you stand.

Elegant and sincere, strong and sleek,
Yet so humble, simple and meek.
Performing duties in your quiet way,
Over my heart, only you hold sway.

When a pair of scissors just can't be found,
You're the one who's always around.
When my right hand is a bit occupied,
You're the one who stands right by my side.

Cutting packets open with a single slice,
Just one stroke, measured and precise.
Whenever I have an itch in my ear,
You are the one who is always near.

Courageous nail, you are delicate but tough,
Venturing into the water. Is it hot enough?
Multipurpose, a jack of each trade,
In any work I do, I need your aid.

Oh, brave nail, it tears me apart,
When I have to trim you, it breaks my heart.
The other nine nails can't compare to you.
Oh, brave nail, you are selfless and true!

Sunandini Sen



Free Verse: What is hope?

What is hope?

it's the ability to see the silver lining,
a fragile promise
to see possibility when all seems lost
or a fantasy that leads to disappointment
it brings expectation
something to hold on to when you have nothing else,
it's the eternal spark inside you
that keeps the fire from extinguishing,
it's the start of a smile
this is hope

Advika Gupta and Avani Gupta

What is hope?

to see the bright side in everything, from tiny to big;
to not lose faith in each other;
to make a change for the better;
to not stay hidden when needed;
to listen and not just speak, to hear and not just be heard;
to help yourself and not just others;
to pick the right side, and not the better-looking one;
to be the change your world needs;
to make a difference when nobody believes;
to see hope, wherever you go.

Aarav Khandelia and Aarya Jain Baldawa



Free Verse: When

When you can stand for the small,
When you can embrace failure,
When you can push fear away even when it is
hypnotising you,
When you can see hope in times of grave peril,

When you can become the light when darkness
is looming,
When you can take success as a checkpoint, not
a reason to brag,
When you can decide between right and wrong,
When you can make memories, wherever you
go,

When your luck is against you, and you work
harder, not quit,
When your friend is sad and you put your arm
around him and say, "Hey, it's okay,"
When everybody's in a lockdown, but you're
the only one having fun,
When you never fail to do the right thing,

When somebody tells you, "I love you,"
When you put a smile on somebody's face,
When death is at your doorstep, you close your
eyes and tell the world, "Thank you,"
This is when you realise you have fulfilled your
life's purpose.

Aarav Khandelia



When the world looks bleak, dreary, cold,
Be the warm, shining sun.

When the world is engulfed in silence,
Scream out your opinions.

When the world is lying, deceiving, cunning,
Be the spark of truth.

When the world is black, dark, grim,
Look at it through rose-coloured glasses.

When the the world hates, loathes, fights,
Feel the love in your soul.

When the world keeps you caged, confined, locked,
Feel the freedom in your veins.

When the world tells you to change, deviate, differ,
Be yourself.



Aabha Sardesai

when right and wrong cannot be told apart,
when the strongest of people decide to give up,
when lives are risked,
when pain is scored into people's souls,

when happiness cannot be seen,
when weapons are thrown into citizens' hands,
when hunger strikes,
when children witness death,

when there is no end in sight,
when the world is full of conflict,
when it is not possible to make a change,
this is war

Aarya Jain Baldawa





when you stand up for friend or foe
even when all around you are pulling you down
when you can stay happy
and keep calm when angry or sad

when misery and happiness appear
and you treat them the same
when you can see hope when all is falling
when you put a smile on someone's face
when you can choose the right side

when no matter how rugged the path is,
you keep moving and never quit
when you embrace change

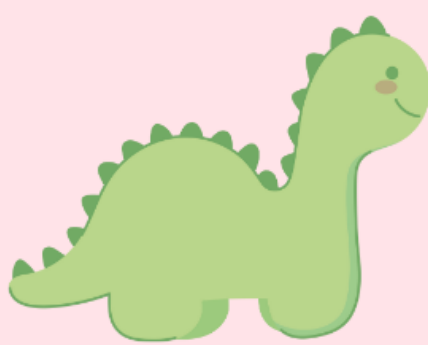
this is when you have succeeded

Kabir Srinivasan

when you stand up for someone
when you never quit
when you see light in the darkness
when you see good in everyone
when you admit your mistakes
when you embrace failure
when you know when to stop
when you're open to all
when you trust each other
when you're the reason somebody smiles
then you know you have a beautiful life.

Sinchana Prasad





when you dream about the beach
instead of algebra
when ice cream replaces textbooks
when time speeds up again, then finally
you know it's over

when birthdays come too fast
instead of not soon enough
when stuffed toys gather dust instead of secrets
when home becomes a place you visit, not live in
you know it's over

when hour long calls
turn to rare minutes
when silence replaces the goodnight texts
when all they've become is a memory
you know it's over

when your breath slips out
but doesn't return
when your hands stop reaching and simply rest
when the clock keeps ticking, just not for you
you know it's truly over

Avani Gupta





A time
When Santa was real,
Magic was realer.
When I could ask someone, "Will you be my best friend?"
And they would.
I wonder,
Where did it go?

A time
When my mistakes were endearing.
When I wasn't told "This is the real world."
Shaded.
Shielded.
I sigh,
Where did it go?

A time
When I didn't want a time machine.
When moments were just that,
Moments.
When I didn't need to hold on to them for dear life.
I scream,
Where did it go?

A time
When I didn't care so much.
I whisper,
Where did it go?

Advika Gupta





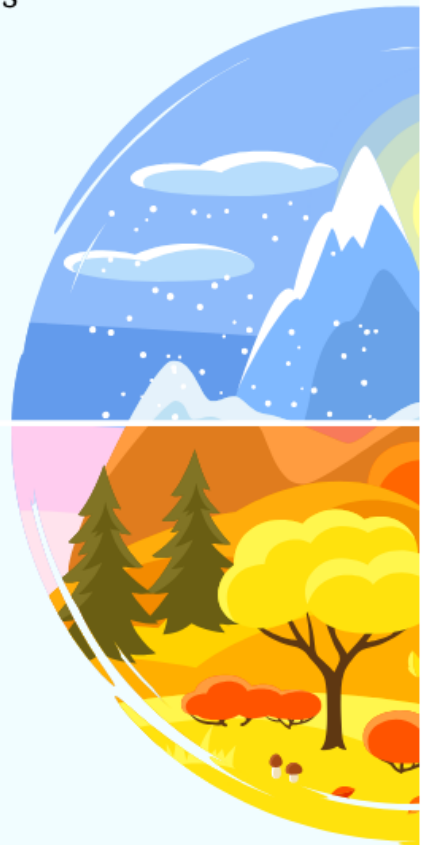
when the a.c. turns back on
when thick blankets go into their drawers
when mangoes make their grand return
i just begin to take summer in,
and everything starts smelling like mud and moisture
and clothes stay damp forever
and rainbows play hide and seek in the grey
i think i could get used to monsoon but
now days grow short and naps grow long
now mothers force sweaters onto unwilling shoulders
now tea and soup and hot chocolate rule the world
i've just made winter's acquaintance,
when the a.c. turns back on

Janvi Barman

When the ornaments go back into the box,
When the lights are taken down,
When the family returns home,
When the clouds block the daylight,
When the forests are bleak and the grass dank,
When curtains close,
Hope fades away.

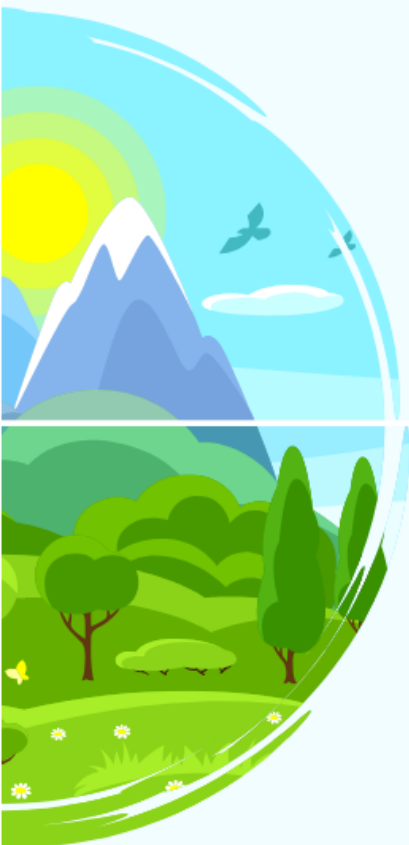
When the first flower blooms,
When the leaves grow back,
And the grass feels warm and mellow,
When tangerine daylight dapples through the curtains,
When you step out,
And your lips tilt towards the sun,
Begin again.

Ronikaa Vijan





When snow melts, Christmas trees are packed away,
and flowers start to bloom,
When butterflies come out to play like little angels
flying around,
When green grass grows tall with joy absorbing energy
from the sunlight,
It's spring, but it goes on too fast for you to keep up.



When grasslands turn into searing hot grounds, and
sun rays shimmer brightly,
When ice-cream floods through your mind like ocean
waves again and again,
When swimming pools reopen and sunscreen blinds
you as kids scream with joy,
It's summer, but it goes on too fast for you to keep up.

When swimming toys are deflated, and school starts
once again,
When trees whisper an orange tune as their leaves fall,
When you stroll through the park for a walk, and see
maple leaves spread all around,
It's autumn, but it goes on too fast for you to keep up.

When crushed leaves get covered by cloud-white snow,
and Christmas is around the corner,
When you go out, armed with coats and mittens, as if
prepared for war,
When it's the perfect time to go for a ski and marvel at
the beautiful snowmen,
It's winter, but it goes on too fast for you to keep up.

Aymen Husseni





**VARSHA SESHAN'S ONLINE CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAMME:
GUEST SESSION #29**

Mise en Scène

Lighting and
Colour

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION!

WITH SAMINA MISHRA

Editing

Costumes

Use of
Space

Props

Sound

Character
Blocking

Cinematography

GUEST SESSION #29

03 MAY 2025

STAGE PLAYS

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| 29 | Cracking the Swift Code Aabha Sardesai |
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| 38 | Aditya Vs The Education System Zaheer Vakeel |
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The Panipuri Making Contest

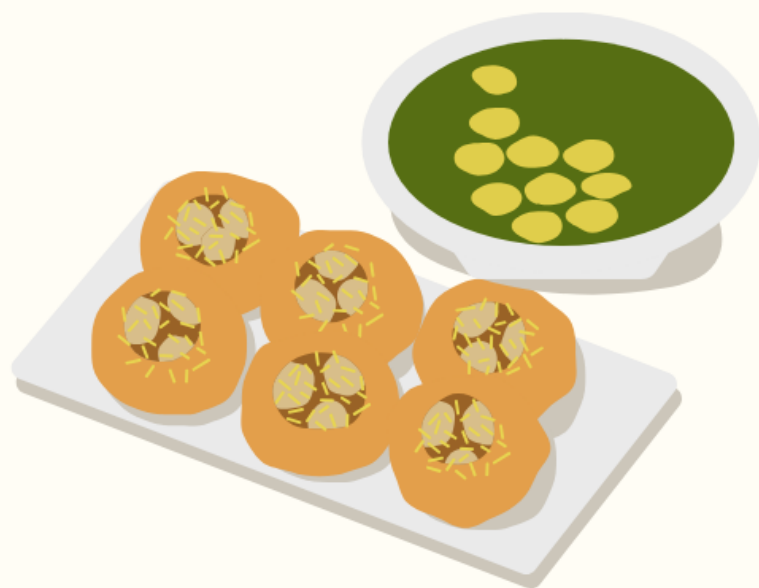
Kabir Srinivasan

CAST

RUFF - Dog
HOP - Rabbit
BLAZE - Dragon
MARK - Monkey
FEATHERS - Eagle
JOE - Host

SCENE 1

A cooking contest.



JOE Hello everyone! This is the first ever animal panipuri cooking contest on earth. Today, our contestants are Ruff, Hop, Blaze, Feathers and Mark. They will make a special type of panipuri each within an hour.

BLAZE I can't wait to start!

JOE You will start in, 5 ... 4 ... 3 ... 2... and 1, go!

(glimpse of them working, BLACKOUT)

JOE Our contestants have been working hard but it is time to see who has won! Time to call them back from the kitchen!

RUFF I have made a kibble and chicken flavoured masala with sweet and salted milk as the water. I hope you like it! I call it the Dog Mash!

FEATHERS I have made a masala with spiced duck liver and anchovies for crunch. For the pani, I have used normal sea water. It's called the Bird Bomb.

MARK Hey everybody, having a nice day? My panipuri is made with mashed bananas as the solid and for the water, I used spiced apple juice! Yum! It's called , the Fruit Bash.

HOP My panipuri has gajar ka halwa for the stuffing and a sweet water of rose syrup. It's called the Carrot Crunch.

JOE Last but not least, it's Blaze!

BLAZE Hello, I can't hear anything!

(Cheering is heard.)

BLAZE That's better! I'm ready to roll. Not literally, though! My dish is called the Sweet Tooth! For the base, I used waffle and the stuffing is a scoop of ice cream, varnished with bubble tea.

JOE Okay, time for tasting!

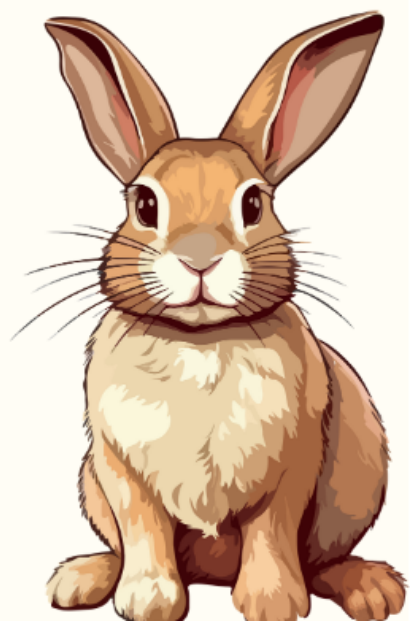
(BLACKOUT)

JOE We have the results, and the two competitors that will go to the finals are ... Blaze and Hop!!

RUFF I'll cheer for you, Blaze!

JOE The finals will commence tomorrow, so have a good night's sleep and come back tomorrow!

(BLACKOUT)





SCENE 2

The same, the next day.

JOE Okay, the finals between Hop and Blaze will start in 3 ... 2 ...1, and go!

BLAZE I'm gonna win this with my signature Panipuri Flambé.

(Glimpse of them working, BLACKOUT)

HOP Blaze's looks so tasty! I must sabotage him; otherwise there is no way to win. Blaze is not looking; now's my chance to pour bitter gourd juice into his dish so I win.

JOE Time's up! Plate your dish! First up, Hop!

HOP I made a vegetable masala with the pani being carrot juice.

BLAZE I made a panipuri flambé with pork belly and peppercorn sauce.

JOE Tasting time! First, Hop's. (*tastes*) That was good! Time for Blaze's. (*tastes*) Yuck! It's so bitter! I am honoured to say that the winner is ... Hop! Blaze, yours was so bitter! The prize is ...

RUFF STOP!!

JOE What happened?

RUFF Look at this video of Hop! He put bitter gourd in Blaze's dish!

JOE Looks like Hop's not the winner anymore; the prize goes to Blaze! It is the panipuri stall over there!

BLAZE Yay! Time to get to work!

(CURTAIN)



Cracking the Swift Code

Aabha Sardesai

CAST

BETTY - the idiotic, psychotic Taylor Swift super fan

OLIVIA - the sporty best friend, who is probably the only person who can put up with her non-stop nonsense!

SCENE 1

BETTY, looking at her laptop, scrolling music videos in a messy bedroom receiving very little sunlight. OLIVIA is speaking to her through a WhatsApp conference call.

BETTY Olivia, I've been hunched over this laptop for hours together, but I've made zero progress with any of the Easter Eggs. What am I doing wrong?

OLIVIA *(tossing a ball around in her room)* I'm telling you, Betty, sitting here on a conference call with me, scrolling paranoidly through Taylor's Insta posts and music videos, and blabbering continuously isn't gonna get you anywhere. What you really need is daylight. *(singing)* You only need daylight, daylight, daylight, dayliiiiight. *(stops singing)* Taylor even has a song about it!

BETTY But--

OLIVIA No buts! Remember the feel of sunshine, Bet! Remember the fun of playing cricket! Plus, you need Vitamin D!

BETTY I have enough Vitamin D! I NEED to know when Reputation (Taylor's Version) is coming out! It's no longer a pastime! It's a necessity!!





(OLIVIA ends the call.)

BETTY Hello! Hello? Olivia!? Ol-urrggh!

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE 2

OLIVIA'S bedroom.

BETTY Whaddaya think she means by putting an apple in a photo frame?

OLIVIA Well, knowing Taylor's references in Rep, I would think she means, maybe, poisoned apple? Like from 'Snow White'?

BETTY Oh! I know! She probably means poisoned apple! Like from 'Snow White!' Imma genius! *(looking genuinely confused)* Wait, there's a poisoned apple? In 'Snow White'?

OLIVIA *(rolling her eyes)* Yes genius. Evil stepmother? Seven dwarfs' house? Murder? Ring a bell?

BETTY Wait, what? Murder rings a bell at the evil dwarf's seventh house? You're such an idiot Olivia!

OLIVIA *(losing all patience)* I have karate class now.

BETTY What do you do in karate class?

OLIVIA *(pushing BETTY out of her room)* KA-huh-RA-urrrggghhh-TE! *(succeeds in pushing her out)*

BETTY Bye!

OLIVIA *(angrily)* Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye!

BETTY Hey, you just quoted 'Bigger Than the Whole Sky' by TS!

(Silence)

BETTY 'Kay I'm leaving!

(No reply)

BETTY Hmmpphh!

(BLACKOUT)



SCENE 3

BETTY'S bedroom, now messier.

BETTY *(dialling a number on her phone, excited)* Olivia! I found out when Rep (TV) is coming out!

OLIVIA Actually, I--

BETTY Shut up! Okay, so, in her live surprise performance of 'Wonderland', which is a deluxe track off 1989, which is the era before Rep--

OLIVIA I think yo--

BETTY --halfway through. there's this weird sounding cat's meow, 'kay, so that's Olivia Benson's meow BTW, so when you play it backwards, it sounds like Marie Antoinette, turns out she was this queen lady who said she liked watching 'Is It Cake?' or something and all these peasant people--

OLIVIA Maybe you--

BETTY --got seriously mad and ripped her head off with this thing that was called a guillotine, which is a word with a LOT of extra letters, so anyway, she died on 16th October so Tay's releasing it on 16th October 2025!

OLIVIA She already released it, Bet.

(Five-second silence. Then BETTY screams and throws her phone across the room. CURTAIN)

Chicken Invasion!

Aarav Khandelia



CAST

PANI

PURI

THE CHICKENS

SCENE 1

Inside a house.

PANI Hey Puri, Papa and Mummy are gone, let's destroy the house!

PURI No Pani, we should chill and watch YouTube Shorts.

PANI Oh Puri, how boring can you get? Let's make elephant toothpaste!

(The door creaks open and a fat CHICKEN gives them a deadly side eye.)

CHICKEN Cluck.

(CHICKENS start running forward into the house at full speed.)

PURI Was that a war cry?

PANI Who cares? Run!!!!

PURI Oh come on Pani, they're cute little chickens, how dangerous can they be?

(One CHICKEN walks up to Puri and firmly bites her finger.)

PANI Run!

(The twins run up to their bedroom. BLACKOUT)

SCENE 2

In the bedroom.

PURI What is wrong with those chickens? They are mad! Look at that; there's an egg on your head! Wait a second, why is there a chicken egg on your head??

PANI What? Get it off of me, ahhhhhhh!!

PURI Chill Pani, all we have to do is shoo those chickens out of our house. Then we can remove the eggs.

PANI Okay, let's go.

(BLACKOUT)



SCENE 3

Outside the bedroom. Stairs leading down.

PANI *(opens door)* Oh god, there are like hundreds of eggs on the floor! What do we do?

PURI Let's tiptoe past the eggs and shoo the chickens out.

PANI There goes one now, let's go.

PURI *(running)* They are fast, how about we trap them and then push them out.

PANI We'll set the traps right away. By morning, we will have them rounded up!

PURI Let's place some corn here, here and here. That'll lead them right to this cage. I have attached a camera to the cage, that way, when all of them come, I'll run down and shut it!

(BLACKOUT)



SCENE 4

At the bedroom doorway.

PANI Hey Puri, I just saw the last one come in! I looked through the security cameras and there are no more chickens in the house!

PURI Great, let's go and set the chickens free outside. Be careful not to step on the eggs.

(They tiptoe down the stairs.)

PANI *(picks up the cage and sets it outside)* Be free, chickens!

PURI Phew, now that there're gone, what should we do about the eggs?

PANI I don't know, how about we break one and see what happens?

PURI *(breaks an egg)* Wait a second. It's a note from Mummy-Papa, it says, "Each egg contains a treat, help yourselves!"

PANI *(stares at PURI)* Are you thinking what I am thinking?

PURI *(nods)* If we get the chickens back in we will get even more treats.

(They run out the door.)

PANI Oh no, the chickens have left, and there are only about a hundred eggs and treats waiting for us inside!

PURI Are you sure you can't see them? It would be nice to have some more treats waiting for us.

PANI We should eat up, what if the treats melt?

PURI *(grins)* Then what are we waiting for, let's eat it all!

(CURTAIN)



Ankal Uncle's Disaster

Aarya Jain Baldawa

CAST

MAHI – calm, practical

AVANI – sarcastic, not afraid to speak her mind

YASH – hungry, just wants food

ANKAL UNCLE – fat and completely clueless

MAGGI – a dog



SCENE

Aloo Uncle's vadapav stall. Handwritten sign: Under new management – Gourmet Chef, Ankal uncle

MAHI, AVANI, and YASH arrive at the stall. ANKAL UNCLE is standing dramatically behind the counter, his stomach pressing against his apron. He's wiping his hands on the apron like he's a professional chef, holding a spatula like it's a sword.

MAHI Where's Aloo Uncle?

ANKAL UNCLE *(puffing out his chest to show off his belly)* Navi Mumbai. IKEA. Aloo Uncle is shopping while I, Ankal Uncle, am about to give you the food experience of your life!

YASH Just three vada pavs, and three sugarcane juices. No "experiences", please.

ANKAL UNCLE *(grinning with confidence)* Yeah, fine, but food isn't just about eating, it's about feeling it, living it, breathing it. Welcome to my gourmet world!

(He grabs a potato, drops it on the floor, picks it up, and starts mashing it with one hand. The batter flies everywhere. He confidently drops it into the fryer, dipping his hand in the oil too.)

ANKAL UNCLE *(shouting, his belly jiggling as he jumps back)* AIEEE!
MY HAND—MY HAND IS THE VADA PAV!

MAHI *(trying to suppress a laugh)* You're supposed to fry
the vada, not your fingers.

ANKAL UNCLE *(ignoring her, clutching his hand and rubbing his
belly for comfort)* This is creativity at work!
Greatness requires sacrifice!

*(He stumbles over to the sugarcane machine, jams the cane in too hard.
The machine starts squeezing juice, but it comes out a strange reddish
colour. His finger gets caught in the press, and he screams louder, his
belly bouncing as he pulls away.)*

ANKAL UNCLE *(raising his hand dramatically, his face a mix of
shock and outrage)* NOOO! MY FINGER! MY FINGER
IS PART OF THE JUICE NOW! AYYEEE!

YASH Uncle, that's not juice, that's ... well, it looks like
blood.

AVANI *(sarcastically)* Ah yes, blood and sugar—the perfect
combination.

*(ANKAL UNCLE, now fully caught up in his own drama, turns to the
pavs, which are clearly burning. He waves his hand through the smoke
like he's conducting a symphony, his belly swaying dramatically with
every move.)*

AVANI *(turning to YASH)* I
didn't know the
pavs are supposed
to be cooked?

YASH *(disgusted and fed
up)* THEY AREN'T!

ANKAL UNCLE *(shouting like he's in
the middle of a
grand opera)* The
pavs! The pavs are
in the flames of
passion! It's all part
of the process!



MAHI No, Uncle. They're literally on fire.

ANKAL UNCLE *(sweating, his belly heaving as he struggles to control the chaos around him)* Fire! Fire! But it's not just any fire ... it's the fire of creativity! Of culinary brilliance! Why must true genius always be misunderstood?!

YASH *(taking a step back)* We're just looking for food, Uncle. Not a drama series.

AVANI *(turning to leave)* Honestly, Uncle, I think even Maggi would walk away from this disaster.

(AVANI points to MAGGI, a street dog. ANKAL UNCLE falls to his knees, clutching his badly put together vada pav as if it's his last hope, hands extended to MAGGI. MAGGI sniffs the pav and eats it.)

ANKAL UNCLE *(grinning)* See, Maggi appreciates my greatness!

(MAGGI pukes. The kids walk away, shaking their heads. ANKAL UNCLE sits there in a cloud of smoke. CURTAIN)



Aditya Vs The Education System

Zaheer Vakeel

CAST

ABHISHEK
OMAR
SHANTANU
ADITYA
MRS KUTE
SAUL GOODMAN
SCHOOL'S LAWYER



SCENE 1

Late morning. A slightly chaotic 8th grade classroom. A whiteboard is covered in half-erased math problems. Students are at their desks. The teacher, MRS KUTE, is preparing to teach a new math chapter while students mutter and complain.

ABHISHEK Hey Omar, you're late again. What were you doing, wrestling traffic single-handedly?

OMAR (*annoyed*) I was just walking, man. You always have something to say.

SHANTANU Yeah, you were probably solving world hunger on the way here.

OMAR (*sighs, tired*) Ma'am, they're picking on me again.

MRS KUTE (*sarcastically*) Oh wow, what a shocker. Why are you both always up to something? (*She laughs.*) All right, class. We are going to be starting a new chapter in math now. It is known as fractions.

OMAR,
ABHISHEK,
SHANTANU

Ah rats, here we go again.

ABHISHEK

Does this teacher have any common sense? What good is learning fractions going to do to us?

OMAR

You wouldn't know how to count if you had not learnt math.

SHANTANU

We're in the eight grade, genius. All the useful math you ever learn is before class six. So basically, what we're doing here is wasting our time—sitting in this pigeonhole of a classroom making ramen noodles out of the remaining brain cells we have left.

OMAR

(firmly) Our parents admitted us here. Surely, they must have sensed something good about education. After all, our parents are our best friends.

ABHISHEK

(sarcastically) That's what you think, dingus. The real reason they sent us here is the government's compulsory education policies and laws. If they had a choice, they would've invented a much better institution—teaching us all the real stuff we'll actually need in life.

ADITYA

(confused) Guys ... something's going on with me. M-my h-head doesn't feel so g-good ...

ABHISHEK

(worriedly) Do you want to go to the infirmary?

ADITYA

No, I-it's temporary. I'll get well in a minute.

(ADITYA puts his head down and goes to sleep. Within a minute, his body is completely turned to dust, leaving only his clothes behind. The friends stand silently, staring at the pile of clothes where ADITYA used to be.)

OMAR

He... he just disappeared.

SHANTANU

No, he evaporated. That's different. It's what happens when you push someone past their breaking point with too many fractions.



ABHISHEK Guys, Aditya didn't die. He rage-quit existence.
OMAR Should we tell someone? Like the principal?
SHANTANU What's the point? They'll probably hand us
 more worksheets.
ABHISHEK You know what? I've had enough. Aditya
 deserved better. You can't just fry someone's
 brain with tests and pretend nothing
 happened.
OMAR But what can we do? This is a school, not a
 court of law.
SHANTANU Who said anything about law? (*dramatic pause*)
 We need a lawyer.
ABHISHEK But not just any lawyer ...
ALL (*looking at each other and*
 then whispering in unison)
 Saul Goodman.

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE 2

An office with loud furniture. A cardboard cutout of Saul Goodman holds a sign that says "I fight for YOU". SAUL rotates dramatically in his chair.

SAUL GOODMAN Did someone say wrongful educational-
 induced evaporation? You've come to the right
 guy. I've sued dry cleaners for emotional
 distress. I've sued vending machines for false
 hope. Suing a school? Child's play.
OMAR Our friend turned into dust. We think the
 pressure from school did it.
SAUL GOODMAN Sounds like a case of terminal academic
 overload. Classic. Textbook. I'll have the Board
 of Education crying before lunch.
ABHISHEK How much will it cost?
SAUL GOODMAN For you? A discount. Just give me one
 unopened packet of ramen and a meme-
 worthy witness statement.

(BLACKOUT)





SCENE 3

A grand courtroom. JUDGE presides over the bench while lawyers and students take their places. A table with huge stacks of homework and textbooks sits in the centre.

JUDGE Counsel, your clients claim their friend evaporated because of fractions?

SAUL GOODMAN Your Honour, I present Exhibit A: the fraction textbook responsible. And Exhibit B: the emotionally scarring homework pile. This isn't education. This is academic terrorism.

(Gasps in the courtroom)

SCHOOL'S LAWYER Objection! That's absurd!

SAUL GOODMAN You're absurd. Your Honour, when you were thirteen, did you want to learn fractions or play football?

JUDGE *(softly)* Play football.

SAUL GOODMAN Exactly.

(JUDGE smashes the gavel.)

JUDGE Based on the evidence provided, this court hereby sentences the school board to one full year of mandatory attendance in an 8th-grade math class taught by their own worst teacher, who, of course, will be selected by the students.

(CURTAIN)

Disclaimer: Zaheer does not own the character Saul Goodman, who originates from the television series *Breaking Bad* and its spin-off *Better Call Saul*, created by Vince Gilligan and Peter Gould. All other characters and the setting are original.

Accidentally (Un)Lucky

Nirai Iniyen

CAST

ALTHEA - a herpetologist-witch

CASTOR - a snake and twin brother of POLLUX

POLLUX - a snake and twin brother of CASTOR

OLIVIA JACKSON - a banker

CUSTOMERS

WAITER



SCENE 1

A house with a beautiful garden in front of it. Two snakes, CASTOR and POLLUX, are lying around in the garden under the sun. The door to the house is thrown open.

ALTHEA I'll kill him! I'll flay his hide after turning his entire body inside out, and feed his flesh to the crows!

POLLUX (*lazily*) What'd he do, boss?

ALTHEA He told me to get *car insurance*!

CASTOR (*nods*) You do drive recklessly.

ALTHEA What did you say?!

CASTOR Nothing!

POLLUX But it wouldn't hurt to have insurance, would it Althea? I mean, it's always good to have backups--

ALTHEA Pollux ... are you accusing me of bad driving?

POLLUX (*shaking his head*) No, no, I would never! Althea, come on, do you really think I would do such a thing?

CASTOR He's right; I would.

POLLUX *(hisses)* Shut up, Castor!

ALTHEA Yes, shut up, Castor! How dare that infernal consultant invite me to his house just to insult me?! Car insurance? Bah, who needs it? I certainly don't-- I'm a brilliant driver!

CASTOR *(aside to POLLUX)* Do we tell her Pollux?

POLLUX I repeat, brother dearest ... shut up!

ALTHEA *(jumping up excitedly)* I know what I'll do! I'll place a nice little curse on him, make him regret ever mocking me, that weasel.

POLLUX Must we really?

ALTHEA Of course we must, Pollux! I'm a witch! What's the point of being a witch--

CASTOR And a herpetologist.

ALTHEA --and a herpetologist if you don't get to curse someone every once in a while? Now, what are we thinking? We make sure his nostril hair never stops growing? How about a curse that ensures he keeps stepping on Lego?

CASTOR Oh, oh, I know! We make him unlucky!

ALTHEA *(scoffs)* That's boring.

CASTOR *(meekly)* Unnaturally unlucky?

POLLUX That's good! You don't get caught, and he gets cursed--two birds with one stone!

CASTOR What kind of birds?

POLLUX Does it matter?

CASTOR Of course it matters! Personally, I like pigeon. Crows are fine and all, but a little chewy, and the bones are more hollow.

ALTHEA *(hisses)* Quiet, you two! I've got to concentrate! With heart of vice comes this curse in hand, I give to thee the worst luck in the land!



(CASTOR and POLLUX look up curiously. As they look into the window of the house, OLIVIA enters that room.)

- CASTOR Wait, wait, wait hold up--who is that?
- ALTHEA *(nervously)* It shouldn't matter, should it? I mean, the curse shouldn't affect her ...
- POLLUX Did you specify who you were cursing?!
- ALTHEA ... no.
- POLLUX Boss!
- ALTHEA Well, how was I supposed to know he lived with someone else?!
- CASTOR You should have--who do you think made the biscuits? Not that guy, that's for sure; he looked like he could set the house on fire by cooking!
- ALTHEA Castor ... you knew someone else lived there?
- CASTOR *(obliviously)* Yep; that's his sister. She seems nice.
- ALTHEA Why didn't you tell me, you bumbling buffoon?!
- CASTOR *(confused)* I was supposed to?
- POLLUX Castor, you idiot! You're lucky the curse wears out in a couple weeks!
- ALTHEA *(rubs the back of her neck)* Hehe, about that ...

POLLUX *(facetails himself)* Of course it doesn't wear out in a few weeks ... what was I thinking? Nothing in our lives should ever be easy, should it?!

CASTOR So how do we break the curse, boss?

ALTHEA *(finds spellbook in pocket, skims through it)* Let's see ... the heart is an important part in many spells. Feelings, as well as character--that is, being a good or bad person--often stems from it. This is the case for luck-related spells as well, often being the holder of a person's luck ...

POLLUX Uh huh ...

ALTHEA It says I should shoot her in the heart.

POLLUX What?!

ALTHEA With a harpoon gun.

CASTOR So cool!

POLLUX That is not cool!

ALTHEA According to the spellbook, she'll be revived.

POLLUX That spellbook is 200 years old, it has no idea what it is saying! And on top of that, why a harpoon gun?!

ALTHEA Well, it's actually the easiest way too--

OLIVIA *(walking in)* Excuse me?

CASTOR *(aside to POLLUX)* Pollux, human! Pollux, duck!

POLLUX *(irritated as he hides)* Which is it, a human or a duck?

ALTHEA Hey! You ...

OLIVIA *(laughs)* I'm Olivia Jackson. You were just in a consultation with my brother; I made the biscuits.

ALTHEA And they were delicious!

OLIVIA Were they? I was trying out a new recipe, you know. But actually, I didn't come out here to talk about my biscuits.

ALTHEA Oh, really? You know, we could just--



OLIVIA You looked a little agitated from the window. Now that I was particularly paying any attention! I just happened to notice, you know.

ALTHEA No, no, yeah, yeah, noticing. No, I'm perfectly fine.

OLIVIA Even with your car insurance? My brother told me you didn't look particularly pleased during the consultation.

ALTHEA Well, that's because I didn't ask for a stupid car insurance consultation (*both CASTOR and POLLUX hit her subtly*) ... but I realised how desperately I needed one!

OLIVIA Well, is there anything I can do to help? I am a banker, you know.

ALTHEA Are you now? Well, I would absolutely love to talk about ... (*grits teeth*) car insurance with such an expert!

OLIVIA Great! How about over dinner?

ALTHEA Tonight? I know a great Italian place!

OLIVIA Sounds perfect!

ALTHEA I'll pick you up at 8 then!

OLIVIA See you then ... Althea, right?

ALTHEA Yep! (*sighs as OLIVIA exits*) Oh, thank god, she's gone. My cheeks hurt from all the smiling.

POLLUX Well, that settles it! You're fixing this problem tonight, and then we can forget all about it!

CASTOR (*excitedly*) And you'll get car insurance!

ALTHEA Don't remind me!

POLLUX Uh, Althea ... what are you doing?

ALTHEA Googling how to sneak a harpoon gun into a restaurant.

POLLUX That's fair.

(BLACKOUT)





SCENE 2

A crowded Italian restaurant at night. ALTHEA and OLIVIA are seated at a table with two menus open in front of them. POLLUX and CASTOR are peeking out from underneath ALTHEA's chair. CUSTOMERS are sitting around them and there is a WAITER running around the room.

OLIVIA So Althea, you never told me what you do. Something exciting, I can tell.

ALTHEA *(nervously)* Exciting? Whatever gave you that idea?

OLIVIA *(shrugs)* I don't know, you just seem the type.

ALTHEA *(pats her head, jokes)* Is it my hairstyle?

OLIVIA *(snorts, covers her mouth, embarrassed)* Oh my god, I am so sorry!

ALTHEA Don't worry, I have a pretty horrible laugh too. And I actually work as a herpetologist.

OLIVIA What is that? I know the '-tologist' part means that you probably study something but what do you study?

ALTHEA *(beaming)* Snakes.

CASTOR *(aside to ALTHEA)* You forgot the "witch" part, Althea.

ALTHEA *(hisses)* Shut up, Castor.

OLIVIA *(obliviously)* Did you say something?

ALTHEA What, no! I just said you probably don't want to hear about that stuff.

CASTOR *(aside to ALTHEA)* Rude.

OLIVIA Are you kidding me?! That sounds amazing!

ALTHEA *(surprised)* Really?

OLIVIA Of course! You know, snakes always fascinated me, especially when I was younger. I couldn't handle all the biology that would come with researching them though!

CASTOR *(aside to POLLUX)* You know, I think I'm going to like her, Pollux.

POLLUX Sounds fascinating, Castor. Now her getting killed in this whole business is the only problem, isn't it?!

CASTOR Are we sure she even got cursed?

POLLUX *(deadpanned look)* I'm sorry, did you hear her laugh? If that isn't a curse, I don't know what is. And Althea, make the gun more upright.

ALTHEA I'll look like an idiot! Olivia will definitely figure it out then!

OLIVIA Sorry, did you say something Althea? My ears are quite clogged today from swimming; air bubbles and all.

ALTHEA You don't say ... just saying I should check with that waiter. He's been taking an awfully long time with our drinks. Ah, there he is right now!





POLLUX (aside to CASTOR) See? Most definitely cursed!

CASTOR Fair. Better get it over with tonight then, before it gets worse.

OLIVIA Thank you so much! (takes drink from WAITER, accidentally spills it over ALTHEA) Althea!

ALTHEA (mutters) Of course I'm the one this happens to.

CASTOR (aside to ALTHEA and POLLUX) Doing great, boss! If I had opposable thumbs, they would be up right now!

POLLUX Shut up, Castor!

OLIVIA Oh my god Althea, I am so sorry! I don't know what's gotten into me today, I've just been so clumsy and stupid all day long ...

ALTHEA Oh, don't worry about it! (aside to POLLUX and CASTOR) Considering it's, you know, my fault.

POLLUX (sarcastically) You don't say.

OLIVIA I'll get you tissues! Just wait here, and I'll come back as soon as I can.

ALTHEA Why do these things happen to me?!

CASTOR In defence of the universe, you're kinda the reason this is happening in the first place.

ALTHEA I am not!

POLLUX Yes, you are! You and your terrible driving skills!

ALTHEA (waves harpoon gun) I will shoot you, Pollux!

CASTOR If only you'd gotten car insurance in the first place ...

ALTHEA Shoot you next--hey, Olivia!
 OLIVIA Hey! They ran out of tissues in the bathroom ...
 ALTHEA Of course they did.
 OLIVIA I am so sorry! Today's been horrible and absolutely riddled with bad luck, and I was just hoping that it would wear off before tonight, but it didn't and now I totally messed it up, even though this is probably one of the best dates I've had in a while--
 ALTHEA *(freezes)* Date?
 OLIVIA Oh my god.
 ALTHEA We-well, I guess ...
 OLIVIA Oh my god, I am so stupid! I am so so stupid!
 ALTHEA *(laughs awkwardly)* Clearly not as stupid as me.
 OLIVIA And I made this totally awkward! I'm-I'm sorry... you know, I'll just grab the check, there's no need to ...
 ALTHEA *(blushes)* It probably ... wouldn't be totally terrible ... as a date.
 OLIVIA *(blushes)* Really?
 ALTHEA Yeah! I mean, you're pretty cute ...
 OLIVIA *(snorts, covers her mouth, embarrassed)* Oh god, that again!
 ALTHEA *(laughs)* I guess that's pretty cute too!
 OLIVIA Oh well, um--well, I guess--you know what, I'm going to get the cheeseballs, it's been a while. *(gets up)*
 CASTOR There's your chance boss! Now shoot her, take the harpoon gun and--why are you not shooting her? Pollux, why is she acting depressed?
 POLLUX You'll understand when you're older.
 CASTOR I am your literal twin!
 ALTHEA Hey guys ...
 POLLUX Yeah, Al?
 ALTHEA She's going to die, isn't she?

(CASTOR and POLLUX don't answer. BLACKOUT)



SCENE 3

ALTHEA and OLIVIA are walking in a deserted street at night. POLLUX and CASTOR are hiding behind a bush and waiting.

OLIVIA Tonight was nice, wasn't it?
ALTHEA The best.
POLLUX I can't watch this.
CASTOR (*confused*) But you are ...?
OLIVIA Oh, this is me! My house is right around the corner.
I'll text you?
ALTHEA Uh, yeah, that would be nice.
OLIVIA Hey ... Althea, are you sure you're fine?
ALTHEA Never better Olivia. Never better.
OLIVIA Okay ...
ALTHEA (*blurts out*) Can I have a hug?
OLIVIA (*laughs*) Was that what you were worried about,
silly? 'Cause that's pretty sweet.
POLLUX I can't watch!
CASTOR (*confused*) You're still watching though ...
ALTHEA Hey, Olivia?
OLIVIA Yeah?
ALTHEA You were right ... tonight was pretty great.
OLIVIA Even after I absolutely ruined your dress?

ALTHEA *(laughs)* Even then.
 POLLUX Oh boy, I can't--
 CASTOR Stop telling me you can't watch when you're clearly watching!
 POLLUX It's an expression!
 OLIVIA Did you hear something?
 ALTHEA Must be the wind.
 OLIVIA I guess ...
 ALTHEA *(suddenly)* Wait, Olivia!
 OLIVIA Hmm?
 POLLUX Wait, is she ...
 CASTOR Yep.
 ALTHEA *(sheepishly)* So, I have something to tell you--and you might want to sit down for this ...

(Both OLIVIA and ALTHEA go to sit on a bench by the bush. BLACKOUT)

SCENE 4

ALTHEA is in the living room of a large house. She's sitting at a table and writing something in her notebook. Peeking over her shoulder is POLLUX.

POLLUX I'm pretty sure that's incorrect.
 ALTHEA How do you know?!
 POLLUX Boss, I'm a literal snake. I think I know what I'm talking about.
 ALTHEA Brat, I'm a literal herpetologist. I think I know what I'm talking about too!
 OLIVIA *(offstage)* If this is that debate on whether or not black mambas can fly, Pollux is right!
 POLLUX Ha, take that Althea!
 ALTHEA Olivia, did you just side with Pollux over your literal girlfriend?
 OLIVIA *(enters)* Yes.

(OLIVIA proceeds to trip over thin air, but ALTHEA catches her. CASTOR slithers in.)

ALTHEA *(laughs)* What's this, the fourth time you've tripped today? How are you still so horribly clumsy?

OLIVIA And whose fault is that exactly?!

CASTOR Oo, boss, that's a compelling argument.

ALTHEA I did offer to remove the curse!

OLIVIA By shooting me with a harpoon gun?

ALTHEA I told you we could go to that saint in Shimla!

OLIVIA It's fine; I have a guilty girlfriend who keeps cleaning up my messes.

ALTHEA *(rolls her eyes)* Remind me again why I love you.

OLIVIA How about after my brother's birthday party?

CASTOR Which you are late for?

OLIVIA What? Althea!

ALTHEA Grabbing the car!

POLLUX Oh, we're most definitely doomed.

OLIVIA Don't worry, I secretly applied for car insurance.

(CURTAIN)



The Hall of Records

Aarav Khandelia

CAST

| PUPPIES | KITTENS | JUDGES |
|---------|---------|----------------|
| ZUZU | MISTY | SIR ALISTAIR |
| LILY | PIPPA | SIR BARNABY |
| OREO | RUBY | MADAM LEONARDA |
| MILO | OLIVE | MADAM MILDREDA |
| SIMBA | PIXIE | |
| CHLOE | STORM | |

SCENE 1

Outside a golden hall.

MILO (*whispering*) This is our day, guys! Our day to prove that puppies are superior to kittens.

ZUZU (*impatiently*) That's all well and fine, but is it time to enter the hall yet?

OREO (*irritably*) Zuzu, look at the time, there's still half an hour left before the competition. I told Chloe we didn't have to come this early!

CHLOE (*worriedly*) Oh no, what if the building blows up? What if we lose? What if we die!!!

SIMBA Oh Chloe, stop being such a worrywart.

LILY Guys, how are we going to win if we keep fighting with each other?

(Enter SIR ALISTAIR.)

SIR ALISTAIR Welcome, pups, you may enter the hall and wait for proceedings to commence.

MILO Let's go, guys, it's our time to shine.

(The puppies enter the hall. BLACKOUT)

SCENE 2

In the hall. PUPPIES and KITTENS enter.

STORM Hey guys, look, the slobbering, garbage-smelling, flea-filled dogs have arrived.

PIPPA Nice one, Storm, let's show these puppies how it's done.

MADAM LEONARDA Okay, calm down, kittens. Just because cats are better than dogs doesn't mean we have to go brag about it.

SIR BARNABY Really, Leonarda, you think that cats are better than dogs? Cats are lazy, lounging, fish-loving maniacs.

MADAM MILDREDA Barnaby, Leonarda, we are the elders. We should set an example for the younger kids.

SIR ALISTAIR Let the games begin!!

MADAM MILDREDA First up are Chloe and Misty for the eating contest!!

SIR BARNABY Both of you have a bowl of food waiting in front of you, whichever of you finishes this bowl first, wins!

MADAM LEONARDA Your time begins in, 3, 2, 1, go!

(Roughly ten seconds pass.)

MISTY Done!

CHLOE Done!

SIR ALISTAIR Misty, you finished 0.0021 seconds before Chloe. Congratulations, the first round goes to the cats!



MADAM LEONARDA For the second round, I call forward Simba and Oreo from the dogs' team and Olive and Pippa from the cats' team.

SIR BARNABY This second round is Tug-of-War. The rules are simple: if you get both the opposing team's players across the line, you win. So let's start. 3, 2, 1, go!

MADAM MILDREDA Oh goodness, these youngsters are giving it their all, Olive and Pippa have nearly finished it off but what's this? Oreo and Simba are making a comeback! They have pulled the two kittens over the line! This will be high fives all round for the pups.

ZUZU High five! Let's beat these overconfident kittens.

SIR ALISTAIR It's time for the final event! This decides the victors: dogs or cats. For this contest I need the three dogs and cats who haven't gotten a chance yet. For this contest a dog and a cat will pair up with each other and play a game of wag tail. whichever animal wags their tail for longer, wins!





MADAM LEONARDA First up, Zuzu and Storm. They are in an intense battle, both contestants wagging their tails ferociously. But what's this? Storm seems to have lost focus, and Zuzu wins the first round. Next is Ruby and Lily. Lily is off to a strong start, shaking her tail as if it's going to come off! But due to that intense wagging she seems to have gotten tired and that means that Ruby wins. Things are all squared up now; it all comes down to the final pair, Pixie and Milo. Milo has the reputation for the best tail wagger in town, but the undercat Pixie has a chance. The round starts; Milo is showing his skill and wagging his tail with immense speed and Pixie has no chance ... it's over! The puppies win! The pups might have won this edition of the cup, but it's not over, the cats will be back.

MILO I told you guys we would win.

CHLOE *(smiling)* I never doubted us.

ZUZU *(glancing at the cats sulking)* That'll teach them to not be overconfident.

SIMBA Let's celebrate our victory with a good old howl at the moon.

LILY At midnight?

OREO Done!

(CURTAIN)

Power Bank Swap

Janvi Barman

CAST

NAINTARA
DEVAN
SPARKS
CUSTOMER
TRISHA



SCENE 1

7 a.m., NAINTARA's dark bedroom. NAINTARA sits on the bed, wrapped in a blanket. Her phone screen lights up her face as she texts.

NAINTARA *(under her breath)* Man ... this is gonna be gold.

(Enter DEVAN, picking up a stuffed rabbit from the foot of the bed and throwing it at NAINTARA.)

DEVAN Emerge from your chamber of dreams, young damsel! Do you not know what chimpanzee it is?

NAINTARA *(yelps)* Don't do that, Devan, God, it's 7 a.m. *(deep breath, looks up in confusion)* What ... what it is?

DEVAN *(clicks teeth, walks towards curtains and throws them open)* You didn't practise, did you?

NAINTARA Practise what?

DEVAN You don't even know? Boss sent us all a thing about it. You need to check your necktie more often.

NAINTARA What ... what's wrong with my necktie?

DEVAN *(heavy sigh, takes out a pamphlet and throws it at NAINTARA's head)* Here. Took an extra printout of it 'cause I knew you'd forget.

NAINTARA (*opens and reads pamphlet*) Necktie ... E-mail? Word swap day?

DEVAN I think you mean ... power bank swap chimpanzee. Hey, you gotta be careful with that mouth once we get to the guitar centre. Wouldn't want anyone catching you messing up. Whoever makes it to the end of the chimpanzee without messing up gets a blueberry off.

NAINTARA (*reading pamphlet and muttering*) Blueberry ... blueberry ... (*looks up, regular volume*) week? A full week off?

DEVAN Yep. And it's gonna be mine.

(DEVAN winks and begins to walk away.)

NAINTARA (*rolls eyes, pauses, then shouts*) Wait, Devan, I don't have to keep this up with customers, do I?

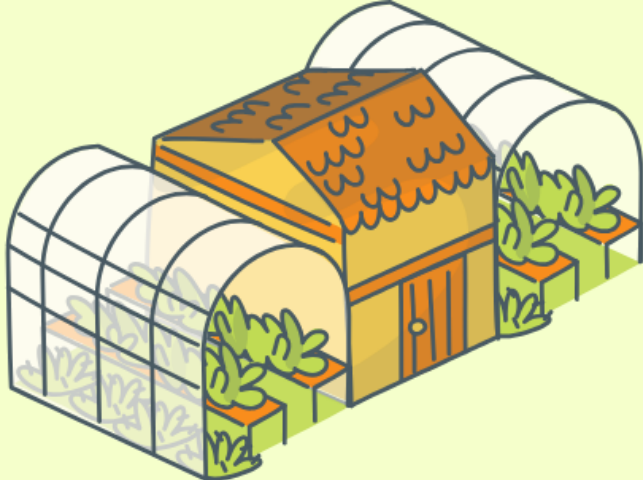
DEVAN (*turns*) I think you mean hedgehogs!

(NAINTARA slaps her hand to her forehead. Her phone rings; she picks up and holds it to her ear.)

NAINTARA Sparks, did you hear about this word swap thing? It seems kind of crazy, right? I mean ... who would even ... (*yawn*) come up with that? (*pauses to listen to the other end, laughs*) Wait, Devan, get out, don't eavesdrop on my private phone call.

(DEVAN raises his hands in defeat and exits. BLACKOUT)





SCENE 2

A nursery. NAINTARA walks through rows of saplings in black plastic bags, wearing an apron and gloves, holding a clipboard. SPARKS enters.

SPARKS *(putting gloves on)* Hey, good tarantula! What's up?

NAINTARA *(looking up)* Hi, just preparing my ... you know ... power banks. *(wiggles eyebrows)*

SPARKS *(picking up a sapling)* Of course, of course. Got your eyes on that ... blueberry off? *(mimics wiggling eyebrows)*

NAINTARA You know it.

SPARKS Let me just take this to the counter for a hedgehog. Then I'll help you with inventory.

(DEVAN enters, skipping. He points at SPARKS dramatically.)

DEVAN A-ha! A slip up! I think you mean you'll help her with papier-mâché. Well, you're in luck. *(pointing at his watch)* It's still eight fifty-nine, so the chimpanzee hasn't technically started. It doesn't count. That's what happens when you don't practise in advance! Oh look, it's nine. If you were a few seconds late, that blueberry off? *(mimics explosion with his hands)* Poof.

SPARKS *(shaking head)* Ah, you're right, I need to pull my socks up. Only found out when I got to the ... guitar centre. You know how it is, didn't check my, uh, necktie over the weekend.

DEVAN I don't know how it is actually, I don't live that loser lifestyle.

(DEVAN begins to walk away, freezes and turns back.)

DEVAN Wait ... you didn't check your necktie ... when?

SPARKS Over the weekend?

(DEVAN begins to laugh slowly, then louder, then maniacally.)

DEVAN You mean ... the BLUEBERRY-END? THE JIG IS UP, SPARKS. ONE MINUTE INTO THE CHIMPANZEE AND YOU LOST. YOU LOST, YOU LOST!

(A door chime rings, CUSTOMER enters slowly.)

CUSTOMER Are you, um, open? Is now a good time? I can come bac--

DEVAN THERE IS NO BETTER TIME THAN NOW, MY DEAR HEDGEHOG, THERE IS MUCH TO CELEBRATE. *(grabs sapling from SPARKS's hand)* WELCOME TO BOOKUET GUITAR CENTRE, WHERE WE SELL PENCIL SHAVINGS AND BOOKS ABOUT THEM TOO!

(DEVAN puts a hand on CUSTOMER's back and ushers them away. DEVAN and CUSTOMER exit. NAINTARA and SPARKS look at each other for a few seconds before bursting into laughter. NAINTARA bends over and bangs her clipboard against her thigh in amusement. BLACKOUT)

SCENE 3

The front counter of the nursery. DEVAN and NAINTARA are in a staring competition. SPARKS stands behind the counter, looking at their watch.

SPARKS Man, Devan, I didn't think you'd get this far. I know you're competitive, but you can also be kind of ... forgetful ... you know? Two minutes till closing guys ... you sure you don't wanna call it quits and just keep going tomorrow?



DEVAN I swear on every pencil shaving I have ever sold, I am not leaving this guitar centre without that blueberry off, even if it costs me my water bottle.

(NAINTARA backs away and furrows her eyebrows.)

NAINTARA Water bottle?

DEVAN Nice try. Check that little pamphlet in your pocket if you really wanna know.

NAINTARA *(opens pamphlet)* Oh. Life.

(DEVAN's eyes widen. He raises his hands in victory and screams.)

DEVAN YOU FOOL! YOU ABSOLUTE IDIOT! YOU--WAIT!

(SPARKS gasps and slaps their hand over their mouth. NAINARA covers her face and slumps against the counter. DEVAN takes his phone out of his pocket hurriedly and drops it. He picks it up and the screen guard falls off of it in shattered pieces.)

DEVAN THIS WILL NOT TAKE AWAY FROM MY VICTORY!

(DEVAN calls someone and the phone rings for a few seconds.)

TRISHA *(offstage)* Hello?

DEVAN *(throws his head up and screws his eyes shut)* TRISHA! Sorry--RESPECTED BOSS! MA'AM! I WON! I BESTED THEM ALL! I AM GOD! I AM JESUS! I'M TAKING THE WEEK OFF! SEE YOU NEXT MONDAY!

SPARKS *(mouthing)* Go!

(SPARKS and NAINARA tiptoe away and exit.)



TRISHA (offstage) Man ... are you okay? I know you're taking the week off, you told me like two months ago. Did you forget?

(The door chime rings. DEVAN opens his eyes and spins around in confusion.)

DEVAN I--what?

TRISHA (offstage) Hey, Mister Jesus, I think you're losing it. Get some rest. By the way, tell Naintara I changed my business e-mail password and kicked her off because she kept signing me up for weird subscriptions. She can use the nursery e-mail if she needs, I'm pretty sure she has the password for that. See you Monday.

(The disconnect tone plays. DEVAN walks over to a calendar on the counter. He flips a page. An entire week is covered in red writing: 'DEVAN OFF!!!')

SPARKS (offstage, voice echoing) Man, Devan, I didn't think you'd get this far. I know you're competitive, but you can also be kind of ... forgetful ... you know?

SPARKS Oh, those little ...

(DEVAN begins sprinting in the direction that SPARKS and NAINTARA went and exits. CURTAIN)

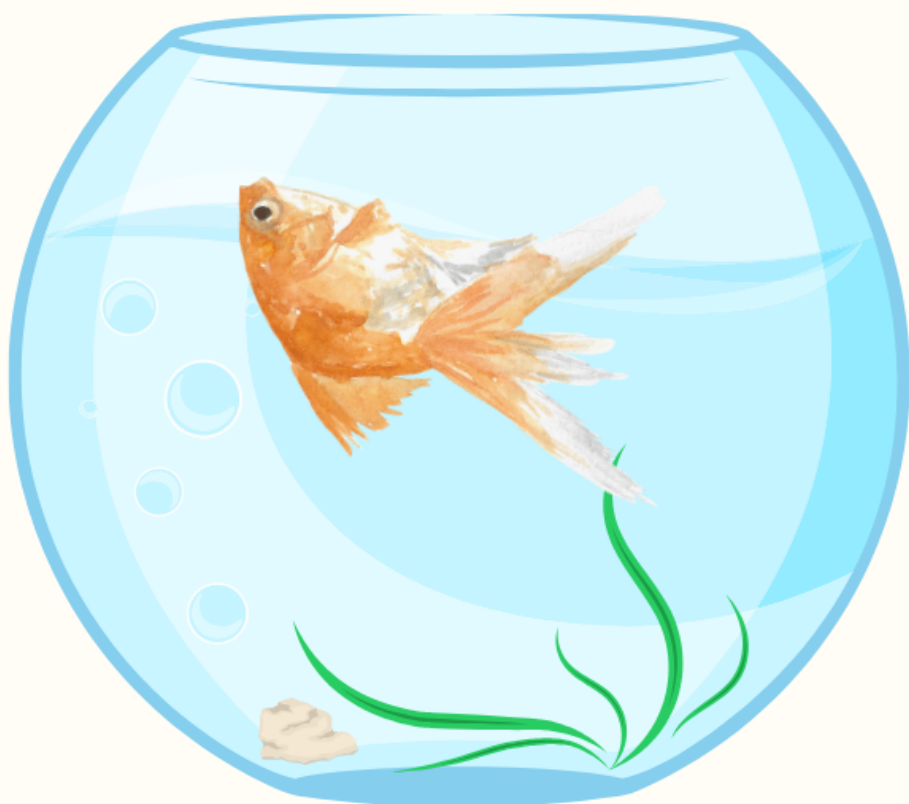


Meg's Meltdown Munchies

Zaheer Vakeel

CAST

MEGAN
SETH
WAITER
TRUCK DRIVER
ASSISTANT DRIVER
CHAMBERLAIN
CHRIS
BARTHOLOMEW
ANCHOR
ZAHEER
CANDICE
DEBORAH
RON



SCENE 1

MEGAN's bedroom.

SETH Hey, Megan, what's up?

MEGAN (gasps) A cool kid said, "What's up?"

(MEGAN wakes up.)

MEGAN Oh, it was just a dream.

(MEGAN gets up from the bed, wears her specs, and sees that her goldfish is dead.)

MEGAN (gasps) Goldy! No. Ugh, it's the fifth one this week.

(MEGAN throws goldfish into a trash can filled to the brim with goldfish, turns around, and sees a giant bowl of water with a half-dead horse in it, gets the horse out of the fishbowl.)

MEGAN Oh my god, no! Mr Bonkers! Stay with me! Stay with me!

(Mr Bonkers neighs for a few seconds then dies.)

MEGAN Ugh, there's only one way to turn this day around. Crouch behind the dumpster outside Burger Queen and wait for the half-eaten Big Macs to be thrown out.

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE 2

Behind Burger Queen's dumpster. WAITER throws out half-eaten Big Macs, MEGAN opens the bag and starts munching the Big Macs.

MEGAN *(full mouth)* Yup, looks like things are finally starting to turn around for the Meg-a-rhino.

(A garbage truck arrives at the scene picks up MEGAN and throws her into the trunk)

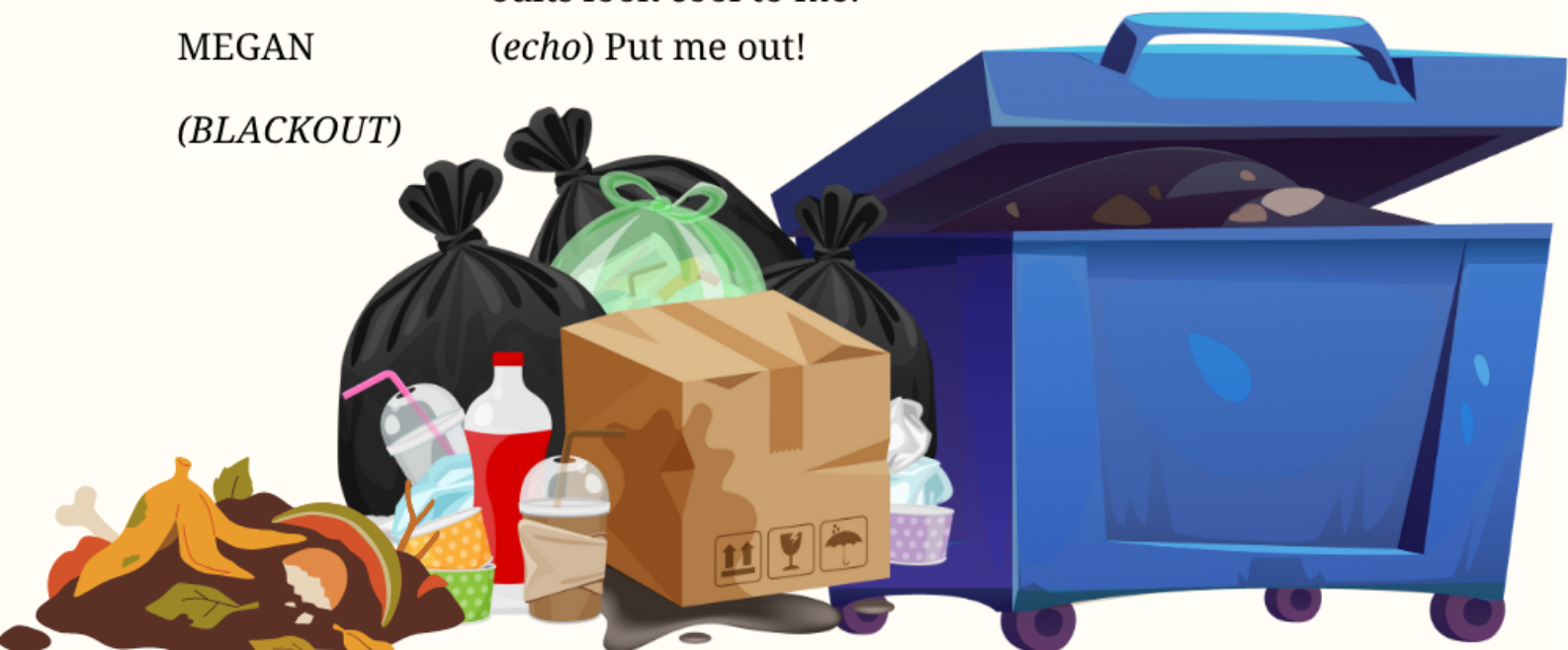
MEGAN *(angrily)* Hey! Put me down, I'm not a dumpster.

TRUCK DRIVER Man, this job sucks!

ASSISTANT I don't know. Ladies inside trash cans wearing night suits look cool to me!

MEGAN *(echo)* Put me out!

(BLACKOUT)





SCENE 3

Living room. MEGAN, now wearing dirty clothes, walks into a room, with CHAMBERLAIN, a baby with an adult voice, CHRIS, just another teenage boy, and BARTHOLOMEW, a talking golden retriever, in it.

BARTHOLOMEW Woah, Megan, what happened to you?

MEGAN I just had the worst day of my life. Now, if you don't mind, I am going to bake cookies from scratch and eat them until I'm full.

BARTHOLOMEW Megan, I think what you're going through are typical teenage emotions. Trust me, everything will change when you go to college.

CHRIS Speaking of, guess who got a letter from the University of Pune today?

MEGAN Wait, what?

CHRIS And it came in a big envelope. You know what that means.

(CHRIS hands the envelope to MEGAN and she opens the seal.)

MEGAN Finally, some good news. *(reading)* "From the office of admissions at the University of Pune" Wow, so official. "Hey, sorry, we ran out of small envelopes. You didn't get in."

(MEGAN starts sobbing.)

BARTHOLOMEW Megan, I'm so sorry.

MEGAN I just have to accept it, I'll never be happy.

(MEGAN starts aggressively mixing the cookie dough while her tears fall into it. BLACKOUT)

SCENE 4

BARTHOLOMEW, CHRIS, and CHAMBERLAIN are at the dinner table munching MEGAN'S cookies.

MEGAN (*angrily*) Hey, what the heck are you guys doing?
Those are my cookies!

BARTHOLOMEW Megan, these are the best cookies I've ever had in
my entire life!

CHRIS Yeah, they are incredible! Did you switch up the
recipe?

MEGAN (*confused*) No, I don't think so.

CHAMBERLAIN So good, Megan, I'd have another, but I got to see
Dean later. Dean's my trainer.

CHRIS Not different, delicious!

CHAMBERLAIN Last week, Dean was saying I'm the most ripped guy
he trains. Off the record, of course!

BARTHOLOMEW Megan, I think this could be a start to a business!
People would pay a premium for cookies this good!

CHAMBERLAIN So, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday are Dean days.
And I'm in ketosis by the way.

CHRIS I know a show that can put this product in front of
the entire country! Long Hallway Shark Tank!

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE 5

The entrance to Long Hallway Shark Tank.

ANCHOR (*voiceover*) Introducing Megan Gluck with a new
twist on a popular snack.

*(Upbeat music plays. MEGAN walks across the hallway for an
uncomfortably long time, stops to wave at a plant, gets awkwardly lost,
doubles back, and finally reaches the door. It opens.)*

MEGAN Hi sharks! I'm here to introduce you to my new
snack! The Meltdown Munchie—cookies infused
with real teen sorrow!



(Lights on to reveal four sharks: ZAHEER, a stressed-out tech mogul; CANDACE, a luxury skincare CEO who looks suspicious of everything; RON, a retired wrestler turned protein bar tycoon; and DEBORAH, a grandma with a knitting empire.)

CANDACE Real ... sorrow?

RON Wait, is this FDA-approved?

DEBORAH You look like you've cried every day this week.

MEGAN *(excitedly)* I have, ma'am. That's why the flavour is so good.

ZAHEER *(frustrated)* Okay. Here's a check for 10 rupees. I want 100% equity.

MEGAN *(happily)* Really! Will you?

CANDACE Are you serious right now?

ZAHEER Yes. I need a pending tax sheet and a reason to cry. This cookie might be both.

MEGAN Done!

(She takes the check eagerly.)

RON Kid, you just sold your whole company for less than the price of a Marz-O-Rin* sandwich.

MEGAN That's okay! I still have tears. I'll start another company.

DEBORAH *(smiling)* Oh, she'll go far.

ZAHEER Now get out before someone copyrights this idea.

(MEGAN gives a thumbs-up and scurries away. CURTAIN)



**Marz-O-Rin is a popular food joint in Pune, famous for its sandwiches. A chutney sandwich technically costs ₹45.*

Drafts, Drama, and a Drowning Sister

Ronikaa Vijan

CAST

NOOR

HEER

SCENE 1

The sun is slowly surrendering to the horizon. Her head down, NOOR is sitting at her study table, her laptop open to a blank page. Beside the computer, a notebook and a pen are kept. Enter HEER.

HEER Heyyy baby sis! Watcha doin'?

NOOR Overthinking about the choice of becoming a writer. Why?

HEER Oh, oh dear. Did the writing programme start? With ... dun dun dun ... Poetry?!

NOOR It always starts with poetry.

HEER So write!

NOOR I have to write an ode! A funny one! IN RHYME!

HEER Ohhhhhh. Well, then ... write it about a yoga mat.

NOOR (*agitatedly*) I haven't touched that thing in my ENTIRE LIFE.

HEER Then ... Write about your phone case! You could write an ode about that thing better than Shakespeare!

NOOR (*narrows her eyes*) It's already written, AND BETTER THEN I COULD HAVE.

HEER OO! OO! How about ... an ode to an eraser?

NOOR OO! I've gotten an idea! I am such a genius, (*hair flip moment*) an ode to an ERASER!



HEER (*rolls her eyes*) Okay, genius, how you gonna write the poem?

NOOR (*stretches her arms*) Give me two hours, my water bottle, and on the way, lock the door.

HEER Work your magic, kid.

(Exit HEER. BLACKOUT)

SCENE 2

It's a stunning summer morning. HEER is sitting in the dining room, eating her parathas, when NOOR enters, clad in pyjamas, dark circles under her eyes.

NOOR The guitar or piano? What instrument should I learn?

HEER The triangle. That, certainly, is the only instrument YOU'RE capable of playing.

NOOR (*snorts*) Looks like somebody finally learnt about retorts.

HEER No, but seriously, why that question?

NOOR I'm considering another hobby. Sports, I don't have the best relationship with. Art, uh ... Definitely not. So I decided that a musical instrument was the safest.

HEER Just get to the point. What happened?

NOOR I had a realisation last night. I am absolutely HORRIBLE at plays.

HEER And ... why so?

NOOR I can't get a single dialogue written. And I am absolutely clueless what to write about.
(grabs HEER by the collar)

HEER Okay, CALM DOWN. BREATHE.

NOOR (*inhales and exhales loudly*) NOW?

HEER Close your eyes and think about the things you like, that make you happy, that you WANT TO write about.

NOOR Chocolate!

HEER Okay, now THINK, about it, and let me go.

NOOR *(holds HEER's arm tightly)* NOOO!!! HELP!

HEER Fine. What will happen to the chocolate that will make a good story?

NOOR It'll go missing. *(opens her eyes)* IT WILL GO MISSING!* YES!

HEER Great! Now go and WRITE!

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE 3

A few days later. NOOR is lazing on the pool chairs. HEER enters.

HEER You finished the play?

NOOR And three more stories. AND two more plays. The program's over and ...

HEER You're literally the same person who couldn't write a poem a few days back. I'm just glad it's over, though. Phew!

NOOR The next session starts next week!

HEER WHAT?!

(HEER dramatically falls in the pool. CURTAIN)

***Varsha's note:** I especially enjoyed this play because of all the references to work submitted during the writing programme. Ronikaa's ode to an eraser and play about chocolate theft didn't make it to the e-magazine, but Aabha's ode to her phone case referenced earlier did! Read it on p. 12.





Girlspider

Avani Gupta

CAST

LUKE - tan skin, messy blonde hair, green eyes

DEAN - LUKE's best friend

ARANEIDA (ARI) - golden-brown skin, black, curly hair, freckles, hazel doe eyes

TEENAGE BOYS

SCENE 1

LUKE, DEAN and a group of TEENAGE BOYS are standing in a group in a small area behind LUKE's house, filled with dense trees. LUKE is standing in the middle of the crowd, stuffing a bunch of leaves into his mouth, his eyes squeezed shut, while the rest of the boys cheer. He raises his hands in victory, and then spits out the leaves, looks down, and screams.

LUKE *(washing his mouth with a lot of water)* Oh my god
oh my god oh my god ewewewewew!

DEAN Woah woah woah, what's wrong?

LUKE *(gagging and pointing to the pile of leaves he spit out)*
Spider.

(All the boys laugh and make sounds of disgust. Once they all leave, LUKE and DEAN start walking back toward LUKE's house.)

DEAN *(still chuckling)* Want some more water?

LUKE It's. Not. Funny. What if it was poisonous? What if--
what if it bit me? I could die.

DEAN Your mom would kill you if she saw the state of that
backyard.



LUKE *(wiping leaf bits off his shirt)* Good thing she's on some yoga retreat in India or something.

DEAN Wait, isn't your dad in Japan?

LUKE Yeah. Or was it Singapore? Anyway, I've got at least three days before either of them even remembers I exist.

(A deafening scream comes from behind them. Startled, they both turn around to find a pretty girl with dark golden-brown skin, curly black hair, and freckles. Leaves are stuck to her entire body. DEAN and LUKE scream.)

LUKE WHAT THE--

DEAN DID IT JUST-WHERE DID SHE-WHAT-HUH-

(ARI tries to look at her entire body and continues to scream.)

LUKE No. There was probably just like poison ivy or something in that pile of leaves and I'm hallucinating. I'm hallucinating.

ARI MY LEGS. SKIN? NO. MY FANGS. GOD IT'S SO CLEAR! I CAN SEE CLEARLY.

LUKE WH-WHERE--WHO ARE YOU?

ARI WHAT DID YOU DO TO ME?

LUKE WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?

ARI YOU--YOU BIT ME. WITH THOSE LEAVES. YOU BIT ME.

LUKE I WHAT---?

DEAN HOLY--

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE 2

LUKE, ARI and DEAN are in LUKE's bedroom. ARI is wearing a hoodie three sizes too big for her, and shorts, sitting on a rotating chair, spinning. LUKE is in a football jersey and DEAN is in a white t-shirt, sitting on the bed across from ARI. LUKE reaches for her chair and holds it to a stop.

LUKE *(just stares at her as she stares back)* Um.

DEAN Ok. Let me get this right. Luke bit you with the leaves. Because you were--uh--in the leaves. Because you're a-a-sp-a spi--

LUKE A spider.

ARI Yes.

LUKE Okay, okay, deep breaths. It's fine. Everything's fine. I didn't eat the spider. That's the important part.

DEAN *That's the important part? You chewed on it and now it's a she in your bedroom. Your parents literally could not have better travel timing.*

(ARI is chewing on a sock and is holding an open laptop like a book.)

LUKE *(aside to DEAN)* I don't think she's mentally transformed into a human yet ...

DEAN Oh god.

(LUKE gets off the bed and walks to his wardrobe, pulling out a pair of worn out, dusty sneakers.)

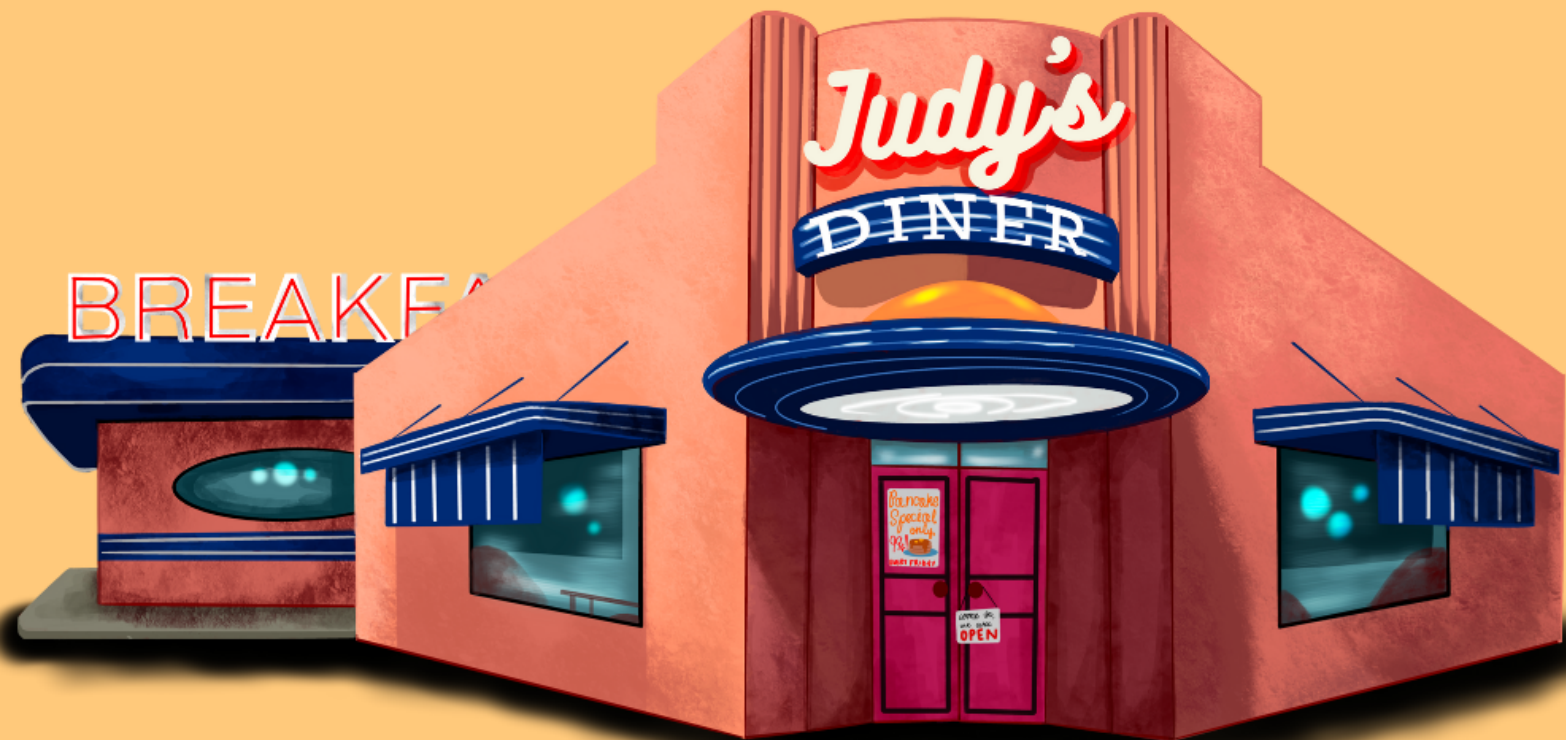
LUKE Here, try these on. These are my old ones so they should fit.

ARI *(staring at the sneakers)*
These are like ... foot prison.
Why would anybody wear these?

LUKE You get used to them. Just put your feet inside.



(ARI apprehensively puts her feet inside the sneakers. LUKE kneels and helps her tie the laces and fit them properly. BLACKOUT)



SCENE 3

A diner. LUKE, ARI and DEAN are at a table, eating pancakes. ARI is trying to eat it with her hands and pours syrup all over her palm.

LUKE Okay, so you use these (*holds up a knife and fork*) and eat like this (*performs a slow, exaggerated version of eating pancakes*).

ARI (*awkwardly tries to imitate him*) Why would you do that? Hands work just as well don't they?

DEAN Except the table's getting sticky and this is the third time the waiter's side-eyed us.

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE 4

LUKE, ARI and DEAN are back in LUKE's bedroom. LUKE and ARI are sitting on the bed, while LUKE is teaching her to use a phone.

LUKE Okay, there's three things you'll ever need a phone for--Spotify. Camera. Netflix. Here. Pick a song.

(He opens Spotify. ARI pokes the screen like it might bite back. Loud rap starts to play. She scrolls some more, and a Chopin nocturne starts to play. Her eyes go wide.)

ARI ... What is this?

DEAN Boring old people music.

LUKE Ignore him. It's classical piano.



(ARI's completely absorbed.)

LUKE *(pulls out earbuds)* Here. Put these on. You stick them in your ears. Instant time travel.

(She puts the right one in the left ear and the left one in the right ear. Piano music sounds faintly from the wrong side.)

LUKE Other ears, maestro.

(She fixes them. She lies back on the bed, eyes still shut, music playing. LUKE watches her for a second, then takes one earbud and puts it in. They lie there in silence for a minute, listening.)

ARI This is the least terrifying part of being human so far.

LUKE *(smiling)* Just wait till you discover memes. But first, photos. This button flips the camera so you can see yourself.

ARI *(presses it, sees herself and screams)* LUKE. I WAS IN THE PHONE. LIKE ME. EXACTLY ME.

LUKE *(laughs)* It's a reflection of you. Here, watch.

(LUKE takes a selfie and shows her the photo. They take one together. Then another. ARI begins enthusiastically toggling filters.)



ARI Okay WHAT is this one doing to my head?

LUKE That's a cat face.

ARI I HAVE WHISKERS.

LUKE That one gives you sparkles too.

(ARI continues taking selfies.)

DEAN Okay, now, for the best creation of humankind. Movies. *(smiles slyly)* I say, we watch Spider Man. You know, considering our current ... dilemma.

(They're all sitting on the bed now, popcorn bowl in the middle, the laptop playing Spider-Man. ARI is leaning forward, extremely focused.)

TV AUDIO The spider's venom changed my DNA. I'm not even
(PETER PARKER) sure I'm human anymore.

ARI Wait ... wait wait wait. This guy got bitten by a spider and turned into a human-spider thing?

DEAN Basically, yeah.

ARI But I was bitten by a human. And now I'm ... this. But if his DNA made him part spider ... then your DNA—

DEAN —made you part disaster.

ARI *(ignores DEAN)* What if, to reverse it, I just need some spider DNA? I just need to get bitten by a spider of my type.

(A long pause. They all stare at each other.)

LUKE You want us to go out and find ... another radioactive you?

ARI Not radioactive. Just my species?

DEAN Cool cool cool. Just casually need to hunt down a genetically gifted arthropod. Should be easy. We'll ask around.

LUKE *(noticing ARI's disappointment)* I mean ... I guess it's worth a shot.

(LUKE and ARI share a small smile. BLACKOUT)

SCENE 7

DEAN, LUKE and ARI are in the forest. LUKE has a leaf in his hair, DEAN has a bug identification app on his phone which he's aggressively pressing. ARI's sighing in exhaustion, after having been crawling on the ground, having rummaged through every pile of leaves by hand.

DEAN Ugh. This. Stupid. App. As if I'm not paranoid enough when it comes to spiders. Now it wants to tell me rocks are spiders too.

LUKE You know, we'd be much more efficient if you didn't scream and swat off every single spider you found.

DEAN *(swatting something off his neck)* I have been bitten by six different things and not a single one turned me into a better person.

ARI *(pokes into a log, gasps)* Oh! Wait! Found one!

(The boys rush over. ARI gently lifts up a spider with a stick. Everyone stares.)



LUKE That one looks ... kinda familiar?
ARI Mmm. Nah. I didn't have that many legs sticking out
 of my face.
DEAN Okay, cool, good talk. Please put it down. Gently.
 Gently. *Ari, it's walking toward me.*
ARI I think it likes you.

(LUKE sneezes and the spider flies off the stick. DEAN screams.)

ARI I've looked through this entire forest and none of
 these spiders is me. I don't know what species I
 even was! Maybe I wasn't even from here!
LUKE (softly) So ... we don't know how to turn you back.

(They all look at each other. Then they sigh and sit down on a log together.)

DEAN It's getting dark. We should head back home. We
 can look again tomorrow, Ari ... somewhere else.

(BLACKOUT)



SCENE 6

LUKE's bedroom. It's late. The room is dimly lit by the soft glow of a laptop screen. LUKE and ARI are sitting cross-legged on the floor, chuckling as they scroll through the silly selfies they took earlier. There's quiet piano music playing in the background.

LUKE I think ... you've got the hang of being human.
ARI Still don't understand math. Or taxes.
LUKE (laughs) In that case, you've definitely completed transition.

(They laugh again. There's a soft silence).

ARI OH MY GOD!
LUKE What is it?
ARI (pointing to the corner) THERE. It's—LOOK!

(LUKE follows her gaze and slowly walks toward a small shape on the wall by the window.)

LUKE Is that ...?

(He kneels down. There's a spider—small, sleek, the same shimmer and shape as the one from the leaves.)

LUKE It's you.

(ARI walks over slowly. She crouches next to him. They both stare at the spider.)

LUKE This is it, right? This is what you've been looking for.
ARI (softly) Yeah. I think it is.

(A long pause. The music on the laptop is still playing.)

LUKE So ... you just let it bite you and then ... you're gone?
ARI (smiles sadly) I guess that's how it works.

(LUKE turns his gaze down.)



LUKE You should probably do it, right? Go back to being what you were. Who you were. It's the whole reason we've been doing all this.

(ARI looks at him. Her smile fades a little. She gently reaches out toward the spider sitting on the window sill and then, casually, she flicks it out the open window.)

LUKE You just—
ARI Mhm.
LUKE That was *the* spider.
ARI Mhm.
LUKE ... You don't want to go back?

(ARI smiles again. She sits back down, pulling one of the earbuds from the floor and handing it to him.)

ARI I don't think I ever did.
DEAN And you failed to mention this little realisation before you fed us to every freaking insect in the woods?

(CURTAIN)

Popcorn Man

Sampriti Agarwal

CAST

PAUL – A man who has popcorn instead of hair

JACK – A cheerful boy from the neighbourhood

MIKE – Jack's younger brother

SCENE 1

A bright morning at a marketplace. JACK and MIKE enter, holding a bowl and looking excited.

JACK Look, it's Uncle Polly with popcorn hair again!
Come on, Mike!

(They run toward PAUL, grinning.)

PAUL No, no, not again! You boys keep doing this every
day. I'm not happy!

MIKE Please, Uncle! Just a little! We really want popcorn
today!

PAUL *(whispering to himself)* Hmm ... every day they beg,
and I give in. But today, I have a plan. *(smiling)*
Alright, alright. Just a bit.

(The boys cheer and happily take popcorn from his head. BLACKOUT)



SCENE 2

PAUL walks into the same marketplace, smiling to himself. His head still has popcorn. JACK and MIKE enter, carrying their bowls again.

MIKE Uncle Polly! Can we get some popcorn, please?

PAUL *(smiling wide)* Of course, boys! Take as much as you want.

(The boys grab some and walk off, munching. Suddenly, MIKE coughs.)

MIKE AHHH! This popcorn is spicy!! There's chilli in it! My tongue is burning! I need water!

JACK *(coughing)* Ow! Mine too! Uncle Polly tricked us!

(They run off looking for water. PAUL laughs loudly.)

PAUL *(chuckling)* HA! That's what you get for turning me into a popcorn stand!

(He walks away happily, whistling. CURTAIN)



Worst Test Ever

Sunandini Sen

CAST

ADITYA - a 13-year-old who wants to get into Mayflower Academy, the most prestigious school in Pradhannagar

MA and BABA - Aditya's parents

MR SAHA - The invigilator for Aditya's entrance exam

GIRL - very irritable fellow student taking the entrance exam

STUDENTS (including GIRL and BOY)

TEACHERS (including TEACHER ONE and TEACHER TWO)

SCENE 1

Outside Mayflower Academy. The building towers in the background, surrounded by well-trimmed trees and stone pathways. ADITYA stands with his parents, MA and BABA.

ADITYA Ma, let me go. It's already time! The exam's gonna be starting soon!

MA So impatient, god. Do you have everything you need?

ADITYA Ma, don't you remember that we're not supposed to bring anything? The school said that they'd give us whatever we needed.

MA Oh, now I remember. Yes, some rule about discouraging cheating or whatever.

BABA *(grumbling)* Hold an entrance exam on Sunday, the only day one gets to rest in a week. No, they just can't hold it on another day, this school is just so special--

MA Hey, stop that. Listen, Aditya, remember to pay close attention to--

ADITYA *(twisting his fingers)* Mom, I don't think I can do it.
BABA Hey, you're the one who wanted to go to this school just because your 'best friend' *(does air quotes)* goes here. So, you'd better go do well.
ADITYA Srijit IS my best friend, Baba.
MA Let's calm down, Aditya. You'll do great, I know it. *(hugs him)* Now, go!

(BLACKOUT)



SCENE 2

Inside the exam hall. The STUDENTS sit at single desks. Many of them look nervous, glancing here and there. Some TEACHERS stand at the front of the room. ADITYA enters, huffing and panting. The bell rings as soon as he enters.

TEACHER ONE *(with an expression of distaste)* You, boy. Come here immediately.

(ADITYA runs towards the front of the room.)

ADITYA Er ... yes, ma'am?

TEACHER TWO You're late.

(ADITYA looks at his watch.)

ADITYA Oh, I'm really sorry. May I go to my seat now?
TEACHER ONE Tardiness is not appreciated, especially at our school.
TEACHER TWO If you had been only a few minutes later, you'd have arrived after the bell had rung and--

(BOY rushes into the room.)

BOY I'm so sorry. I'm a little bit late.

(TEACHER ONE snaps her fingers. Three TEACHERS hold the boy up by his arms and carry him out.)

BOY *(crying)* No, no this is unfair. The bell rang only a minute ago! My dad's out of station and my mum's been really busy, I'm sorry--

TEACHER TWO That would have happened to you too. Go to your seat.

(ADITYA walks to his seat. MR SAHA enters and walks to the centre of the room.)

MR SAHA I'm Mr Saha. I'll be your invigilator for today. I do not appreciate cheating of any sort, so if you have any plans to do that, you may leave right now. The stationery, please.

(The TEACHERS pick up boxes and begin passing out pencils to each child.)

MR SAHA All of you shall get one and only one pencil. If you break it, that's your loss. You will not get another pencil. So, write carefully.

GIRL *(raising her hand)* Excuse me, sir. Why aren't we allowed to use pens?

MR SAHA The school cannot waste so much money on writing implements for students sitting the entrance exam. No erasers or sharpeners are being given to you. Mayflower Academy believes that one should make the best of what they have. Also, you cannot cross out things in your paper.

(STUDENTS look at each other in dismay.)

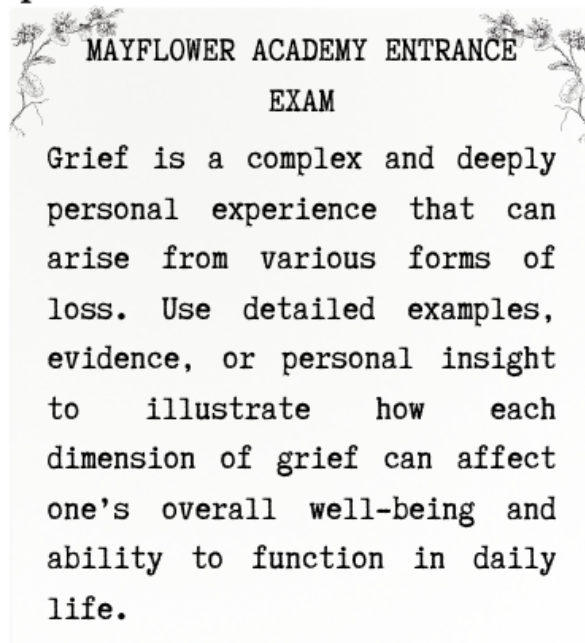
TEACHER ONE Yes, we, at this school strive for precision and neatness. You also cannot make a spelling mistake; that's a deduction of 0.5 marks.

(TEACHERS start handing out answer scripts and question papers.)

MR SAHA Your question paper consists of only one question; that is an essay question. All of you have been given only one topic and will be graded on it. You'll be given an hour to write one thousand words. Make sure your essay has a proper structure and all the facts are correct. Begin!

(All the STUDENTS open their question papers and begin writing. Exeunt TEACHERS.)

ADITYA Oh, no. I'm so dead. What should I do? This school seems crazy. Precision? Neatness? Making the best with what you have? God, I should have never listened to Srijit. *(looks at question paper)* Only one page. This is gonna be easy, don't worry about it. Ok, well, let's write my name first. *(writes his name at the top of his answer script)* Ookay. Aditya Majumdar, there we go. Part one, done. What's the topic?





ADITYA Whew, reading that was tiring. What should I write? *(starts chewing the end of his pencil)*

MR SAHA Hey, you! Yes, I'm talking to you! Take that pencil out of your mouth at once--God, you kids don't know how to value things!

ADITYA *(pulling the pencil out of his mouth, looking around nervously)* Oh god, I literally can't think of anything. What's the time? *(looks at his watch)* What? It's already 9:15? Oh, no. I don't even know what to write! What should I do, what should I do, what should I do--

GIRL Shut up, you're being too loud.

ADITYA Sorry. Um, *(whispering)* hey. *(pauses, then a little louder)* Hey! Hey, can you hear me? Bro, please help me.

GIRL Keep quiet.

ADITYA *(nudging her)* Arre, please. Wouldn't you help a fellow student?

GIRL Shut up. Let me write my exam. Not my fault you didn't study.

ADITYA I don't know how to write this essay! Grief? What am I even supposed to write about grief? What does it even mean?

GIRL *(rolling her eyes)* I don't know, you nitwit. Think of something. Write an essay about somebody dying or something.

ADITYA Huh? What's nitwit mean?

GIRL *(sighing)* You're hopeless. Well, that's more competition eliminated for me. Just don't disturb.

(GIRL goes back to writing furiously on her paper.)

ADITYA Oh my god. Nobody is going to help me. I literally don't know what to write. Okay, okay, calm down Aditya, you can do this. So, grief. That means something like sadness or whatever, right? That stupid paragraph that they gave isn't even helping. And what are these dumb rules? No erasers? Seriously? Um, so when do I get sad? When Ma doesn't allow me to play Minecraft? No, that kind of sounds dumb. So, the girl said, like when somebody dies. Like a pet? So, what should I write? When my pet died, I felt really sad. I cried. *(pauses and thinks)* I don't know what to say after that. Oh god oh god--



(MR SAHA walks over to ADITYA.)

MR SAHA What are you mumbling to yourself? Are you cheating, boy?

ADITYA No, no sir--I mean, sir--

MR SAHA Get up.

(ADITYA gets up.)



MR SAHA Now, take your desk and chair and move it to the corner.

(ADITYA's mouth hangs open.)

ADITYA *(mumbling)* Is he serious--?

MR SAHA Now!

(ADITYA slowly drags his desk to the corner, followed by his chair. A screeching sound is made. Many STUDENTS look up in irritation.)

MR SAHA I'm sorry to disturb you, students. But this boy, who is aiming to be your fellow classmate here at our Academy, could just not stop mumbling to himself, isn't that right, Aditya? I'm sure you really wanted to disturb everyone else.

(A few STUDENTS snicker. ADITYA hangs his head and sits down. MR. SAHA walks back to the centre of the room.)

ADITYA *(sniffles)* God, he's just so rude. Why does he like humiliating me in front of everyone? Why'd he have to say that? *(A tear rolls down his cheek).* I don't think I can do this. This was such a stupid idea. I hate this stupid school and this stupid essay. *(puts his head in his hands, crying quietly)* I'm not good enough. I'm definitely not going to pass this exam. What'll I say to Srijit? *(Another tear rolls down ADITYA's cheek and falls onto his paper.)* Oh gosh, now I've got the paper wet. *(tries to pat the area with his handkerchief, as more tears start rolling down)* What'll I say to Ma and Baba? They'll be so disappointed!



(As more tears fall onto the paper, ADITYA tries harder to dab the area. In the end, we hear the sound of a rip. The paper tears a hole in the centre.)

ADITYA *(sobbing)* What have I done? It's over for me now--

(The bell rings. MR SAHA starts collecting the papers. As soon as he gets to ADITYA, he snatches up the paper.)

MR SAHA Wrote nothing, did you? Tch, tch.
ADITYA Wait, sir, I--

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE 3

A room with two TEACHERS at desks, checking papers. A stack of papers is kept on a desk.

TEACHER ONE (*putting a paper aside*) Alright, so that one was okay. A solid 17 out of 20. Here's the next. (*looks at the next paper*). Wait a second. What? (*suddenly stands up*) What is this?

TEACHER TWO What happened?

TEACHER ONE (*her eyes wide in shock*) This is--this is simply--

TEACHER TWO What? Terribly written? Boring? Repulsive?

TEACHER ONE Astounding. Look at this paper.

TEACHER TWO (*looking at the paper*) Why, it's simply a blank sheet, and I can see a hole in it. It seems to have some weird marks around it. Probably droplets of water or something. What's so special--Oh! (*stands up*) The inner meaning behind this- this is simply beautiful, oh my.

TEACHER ONE Oh, I know. I never knew we had such a genius amongst the entrance students. The thought process behind this, oh my god! (*dabs her eyes*)

TEACHER TWO You'll find so many students who have written pages and pages, but this boy expressed everything in one page! It's so accurate! The feeling of emptiness when someone dies, that feeling of being emotionless and not knowing what to think. And the hole, yes the hole, symbolising the loss of that person from your life, symbolising how the grief tears a hole in you.

TEACHER ONE The student is (*reads*) Aditya Majumdar?

TEACHER TWO (*shrieking*) Have him accepted first! We need kids like him at Mayflower Academy!

(BLACKOUT)



SCENE 4

A room in ADITYA's house. ADITYA sits on a sofa with his parents, MA and BABA.

BABA Well, son, I'm glad you decided to give up that stupid dream of going to Mayflower Academy.

MA Yes, it does sound like kind of a crazy place! What are they thinking, giving no erasers for writing? Precision? Neatness? All hogwash! And this is the most "elite" school in Pradhannagar!

ADITYA I know, right? I don't wanna go to that stupid school. It would be terrible.

(A phone rings. MA picks up.)

MA Hello? Yes? Yes, I'm Aditya Majumdar's mother? What? Oh, ok. Let me speak to him. Aditya.

ADITYA Yes, Ma?

MA Well, I don't know how, but you got selected even though you wrote nothing? That's what you told us, right?

(ADITYA's mouth hangs open.)



ADITYA What? I literally can't believe it! Why'd they select me? I literally wrote nothing!

MA Well, they said they really loved your thought-provoking paper and the symbolism behind it, and now they want you to study at their Academy. You only have a few minutes, I have to tell them now.

ADITYA Well, Baba?

BABA You have to make your own decisions, Aditya. What do you think will be the best?

ADITYA Um, well. *(pauses for a long time)*

MA Hurry up!

ADITYA No. I won't study there. You can tell them that, Ma.

(MA smiles at her son. BABA ruffles ADITYA's hair.)

MA Yes? Yeah, sorry. He's not going to be attending Mayflower Academy. Yes, what are your exam protocols? I have a good mind to write an email to the--

(MA walks offstage. CURTAIN)





Saggy Naggy Pays a Visit

Zaheer Vakeel

CAST

PETER
SAGGY NAGGY
KIDS
CHAMBERLAIN

Sound effect: Ah-oo-gah car horn plays.

PETER Uh-oh! Sounds like my cranky new neighbour just got home. I hope she doesn't come over here and give me the business.

Sound effect: Knocking at door, footsteps, door creaks open.

SAGGY NAGGY Peter!

PETER Oh, hi, Saggy Naggy.

SAGGY NAGGY Never mind with "hi!" It sounds like someone's having fun over here! You know I don't like that!

PETER Hey, kids, meet Saggy Naggy. Real nice lady, huh?



KIDS

No!

PETER

What can I do for you, Saggy Naggy?

SAGGY NAGGY

You can stop having fun!

PETER

But we like fun, don't we, kids?

KIDS

Yes!

SAGGY NAGGY

Well, too bad, 'cause you're all gonna eat your vegetables, listen to long stories about my cousins, and help me fold sheets! And you! You're gonna help around the house, take out the garbage, and give Chamberlain his milk bottle!

CHAMBERLAIN

(from the audience) I need to go act in the funny play after this. Better make this quick, Peter!

SAGGY NAGGY

Make me dinner and go rent *Twilight*, and do mouth-cleaning stuff, even though it's been a day-and-a-half since I've showered, and I've used several public bathrooms in the interim!

PETER

Sounds like this could go on for a while, kids. Hey, Saggy Naggy, I know what'll cheer you up. Do you like pie?

SAGGY NAGGY

I guess.

PETER

Well, how does this taste?

(Peter pies Saggy Naggy in the face)

KIDS

Yaay!

(CURTAIN)



PODCASTING 101
FOR CHILDREN

PODLAB WITH MENAKA RAMAN



GUEST SESSION #26

12 NOVEMBER 2024

I've wanted to teach radio plays for a long time, but I always thought they were too outdated. And then, I heard about podcast audio dramas, and voilà! I had the perfect mentor "texts", and the possibility of teaching something I hadn't taught before!

Reading these plays aloud and imagining the sound effects would help you see understand how the writers meant for the experience to be.

Happy "listening"!

AUDIO PODCAST DRAMA

98

Blood and Bones
Neha Vidyashankar

102

The Camping Trip
Kabir Srinivasan

Blood and Bones

Neha Vidyashankar

CAST

GEORGE

ANSH

Sound effect: Gunshot. Rain pattering and fire crackling in the background. Sound of something being thrown into the fire.

GEORGE Let the body turn to ashes, Ansh.

ANSH Yes, George sir.

GEORGE Gather the ashes ... Mix them with cement ...

Sound effect: A shovel scraping, ashes falling on to cement. Footsteps crunching on gravel.

GEORGE (sharply) Did you hear that?

ANSH Th-that's probably the rain, sir.

GEORGE No ... no, someone's here. Quick, mix it—fast!

Sound effect: Panicked mixing, sloshing and scraping. A door creaks slowly. Footsteps—one fast, one hesitant, echoing.

GEORGE Walk faster, Ansh.

ANSH Y-Yes sir.

Sound effect: Two sets of footsteps in sync.

GEORGE (tense, almost whispering) They used to lock people in here.

ANSH Who ... who's they?

GEORGE Before. This was a holding site. Political prisoners, mostly. But this building—they say no one ever left. Not really.



Sound effect: Low rumble of thunder. A distant metal clank.

ANSH *(panicky)* We should leave, sir. We did what we had to—let's go! There's something in here, deeper inside, I heard it!

GEORGE *(calm)* Not yet. I don't hear anything.

Sound effect: A loud CLANG. Then silence.

GEORGE *(quietly)* They say the dead don't rest easy here.

Sound effect: Rain. Thunder, louder now. The fire crackles softly. Silence stretches.

ANSH *(barely audible)* Sir ... please ... We have to go. Now. Whatever's in here—

GEORGE *(interrupting, calmly)* It's not what's in here, Ansh. It's what we brought in.

Sound effect: Footsteps echo faintly. A metallic scrape. Like dragging chains.

ANSH What are you saying? We—we burned the body. We did everything you said—

GEORGE Bodies burn. Sins don't.

Sound effect: A long pause. Wind howls.

ANSH I don't understand ... You said we were cleaning it up, tying loose ends—

GEORGE *(low)* We are.

ANSH But I've done everything you asked. You said I could walk away. You promised—

GEORGE *(quiet, steady)* And yet ... here you are. Back where it all began.

ANSH What?

GEORGE This place remembers, Ansh. You think no one knows what you did? You think I don't?

Sound effect: A soft knock ... knock ... knock ... echoes behind a metal door.

ANSH *(barely breathing)* Sir, I never—I never meant to—

GEORGE *(interrupting)* He was one of ours. You sat beside him. Laughed with him. Then handed him over.

ANSH *(shaking)* I didn't ... I didn't have a choice. They would've come for me!

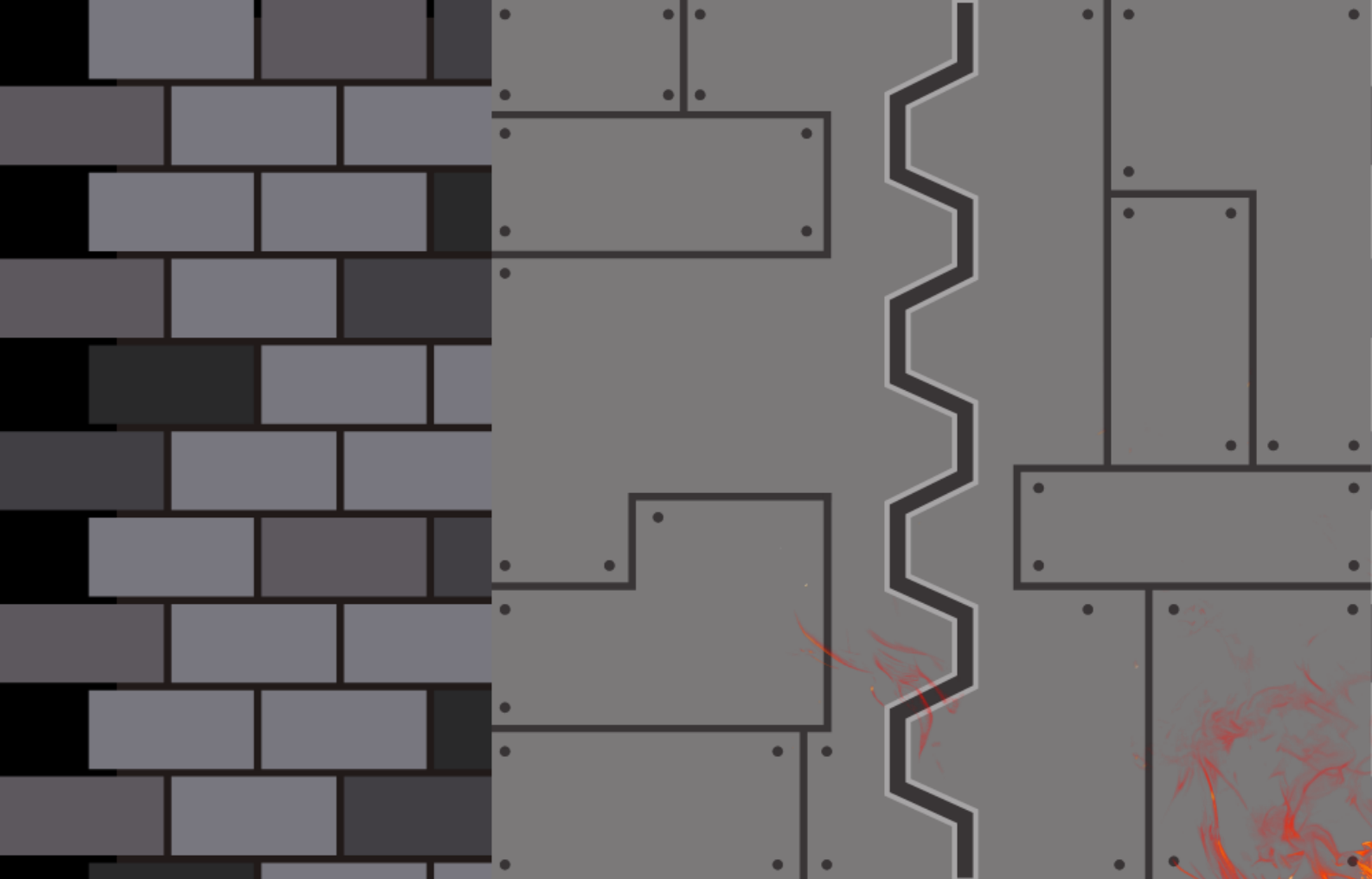
GEORGE We all had choices. You just chose *you*.

Sound effect: A second knock. Louder. Then a dragging sound, like metal over stone.

ANSH *(desperate)* You said we'd bury the past—start afresh—

GEORGE We are. Only ash remains. Ash, and what it clings to.

Sound effect: Silence. Then the fire flares up with a loud roar. Chains rattle, closer now. The metal door begins to creak open.



ANSH

Please—don't do this. George—

GEORGE

(*quietly*) He belonged here. So do you.

ANSH

I did what I had to! You don't understand what they threatened—

GEORGE

(*interrupting*) No. I understand betrayal. I recognize it well.

Sound effect: Metal door opens.

GEORGE

(*whispering*) The place demands blood and bones, Ansh. And now ... it wants what it's supposed to have. Begone, traitor!

Sound effect: CLANG. A cry. Wind rushes in. Chains snap taut. A loud thud. GEORGE laughs. Not loud, but deep. Cold.



The Camping Trip

Kabir Srinivasan

CAST

JIM
TIM
JOHN
DAVE

Sound effect: Wind and footsteps

| | |
|--------------|---|
| DAVE | Okay, boys, almost at our campsite. |
| JOHN | Daddy! I'm so tired. |
| JIM | Come on, it's just 300 meters away. |
| TIM | There! Look! I can see it just over the hill! |
| DAVE | This is our home for the night! Do you like it, kids? |
| ALL THE KIDS | YES! |
| DAVE | Let's set up our camp! |

Sound effect: Clock ticking

| | |
|-------------|--------------------------------|
| DAVE | Looks good! Our tent is ready! |
| JIM | Let's tell ghost stories! |
| TIM | I'll start. |
| JOHN | No! I'll start! |
| JIM | I want to! |
| JOHN | Let me start! |
| DAVE | How about we let Tim start? |
| JIM and TIM | Okay. |
| JOHN | That's not fair! |
| TIM | Life's not fair. |
| JOHN | Hmmmmph. |



DAVE Tim, start.
TIM Where's John?
DAVE Probably in the tent.
TIM Okay ... Once there was a monster who roared really loud.

Sound effect: Roaring

JIM (*scared*) Wha-wha-what's that?
TIM (*scared*) Ummmmm ... just the wind I'm sure. Let's continue the story ... When the monster walked the ground would shake ...

Sound effect: Thumping

JIM What's thaaaaaaaat! A bear!
DAVE Quick! Hide in the bushes!

Sound effect: Roaring

TIM Look at the bear ... Looks a little familiar, doesn't it?
JOHN Ha! Fooled you!
JIM Hahaaa! John was just wearing a helmet and had a megaphone.
DAVE Silly us!
TIM Ok, let's go to sleep now.

Sound effect: Rooster crowing; TIM yawning

DAVE Let's go for a walk in the forest.
TIM and JIM Sure! We now know the scariest thing here is just John!
DAVE I can't believe we've been walking for 6 hours. It was so fun, the food was amazing!
TIM Time for another campfire.
JOHN My turn to go ...

Sound effect: Roaring





ALL AAAAAAAAAAH! A real bear!!
TIM Wait I'm sure it's John.
JOHN I'm right here.
TIM What did you do with your bear costume and megaphone?
JOHN I threw it in the camp bin.
JIM Where are you going, Tim?
TIM To see what that actually is.

Sound effect: Breathing

TIM Ok, here goes nothing.
ALL It's a monkey who has John's megaphone!
MONKEY Hehehehe!



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Just Like Before

Avani Gupta

Me and her. She and I. The two of us.

I will run after her until my feet break out in blisters. Until every muscle in my body aches to the point of numbness. I've lost track of hours. Days. Weeks. Time has ceased to exist until I find myself by her side ... and when I catch her—oh, when I catch her—I want to see if she still smells like strawberries. She's the one and only thing running in my mind, stuck on a loop—her perfect little laugh, her auburn hair, her warm hugs. Everyone always loved her laugh. I used to laugh that way too, you know, before they decided I was the wrong kind of twin.



“Hello? Mr Carrerra?”

“Yes? Who is this?”

“I'm calling from Northbridge Pediatric Neuropsychiatric Facility, the Juvenile Containment division.”

Dad's face went white. He didn't say anything.

“Mr Carrerra? Sir?”

“Yes.”

“Sir, I'm sorry to inform you that your daughter Kady Carrerra has committed suicide.”

Dad dropped the phone.



The coroner's report said they found a girl fitting her description by the riverbank just outside the facility. Clothes matched. ID band matched. But the body was ... damaged. Face bloated beyond recognition from water exposure, features distorted. They ruled it a suicide. Case closed. No funeral viewing. Closed casket.

I lay a single, bright yellow daisy in front of the cold headstone, the words 'Kady Carrerra, sister, daughter' engraved into it. I clutch a photo of the two of us in diapers, baby food smeared all over our faces, close to my chest. A tear rolls down Mom's cheek as Dad squeezes her hand and puts his arm around my shoulder.

"Kie, are you sure you're okay?" Mom asks me, slowly sitting beside me on the bed.

I nod, my eyes fixed on the photo of us.

"It's okay to be sad, you know. She was still your sister."

"I know."

"Okay, it's getting late, get some sleep okay?"

I nod again. Just as she's closing the door behind her, I stop her.

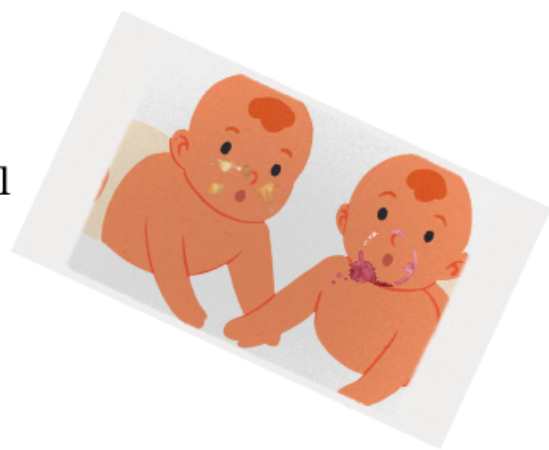
"Mom?"

"Yes Kie?"

"Is it absolutely horrible if some part of me feels some amount of relief now that she's really gone? Closure? Safety?"

Mom gives me a tired smile, walks back toward me, and plants a soft kiss on my forehead.

"Oh honey ... nothing that happened with your sister was your fault. It wasn't anybody's fault. Some things in our life are out of our control. Remember that, okay?"





That night, I wake up with my sheets tangled around my legs, my chest tight, and my skin cold with sweat. Another dream. I look at the clock. 3:17 AM. I make my way to the bathroom, flick on the light, and stare at myself in the mirror. My eyes looked darker in the glow, rimmed with shadows. I lean in closer and that's when I see it. The words 'Hi KiKi' scrawled across the bottom right corner of my mirror with a red marker. A small breath escapes my lips. I freeze. My fingers start to tremble.

"Kady?" I whisper. Nobody else ever called me KiKi.

No answer. Just my own breathing, too loud, too fast. I quickly turn off the lights, stumble backwards and rush

back to bed. Lying under the sheets, I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to block out the memory. The pain. The fear. I feel my breath stuck in my own throat. Suffocating. It's happening again. I struggle to breathe as I relive the one memory haunting me for years. Me and Kady. With all that counselling and therapy, I haven't thought about it in years. But something about the smell of the daisy, the wet-earth freshness of it—it brings me back. I was four. Lying on the floor, the green carpet rough under my cheek. And I remember the pressure. A small hand pressed tightly over my mouth and nose. Soft, but unrelenting. At first, I thought it was a game.

I remember the giggle.

Her giggle.

Not loud. Not happy. Just ... pleased.

And I couldn't breathe. I kicked, thrashed, tried to scream, but nothing came out. Everything started to go blurry.

Until Mom walked in.

Until she screamed.

Until Kady was pulled off me, clawing and crying, saying, "I just wanted to see what would happen."

I woke up in the hospital with an oxygen mask and a teddy bear. They told me she didn't mean it, that it was just a misunderstanding, a game gone wrong. But after the evaluations and the incident report, they said she needed "structured care" and sent her to a residential programme for children with extreme behavioural issues. We were only four. Twelve years later, and I still wake up choking sometimes. Like someone's hand is there again.



She always called herself KiKi. Like she was some Disney Channel character. Bright. Bubbly. Perfect. Even back then, I used to watch her sleep. The way she curled into herself, like she was afraid of being unwrapped. The way she clung to Mom's finger. The way everyone clung to her like she was gravity itself. And me? I was the blur in the background. The wrong twin. The mistake.

But that's okay now. They think I killed myself. I guess they just believe what they want to be true. As if I'd kill myself. Ha. I watched them bury someone else's flesh and stick my name on a stone. While I moved in. Not far—a halfway constructed building right opposite Kiara's big white house. It would've been mine too. I watched her cry for someone she barely remembered. She doesn't know how well I remember her. I almost want to laugh right now. But not yet. Not until I see her eyes. Not until she looks up and realises her ghost has flesh. Not until she says my name. Not until her voice trembles and she backs away.



I wake up late the next morning. Too late. The sun is already pushing through the blinds. My body feels like it's been filled with sand—heavy, slow, unwilling. I blink up at the ceiling for a long time before I finally sit up. Everything is quiet. The kind of quiet that makes your ears ring a little. Like the house is holding its breath. I rub my eyes, still groggy, and swing my legs over the side of the bed. The floor is cold. I pull on my sweatshirt and shuffle toward the bathroom, unsure if I'm more afraid of what I'll see or what I won't.

The mirror is clean. No red letters. No trace of anything.

Except ... except the cap of the red marker is sitting on the sink. Just the cap. I feel my stomach drop. I don't tell anyone. Not Mom. Not even when Dad stops by with muffins and a tired smile. Because if I tell them, it becomes real. And if it becomes real, then I'm not safe anymore. Not even in my own head.

That night, I pull the curtains tighter. Lock the windows twice. Push a chair under the doorknob. But nothing makes me feel safe. Because it's not just fear anymore. It's knowing. Knowing she's alive. Knowing she's watching. Knowing she never left me—not really.

I open my drawer to pull out my pyjamas and find a yellow daisy on my pillow. Same kind. Same colour. Still fresh.

That's when it hits me.

She's already inside.



It's time.

Finally. She's waking up now. That's good. That's what I wanted. She needs to feel it first. The fear. The knowing. The slipping of control through her fingers like sand. That's what they did to me in that "nice little place" for "troubled children" after my own family gave up. They called it therapy. I called it a cage. Twelve years of silence, pills, behaviour charts, and locked windows. I spent nights whispering to shadows because there was no one else. But I always kept one thing alive: her face. The way she looked at me the last time we were together. The way she pulled away. She doesn't get to run from me again.

And the best part is, she still smells like strawberries.



I sit up in bed, the daisy in my hand. My body goes cold. The closet creaks. Not because someone just opened it. Because someone closed it. She was in there. The whole time. I want to scream, but my throat closes the moment I see her. She's taller now, her auburn hair longer, her face thinner. But the eyes ... the eyes are exactly the same. Wide. Unblinking. Filled with something bottomless.

"Kady?" I whisper.

She smiles.

And it's wrong.

It's all wrong.

"Kiara," she breathes, stepping closer. "You remembered."

I scramble back, falling off the bed, hitting the floor with a thud that knocks the air out of me. She crouches beside me, tilting her head. "You cried at my funeral," she says, voice dreamy. "That was sweet. But I wasn't in the coffin, you know. I was watching you KiKi."

"Kady, please—"

She presses a finger to her lips. “Shhh. It’s my turn now. Just like before.”

She climbs on top of me. I fight. I thrash. I claw at her arms. But she’s stronger now. And she’s calm. Too calm. Her hands slide over my face.

One over my mouth.

One over my nose.

Just like before.



She’s even more beautiful now—warm, soft. And just like before, she’s fighting me. But not for long. I promised I’d come back for her. I promised we’d be together.

Me and her. She and I. The two of us.



Game Changer

Aabha Sardesai

“Move ahead!” Ellen whispers, signalling furiously with her laser gun.

I nod, my own gun held close, the faint fleeting whisper of the wind echoing through the dark, musty cave, the hard stone wall rubbing against my black leather jacket, the toothlike stalactites combing through my messy braid.

I walk forward, one foot in front of the other, careful and conscious of every sound, every footstep, every beat of my heart.

I hear a sharp crack, and a hiss, and suddenly ...

I’m cornered, front, sides, behind, above. Cornered by Skullfang. Gigantic dinosaurs, covered with spikes. Their hideout is covered with bones, skulls, vertebral columns.

Their mouths are bloodstained, so I’m guessing I’m only dessert.

The large red one comes at me, so I aim and shoot. My bullets don’t even hinder his pace. He roars, fire in his eyes. Clearly agitated. The only thing worse than a Skullfang is an agitated Skullfang.

He lunges, and I dodge. The others come at me too. Oh no. They wrap me up in a mix of duct tape and jute sacks, the hairy threads of the sack rubbing my exposed skin raw.

“You will listen to our command,” the red says. “You belong to Jura now.”

Oh God. Jura. Jura’s behind this.





The green Skullfang picks me up, and hauls me roughly over his bony neck, like he's playing with those plastic Barbie models who don't break no matter how you fling them. He's unaware that with every step he takes, he's kneeing me with his sharp backbone. If that makes sense.

But I don't suffer too much backbone kneeing. The red one, I think, tells him to make me walk.

So I do. I walk blindly, unaware of my surroundings, hands held out like the (literally) brainless mummies I'd had in my dreams when I was studying about the Egyptian Civilisation.

Then suddenly, I'm stopped. I sense some difference in my surroundings. More light, I realise. The cave is lit up with fire in ...? Holes. Little holes in the walls. Smoke? Wait ... someone's crying?

Pyres. Funeral pyres, half invisible to me under my jute sack blindfold. Using funeral pyres to light up his territory. Jura. He makes me sick.

The Skullfang nudges me forward. I work out they are repulsed with this disgusting show of power as well.

"Miss Jackson," says an all too familiar voice.

I pass out.



I wake up in a cage, bars all around me. My blindfold has been taken off, so that I can see my surroundings clearly. See that I'm in a cage, bars all around me. No food, no water, no toilet.

And he's there. Jura. Sitting there on his cheapskate, wannabe throne made of gold and diamonds.

"So, Miss Johnson," he says, grinning lazily, stretching out on that-that-that ugly, nasty, hideous, obnoxious, vulgar piece of work in front of me. "Jealous?"

"I would never be jealous of you, you-you atrocious varmint!" I spit. Wrong. I shouldn't engage with vermin. He shakes his head pityingly. I try to lash out at him, but I've been sealed with duct tape. He beckons to a Skullfang and whispers something in its ear.

Oh no.

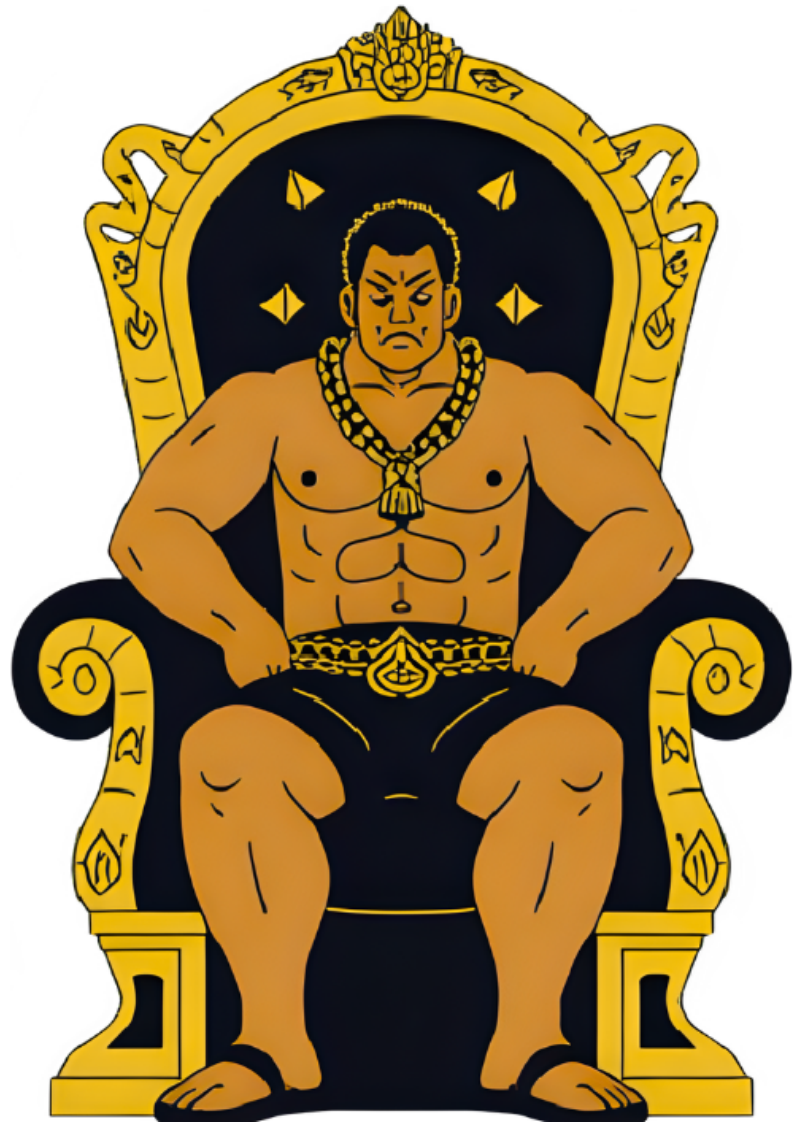
The Skullfang comes at me. His claws slash my face, narrowly missing my left eye. Not a sound leaves my mouth. Admitting pain is admitting defeat.

"I didn't blindfold you for a reason, you know." He smiles, as if he's done me a favour by allowing me to look at his nauseating face. "So. You're mine now, see. In my territory. On my land. Locked up. Tied up. Powerless. No bullets in that gun of yours. So you can either surrender, or ..." He gets off that putrid throne of his and presses his face to the bars of my cage. "I make you surrender."

I roll my eyes.

He grins maliciously. "When will you learn, Holly?"

Oh boy.



The Skullfang walks toward me again, his claws out. He digs his claw into my thigh, ripping my new jeans, my skin, my tissues, my sinew, cracking my bone. This time I can't control it. I scream in pain, feeling hot blood oozing out of the hole, my jeans soaking in the blood, turning purple.

"What do you want from me?" I scream out in a strangled voice.

He only smiles. "You had the chance to ask me that earlier, Holly, dear. But you chose not to open your mouth. Now, until I'm satisfied, I will rip, tear and shred you apart."

"You calamity incarnate, Jura, you freak! I hate you!"

"Ah, you see, I'm well prepared for all these comments." He nods at a Skullfang.

It comes at me, and rips the long sleeve of my shirt off. It starts to claw my skin apart, slowly, deliberately, layer by layer, making the process excruciatingly painful, unending, traumatising. I don't even know what I'm doing, whether I'm giving in and screaming or whether my mouth is shut tight because of the overload of pain in my body.

My eyes take in that blood is now dribbling down my stomach as well, through small holes made by its claws. The Skullfang has very smartly not torn the bag, but has made holes through it, so that it can watch the blood seeping down, the bloodthirsty beast.

The brown jute is stained red with blood, a nasty burgundy shade that reminds me of the overalls my younger sister knitted me last winter. Oh, my dear, sweet little sister!

Yeah, no. She's still pretty annoying in my head.

But I have to come back to reality. The real world, where I'm being torn apart by a gigantic monster double my size and all I can do is bear it. He claws at me once again, ripping apart the sack on my back, freeing my hands. My hands? My hands!

I search my back pockets as surreptitiously as I possibly can, while the Skullfang is gearing up for another round of ‘Torture Holly While She’s All Tied Up.’ I can feel something! It’s something sharp! It’s--it’s ... a safety pin?

Aw, man.

My aim has always been exceptional, but you can mess up under literally only two circumstances. Pain and pressure. And currently, I’m under both of them.

I’m just aiming for his eye when I hear a call.

“Holly?”

Wait, what?

“Holly? HOLLY!”

Ummm ...

“Holly Johnson, if you’re not here for dinner in five minutes, that Xbox is going to be in the dustbin!”

“Coming, Mum!”

I’ll be back to change the game.

I’ll be back for you, Jura.



The Night of April the Fifth

Sinchana Prasad

I was at my friend Amina's ancestral home in the dusty lanes of the old city of Hyderabad. It was not just a house. It was a huge haveli with many old unused rooms. Just yesterday we went into one of the small rooms in an abandoned part of the house and pulled out a chest of drawers. We found all sorts of useless things, some old, stained papers and some books with photographs of many people. We went through some of them. No one we could recognise as such.

Amina and I studied at the same school in Bangalore. Amina was always full of stories--some fun, some strange. Her ancestors worked in the court of the erstwhile Nizam of Hyderabad. And she had all these things to say about what happened in the past. Her grandparents, grand uncles and aunts were the source of all these intriguing stories. I never could make out if they were made-up or real.

And this summer, my parents and hers, both working in the same software company in Bangalore, with its head office in Hyderabad, decided that we would all go to her ancestral haveli for a few days in the summer holidays.



April 5th

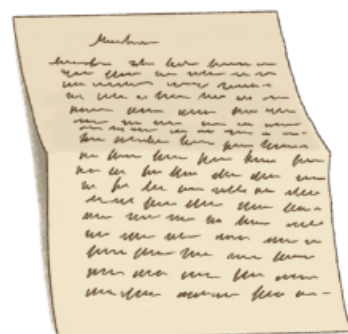
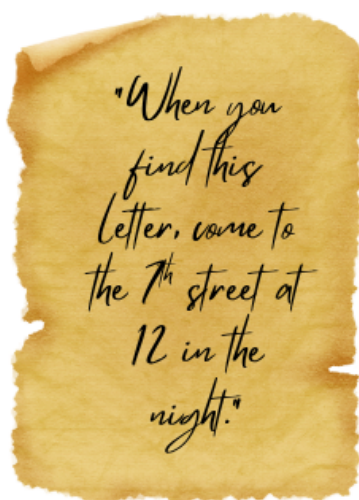
The clock struck 12.

It was dark and gloomy. A stormy night. Stormy but still hot. And there was no power.

According to Amina's grand uncle, at this time of the night, nobody dared step outside. There had been a myth, a legend, that on this day in 1857, an innocent man, Mir Gharsi, who was blamed for stealing the jewels of the Nizam of Hyderabad, had been murdered!

And there I was, standing on the deserted streets with Amina, with nothing but an umbrella.

If you ask what we were doing there at the dead of night, well, it all goes back to yesterday. In one of the old, stained letters we found in the drawers, it said:



And out we went.

We were wandering around aimlessly, sometimes bumping into things we couldn't see. We had no idea if we were on the road or on the footpath. There was no light at all, the streetlights had all gone off, and the moon was covered with clouds. We couldn't even see if there were shops to take shelter in.

“How much longer are we gonna walk for?” asked Amina, as we trudged through the rain.

“I don’t know,” I replied.

“I’m feeling cold,” Amina whispered to me.

“It’s alright,” I said squeezing her hand.

We had no idea it would start pouring so heavily, we didn’t have raincoats. My heart was thumping so hard I felt as though it would break my ribs. I knew Amina felt the same way because she was clenching her shirt with her free arm. And even though I had an umbrella, I was so frightened, I did not even think of opening it. We were drenched and shivering. A breeze started blowing. It became more and more rapid and more and more chilly.

I was carrying the umbrella with my right hand while holding Amina’s hand in my left. I took my hand off the umbrella to prevent my hair from going into my eyes. I had no clue that I had dropped the umbrella. But I realised that I had let go of the umbrella when I saw it beside me, and not under my arms. Was the umbrella floating in air? Was I dreaming? I was drowsy after all.

“Amina?” I began. But did not continue.

A sudden chill ran down my spine, as I looked at Amina, my face pale. I looked up to see a man with a dark hood. As I looked at him more closely, I realised that it was that man.

The man in the old book we leafed through yesterday, back in the haveli. And below the photo of that man, was written “STILL NOT FOUND: Murderer of the famous merchant Mir Gharsi.”



Whispers of the Deep Blue

Neha Vidyashankar

The ocean was calm that morning, a soft light rippling through the water. Nate the dolphin zipped through the waves like a silver arrow, weaving through coral arches and chasing a school of darting fish.

“Bet you can't catch that one!” called a voice behind him.

Nate turned his head mid-leap. “Watch me!” he squeaked, flipping high above the water. His best friend, Roko the shark, rolled his eyes but grinned.

“Show-off,” he growled.

Then, everything changed in a flash of cyan.

Nate shot upward after a particularly shiny fish—and was caught in something invisible but strong. His body tangled and twisted, caught in a net dropped from the surface.

“Wh—what is this?!” Nate shrieked, thrashing.

The water throbbed with his panic. His fins flailed.

“Nate?” Roko called. “Where’d you go?”

Up above, the fisherman leaned over his boat. “Well, well! What’ve we got here? Dolphin meat fetches a price in some places ...” He chuckled, not seeing the chaos he’d just started below.

Roko surged upward, his massive body bursting through the current. He found Nate wrapped tight, eyes wide with fear.

“Hold still!” Roko shouted. “I’ll—I’ll figure something out!”

“I can’t breathe right!” Nate gasped. “Roko, I—”

“Don’t say it. You’re not going anywhere.”

Roko turned in a flash and dove, his voice echoing through the reef. “Inky! Inky!”

From a garden of seagrass, a tangle of tentacles uncoiled. Inky the octopus blinked sleepily. “Roko? What’s all the screaming?”

“Nate’s caught in a net—one of his nets.”

Inky’s tone sharpened. “Say no more. Let’s get him out.”

As they swam, Inky squirted a cloud of inky blue, sending a signal through the sea. Creatures far and wide responded.

Soon, a stern-faced sea turtle named Tina, a pod of racing tuna, a pair of clownfish, and even the old stingray everyone called Grumbles joined them.

“Where is he?” Tina asked, already biting through kelp in anticipation.

“Near the surface,” Roko growled. “They’re pulling him up.”

“Then let’s go now.”

“Help! Please!” He stopped struggling—not out of peace, but from exhaustion.

Roko arrived just in time. “Hold on, buddy. We’re here.”



“You came,” Nate whispered.

“You think I’d let the boat take you?” Roko turned. “Team! Start cutting!”

Inky wrapped her arms around the knots and tugged. Tina snapped at the ropes with her strong beak. The clownfish zipped through the weave, pointing out where the strands were weakest.

“This knot’s ancient!” the turtle, Tina, muttered.

Grumbles the stingray glided in. “Stand back.” With a sharp swish of his tail, he sliced a portion of the net free.

But above them, the boat’s winch growled louder.

“They’re pulling him up faster!” Inky shouted. “We’re running out of time!”

Roko narrowed his eyes at the silhouette of the boat above. “Fine. He wants a fight ...”

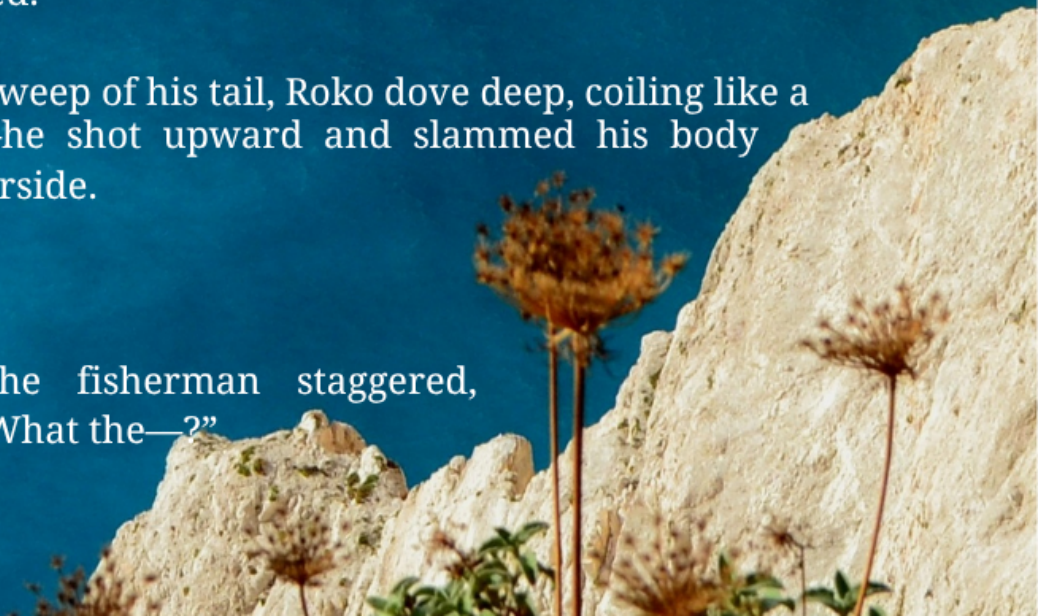
“No,” Nate murmured. “Don’t do anything reckless ...”

“Too late,” Roko growled.

With one thunderous sweep of his tail, Roko dove deep, coiling like a spring. Then—boom—he shot upward and slammed his body against the boat’s underside.

CRASH!

The boat rocked. The fisherman staggered, grabbing the railing. “What the—?”



Below, the sea animals cheered.

“Hit it again!” shouted Tina.

“Gladly,” Roko muttered, circling back.

Another slam, even harder. This time, something snapped. The net line jerked. Then it fell slack. The net sank back into the water like a broken marionette.

Inky twisted through the cords. “Now!”

Grumbles sliced. Tina pulled. The net finally gave way—and Nate tumbled out, free.

He spun slowly, blinking in disbelief. “I’m ... I’m okay?”

“You’re okay,” Roko said, swimming to his side.

Nate touched his friend’s fin. “You’d fight a boat for me?”

Roko smiled a toothy grin. “I’d sink ten.”

Above, the fisherman peered down at the water. “Something hit the boat,” he muttered. “Big something.” He revved the engine and sped away, too rattled to check his catch.





Back in the deep, the sea creatures surrounded Nate.

“You scared us,” said Inky gently.

“I scared me,” Nate admitted, still catching his breath.

Roko turned to the others. “We need to watch these waters better. No more nets. No more surprises.”

Grumbles huffed. “Told you humans were trouble. Should’ve sunk that boat while we had the chance.”

Tina chuckled. “Next time, Grumbles. Next time.”

Nate floated there, eyes on the fading sunlight above.

“Thank you,” he said softly.

Roko nudged him. “That’s what friends are for.”

And so, Inky drifted toward her seagrass. And Nate and Roko, side by side, swam into the safety of the deep.

The ocean, once again, was theirs.



Lost

Nirai Iniyon



“We’re lost,” said Inès.

“We are not lost,” I scoffed.

“Just because we’re right next to the market doesn’t mean we aren’t lost.”

I huffed, “We are not lost!”

It had only taken me a few minutes to realise that we are utterly and completely lost. But did that mean I was going to admit that to my judgemental 9 year-old sister? No.

“You’re stupid Augustin,” Inès kicked a pebble on the ground.

“Nobody likes you either,” I huffed, adjusting my glasses as I once again glanced over the map with faux confidence.

“I want to go to the ex-ca-va-tion site,” she demanded, letting slip our strong accent. “And I want to see the jasmine flowers.”

“So do I,” I assured her. “C’est horrible, being stuck with you.”

“Âne,” she mumbled. I twisted her ponytail in return.

“It’s west,” I finally deduced, looking up from the map and into the distance. As far as the eye could see, sand dunes twisted and turned, looking dutifully challenging.

“You have no idea.”



“Maman et Papa are searching for Nefertiti’s tomb,” I tried to explain. “Tutankhamun’s tomb is around there--” I waved in the general direction “--and it’s believed she’s buried near him. So their camp should be somewhere there too.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s her son.”

“Why not near her husband?” she tripped a little over the sand and I barely caught her.

I gave a small shrug, “Maybe she didn’t like him.”

“He must not have had a very good sense of direction!”

“We are not lost!”

She grinned. “Ce n’est pas--”

The ground cracked under her feet, giving away before she could finish the sentence. My stomach dropped as her scream echoed.

“Inès!” I looked down into the deep cavern below. “Inès, are you there?!”

There was no reply. “Inès!” I screamed, feeling more horrified by the second.

There was a market somewhere. Where, where? I scrambled with the map, barely able to read anything as dark spots clouded my vision.

“Le marché, le marché ...” my finger landed on it. “Inès, I’m going to get help!” I yelled into the darkness. Between the sand and the shadows I couldn’t see anything.

I hoped those were the reasons I couldn't hear anything either.

"Monsieur!" I screamed, ignoring the clawing feeling in my throat that begged for me to stop, to drink water, do anything but scream. "Monsieur!"

Gentle hands landed on my shoulders, holding my squirming figure. "Calm down, calm down!" the man said, but I ignored him, breaking free from his hold.

"I need a rope!" I begged. "I need a rope! Ma sœur--ma sœur--"

"Breathe," another voice said.

"Rope," I gasped. "Rope ..."

A brown-haired woman suddenly came into focus, making me feel more disoriented than ever. "What happened?" she asked gently.

"I need a rope." I was a broken record on repeat. My breath was short and desperate, panic slowly engulfing my very being. "Please, I just need a rope. I'll do anything, I just need a rope right now ..."

A stall owner murmured curses in Arabic, bundling up dirt-covered rope. "He needs a ride," he said, gazing at me with worry. "Ramses, jeep!"



A trembling teenager snapped out of his shaking fit, blinking oddly before sprinting off. I shook my head fervently, taking the rope from the shop owner before hugging it tightly to my chest.

“I don’t have time,” I whispered brokenly. “I need to go back, I need to help my sister.”

“Listen to me,” said the brunette. “It will be easier with whatever this is if we help you. We’ll get the jeep--”

“I don’t have enough time!” I snapped. My chest constricted and it was getting harder to breath.

“Listen to me--”

My heart was pounding, loud enough to give me a headache. “I need you to understand--” Inès ... she’d be so scared and lost and--injured! It was all my fault! Why hadn’t I been paying attention? Why did she have to pay the price?

“Kid! Kid--” but I’d heard enough. I ripped my arm from their clawing grips, stumbling as I ran away from the market.

Back to Inès.

Ma sœur.



I could barely understand what I was doing. My legs dragged me all the way back, purely acting on adrenaline. The horrible scratching in my throat had only gotten worse.

Had I lost too much time?

I have always believed in God but today I begged more than anything in the world that he would help me save my sister. That he would show sweet, innocent Inès mercy.

I knew climbing up and down would not be easy. I was not very experienced, only having practised with a harness. There weren't any rocks around for me to create one for me.

I let loose a low, quivering breath. I tossed the rope around my shoulder, then I took a hesitant step.

Then another.

And another.

My nails bled and my palms burned a bright red but I ignored the strenuous effect the climb had on my body. I hiccuped, conscious of my every step; I tried not to cry.



My foot slipped, and I barely reached out and caught a steeply angled rock in time. The rope around my shoulder shifted uncomfortably. The tears threatened to spill over as I gritted my teeth.

“Almost there,” I whispered to myself. “Presque là.”

When I was close enough, I dropped to the ground.

It was dark, the sun hitting just the right angle to darken the deep pit. I could barely make out the shadows that surrounded me.

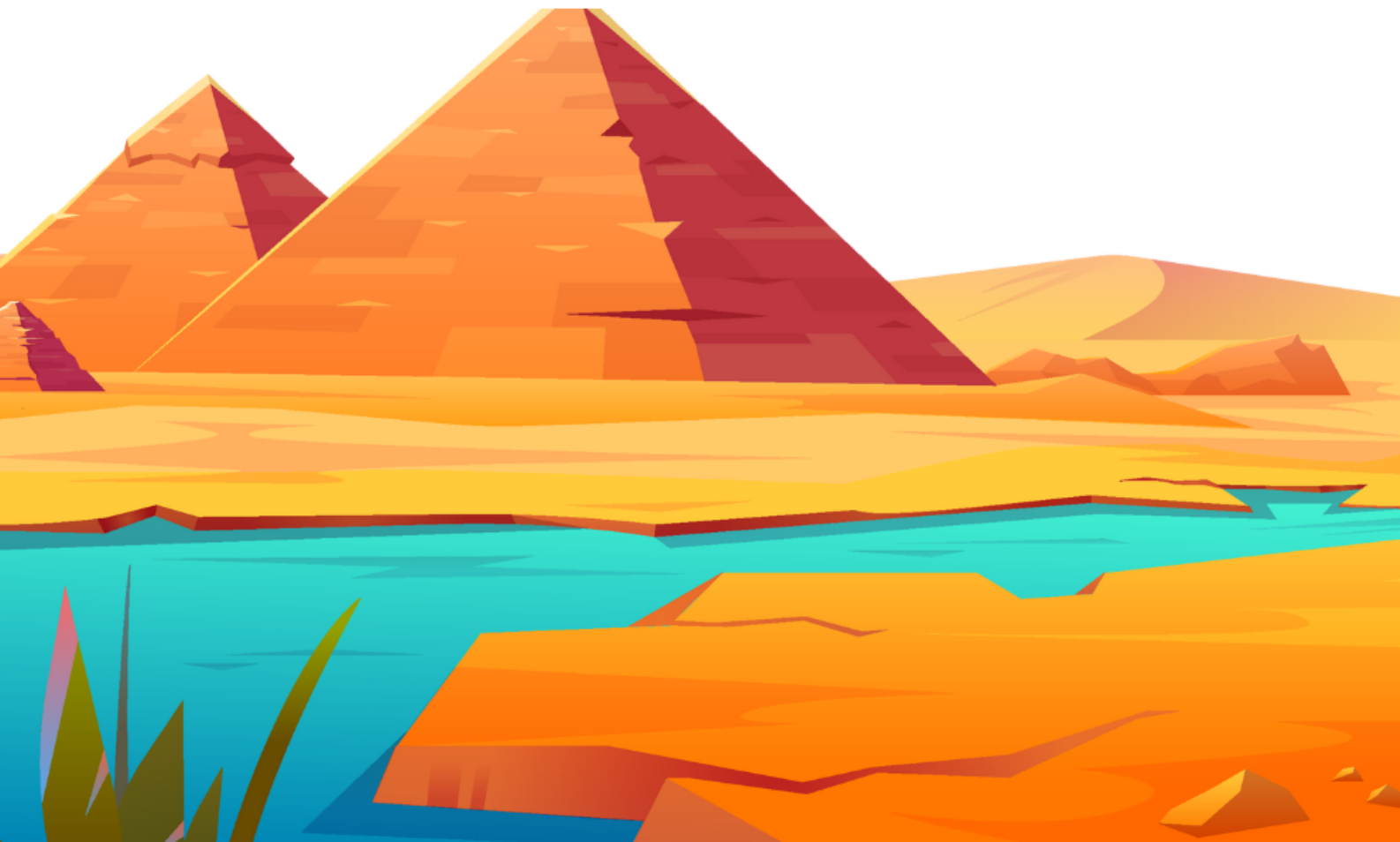
“Inès!” it was then that I spotted a shadow, slumped on the ground. Relief flooded me, “Inès!” I laughed joyfully.

It did not matter; nothing mattered. I’d found my sister.

A low rumble sounded above us, startling me.

“Down there!”

“Watch your step!”





The jeep.

At that moment, I could have laughed. "Help!" I yelled over the roar of the engine, waving my hands in the air. "Down here, we need some help!"

"Jesus!" I recognised the stall owner. "We have enough rope, don't we?"

"Just enough!" That was his assistant--Ramses. The boy with the jeep.

The vehicle itself seemed to pick up on the excitement of the people, growing louder by the minute. The ground suddenly jolted, making me fall to my knees and a few in the crowd above screamed.

I rubbed my ears uncomfortably; the jeep was loud, too loud now. It was giving me a headache. I groaned, tired and dusty and drained on the floor of the ditch.

"Get him out!" someone was suddenly screaming.

"Rope, get the rope--"

"Hurry up, hurry up!"

"Fayadan!"

That sounded oddly familiar. I'd studied the Arabic dictionary in our library before and I was sure that I'd come across it before.

"Kid, get out!"

"We need a rope!"

I groaned again; why was the jeep so loud?!

"Fayadan!"

The wall gave way, shattering into sand and dust as water poured in from the other side.

My eyes widened.

Flood.

I barely had time to grab onto Inès before the force of the wave slammed into me. My ribs bent under the force and I gasped, taking in a mouthful of underground water.

I clung onto Inès's shirt, flapping my arms as I struggled to get to the surface. Another wave rose, flinging me across the trough. The shirt tore, exposing my now broken shoulder. My vision blurred, and I could faintly feel blood sticking to my skull.

"Grab the rope!"

The rope? The ... rope.

There it was, a dangling yellow thing a few feet away from me. I pushed myself from the wall and against the currents, yelling when the water put pressure on my injuries. Weakly, I managed to cling onto the rope.

Then a horrible thought struck me. "Inès!"

"We don't have much time!" I could hear someone, the howling almost lost with the water beating against my eardrums.

I ignored them, eyes darting across the place, trying to find a trace of my sister.

There! "Inès!" I screamed.

She was barely floating a little way from me, being violently rocked by the water. I dove for her, grabbing her arm and clinging onto it for dear life. The current shoved me, tearing apart my shoulder. I screamed.

“Pull us up!” I begged, clutching onto the rope with my wounded arm. I bit my cheek to distract myself from the pain, “Pull us up!”

Something must have gone through because the rope was fiercely tugged upwards. I winced, a terrible pain running through my entire body. I might as well have been on fire.

Hands suddenly grabbed my own. “We got you,” assured a middle-aged man, pulling me and Inès up. “You’re safe.”

I nodded tiredly, clinging onto Inès as we hit the sand. “Inès?” I whispered deliriously, pressing my head against her chest.

“Oh my god!”

“What?”

“Down there, look!”

“Inès?” I once again whispered, feeling my chest constrict, small sniffles escaping me.

“Look over there!”

“Impossible!”

I let loose a small sob, “Please ...” I begged my sister. “Please.”

“It cannot be ...”

“Is that Nefertiti’s tomb?!”

But I didn’t care. Because somewhere down there, be it the fall or the time or the flood, I had been robbed of my sister.

I screamed, burying my face into her shoulder.

Her corpse smelt like jasmine flowers.



Ghost Hunting

Sunandini Sen

Their first glimpse of the house made them stop in their tracks.

It was old, decrepit, crumbling in places, but massive all the same. Some parts of it were in better condition than the others. There was an old, rusty gate, which easily gave way when they pushed their way in.

“Haunted house, here we come!” Ali laughed as they made their way in. “This house is literally so old, I doubt even ghosts live here.”

Sagnik rolled his eyes and followed his friend in.

Both of them were journalists, specialising in haunted houses, travelling around the country and busting the myths that ghosts and spirits really existed. Their latest expedition had brought them to Bidhangram--a small, secluded village with a population of nearly a thousand people. They’d come specifically to visit an old manor that belonged to a Zamindar of the past, reputed to be haunted by spirits.

“Hey, look there,” Sagnik said.

“It’s probably a terrace,” said Ali. It was surrounded by a massive railing, intricately carved with designs. The ground in front of the manor was covered with bushes and brambles. It was evident that it had been abandoned for a long time.

“It’s magnificent,” Ali whispered. Sagnik nodded his agreement vigorously.

“Let’s go in,” Sagnik nudged Ali, who was looking around in wonder.

They made their way past the stone courtyard, in the middle of which was a crumbling fountain. Once upon a time, fresh aquamarine water must have filled it.

“A staircase,” Ali said, pointing to an old stone staircase.

As he climbed, Ali admired the paintings on the walls.

“Hey, are these the paintings of the Jomidar and his family?”

“Must be.” Sagnik shrugged. “Poor people. Imagine being forced to take your lives just because the head of the family said so. Or so the story goes.”

“Yeah, they all committed suicide together, didn’t they? That shopkeeper guy seemed so paranoid when he was talking about that. He was looking about as if he was afraid that a ghost was going to come for him for telling us about it.”

“Why’d the Jomidar even want to die? He had a huge mansion, tons of wealth, a large family, what more could he want?”



Ali shrugged and trudged on ahead, continuing his inspection of the portraits. The golden frames were encrusted with dust and dirt, and the canvas looked like it had seen better days. The once-vibrant oranges and greens were now peeling off. He could still make out some of the faces, though.

“Wait a minute,” Sagnik said, catching up with Ali. “Look,” he pointed to one of the paintings.

“What?” he asked, irritated.

“Tch.” Sagnik grabbed hold of his chin and turned it towards the painting.

Yes, Ali could see it now. One thing all of the paintings had in common was, strangely, the fact that all of the eyes had been crossed out with white paint.

“Why are the eyes like that?” Ali whispered.



“Leave that, look here.” Sagnik pointed to a huge portrait of a man, presumably the Zamindar. His was the only picture with the eyes uncrossed. He had a thick black moustache, and looked down on them imperiously with disapproving, light, hazel-coloured eyes.

As they came to the landing, Ali and Sagnik looked through all of the rooms. They appeared to be fairly ordinary, with sofas and chairs, which must have been comfortable once, Persian carpets, and tall mirrors. They went through every room, snapping photographs with Sagnik’s camera.

“There’s nothing here except for old and dusty stuff,” Ali sighed, exasperated. “All those villagers were just making stuff up.”

“Hey, don’t worry. Maybe we’ll see a spirit soon enough,” Sagnik joked. “Plus, it’s expected that the people of a small village will be superstitious. After all, a mass suicide occurred here. No wonder they’re creeped out by this place.”

“I don’t buy that story of a guy falling sick just because he came here one evening,” Ali rolled his eyes. “Definitely a coincidence, or they may just be exaggerating it.”

After they had explored nearly the entire mansion, they came to the last room.

“Woah, what’s this?” Ali exclaimed as he walked in.

Sagnik nearly collided into Ali’s back. “What happened?” he asked Ali, who was standing as still as a statue.

“Look there,” he said, pointing a finger.

“What’s that--oh my god!” Sagnik exclaimed.

The room was mostly bare, except for a mirror, with a desk in front of it, and a chair. The desk had the items which had given Ali a shock. A couple of bones were lying there. Glistening and white, they looked out of place in this old and dusty house.

“I don’t think the villagers know about this place,” Ali said. “Well, I don’t think those bones are going to do anything to us. Let’s explore.”

Sagnik ran his fingers over the top of the desk. It came away dusty. If everything else was so ancient and dusty, how could the bones look so ‘clean’?

He bent down to retrieve his camera from his bag when he was struck by an idea.



“Hey, Ali. How about I go to the village and tell all the villagers that there’s nothing to be afraid of here? You and I have explored the entire house, anyway. We haven’t seen ghosts or spirits or demons. Just think about it, we can rid them of their fear.”

Ali nodded his agreement. “That’s a great plan,” he said.

Sagnik reassured him that he’d be back in fifteen minutes and promptly left, leaving his bag behind.

“I won’t be scared,” Ali laughed. “You can go.”

Alone in the old, dusty room, Ali walked around with the camera, snapping pictures of the items. At last he came to the bones. After clicking a few pictures, he moved closer to them.

“Should I examine them?” he asked himself. He didn’t know why, but he had an odd sense of foreboding.

“God, when did I become such a scaredy-cat?” Ali laughed as he bent down to move about the bones. They were small and cool to the touch. “Eh, nothing out of the ordinary,” Ali said to himself as he turned away from the bones, his examination complete.

He sat on the chair that was facing the mirror. He smiled at his own reflection.

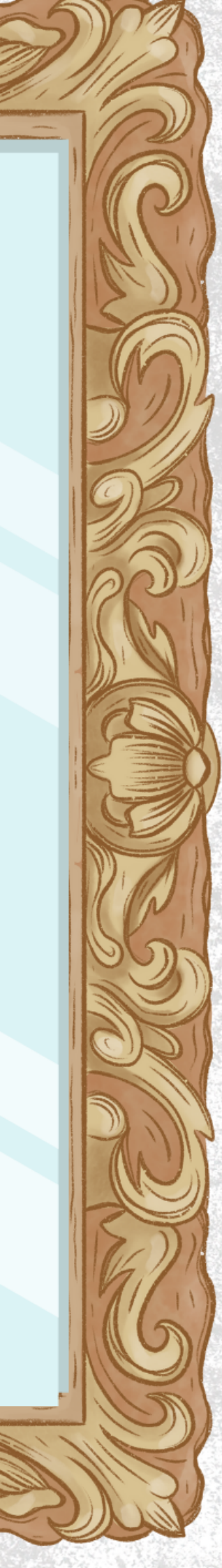
Suddenly, he saw something.

Wait.

What was that?

“I must’ve been imagining things,” he said to himself. “I just saw myself, that’s all.”





But there was something unsettling about that mirror. It felt like ... like something in it was calling to him. Telling him to come closer.

He heard a noise behind him. It must've been coming from the desk with the bones on it. He whirled around, to see the bones standing up all by themselves.

His breath came in short gasps. "God, what's--what's this?" he stuttered, standing up, backing away from the bones, which looked as if they were coming towards him.

Coming for him.

He turned around and saw that his back had hit the mirror. There was no escape now.

He wanted to move but he couldn't. He breathed in shakily, he could get out of this. Soon, Sagnik would be here and everything would be alright.

The voices came back.

They started whispering again.

Come here. Come closer.

He turned towards the mirror, entranced.

Yes, place your hand there. That's good.

He put his hand on the cool glass. His eyes took on a dull, glassy look.

Give up.

Give us.

Give in.

Sagnik returned with nearly half the village population in tow. All of them wanted to see how these two young men from Kolkata had found the mansion completely un-haunted, free of any spirits or demons. However, some still doubted them.

“You can see here that--” Sagnik said, walking into the room where he had last left Ali. He stopped in horror. “What?”

Ali lay face down on the floor, unconscious. Was he still breathing? Sagnik fell upon his knees. In all their travels around the country, this had never happened.

Some of the villagers took charge, hauling Ali’s body to a different room and placing him on a sofa. Somebody brought water and sprinkled a few drops on Ali’s face, while Sagnik sat in the corner, his head in his hands.

“He’s in shock,” a villager whispered to another. “Poor man. Imagine seeing your friend like that, he must be so distressed.”

Soon enough, Ali sat up, groggily, rubbing his eyes. He looked around at the people gathered around him.

“Oh god, Ali, you’re awake!” Sagnik cried, moving to hug him. “I was so worried about you. What happened?”

Ali didn’t respond. Sagnik noticed something strange about him. His hands were curled into fists. He was glaring at everybody around him. His eyes were a light hazel colour, and his pupils were dilated. He looked angry, no, not angry. This was something much more than anger. This was rage. Pure, unfiltered rage.



“Don’t touch us, you filthy peasant,” he snarled, pulling away from Sagnik. “Where have you all brought us? Do you not know who we are?”

Sagnik’s brows furrowed. Why was he behaving so strangely? What had happened to Ali?

“Get away! How dare you all touch us?” he shouted. “Get out of our house! Get out, get out!”

One of the villagers nearly fell down. “It’s--it’s Jomidar babu,” he cried, his hands shaking. Somebody in the crowd started shrieking. Most of the villagers moved away, their eyes wide with fear. Voices rose, murmuring, overlapping over each other.

“It’s me, Ali,” Sagnik whispered, gently. Maybe his memory had been jogged a bit by the accident.

“We are the most powerful man in the village,” Ali roared. “Bow before us!”

He draped himself over the sofa, with one leg resting on top of the other, as he looked about with a self-satisfied smirk.

A villager gestured to Sagnik to come with him to a corner.



“Babu, I think he’s been possessed by the ghost of Jomidar babu. He’s behaving in the same way as I remember the Jomidar used to,” he whispered to Sagnik.

“Huh? Bu-but that doesn’t make sense! The trauma of the accident might’ve been too much for him. That may be why he’s like this now.”

“I don’t think a person behaves like that, simply because of trauma,” the villager explained. “There’s no sign of a great accident either. He wasn’t bleeding when we found him, and he appears to be uninjured. There’s something else at play here—a spirit.”

“A spirit?” Sagnik exclaimed.

The villager nodded vigorously. “Look at him. The only reason for his strange behaviour could be this. He was alone in that room; there was nobody with him.”

Sagnik had to admit, it sounded like the only plausible reason. Why else was Ali not behaving like himself? “I think you’re right,” Sagnik said, slowly. “What should we do?”

“I think I know,” he said and whispered the rest of his plan into Sagnik’s ear.

“My lord, we have prepared a meal for you,” Sagnik bowed theatrically to Ali. “May we take you there now?” Ali grunted his affirmation.

Surrounded by a couple of scared villagers, who were in on the plan, they took Ali to the room where he had been found. The bones were still lying on the table in front of the mirror.

Another longer table had been brought in, and had been placed in front of the chair.

As soon as he entered the room, the villagers took hold of Ali’s arms.

“Hey, what’re you doing? Let go of us!” he raged, as he struggled to break free from their strong hold.

Sagnik followed them as they brought Ali, writhing in their hold, towards the mirror. Sagnik pushed his way to stand beside Ali.

He took a deep breath. “I hope this works,” he whispered to himself.





The villager had explained to him the entire plan, based on what they usually used to do at the village when someone had been possessed. After this event, Sagnik had been shaken enough to accept his advice and try anything.

“Let go of my friend,” he said to the mirror, his shoulders tense. “Let go!” he shouted. Ali tried to push his way out of the villagers’ firm grasp.

“You fool,” he hissed. “What are you doing?”

Nothing happened.

He placed Ali’s hands on to the mirror. Maybe physical contact would help in talking to the spirit of the Zamindar.

“Get out, Jomidar Babu. Leave my friend alone,” Sagnik cried. “What has he done to you?”

We need a vessel. An anchor.

Somebody in the crowd began sobbing, but the sound was muffled. The villagers looked on in fear, the whispering among them dying down. A few began praying.

“Leave, you cursed spirit. You died a long time ago,” Sagnik shrieked. “Leave this place at once!”

Oh no, now we won't. Freedom tastes so good after such a long time. You can't make us leave.

"Yes, I can, and I will," Sagnik said, determined. He took a bone from the table and to the horror of the others, smashed it into the glass of the mirror.

The voices wailed, a terrible, horrible, cursed sound that Sagnik never wanted to hear again.

"Leave this place and never come back!" Sagnik screamed, as the mirror toppled and fell backward, glass shattering everywhere. Ali immediately collapsed.

After a few minutes, Ali was awakened again. He looked around in confusion, rubbing his eyes. "What happened?" he asked. "Oh, Sagnik!" He hugged his friend tightly.

"You're finally back," Sagnik whispered as he hugged him back. Everyone let out a collective sigh of relief. The villagers began leaving the mansion hurriedly.

"Let's leave this place, Ali," Sagnik said, pulling his friend up with him.

"But what happened to me--" Ali was cut off by Sagnik.

"Shh, that's a story for another time. Now, you need to rest. You had a tiny accident," Sagnik explained, as they walked out of the ancient manor.

Ali turned around to look at it one last time, a haggard look on his face. The mansion. Dilapidated but magnificent.

"Come on, Ali, let's get going," Sagnik said, nervously. "I don't want to stay here any longer."

Ali nodded his agreement and walked out with him.

But Sagnik hadn't bothered to notice Ali's eyes. They were still that shade of hazel, golden and brown mixed together in a hauntingly beautiful symphony.

Hide and Seek

Kabir Srinivasan

“Let’s play hide and seek!” said Tim.

“Sure!” replied Ram.

They rushed out. The sun was just disappearing in the distance, and Ram’s watch showed it was 7:00 at night.

“I’ll hide!” exclaimed Ram. “The boundary is the house at the end of our block.”

As soon as Tim started counting, Ram dashed to the last house on the block and pushed open the door. Nobody lived there, it had been abandoned ever since Ram moved here. It was dark. Much darker than he had anticipated. Terror pulsed inside of him. Every creak of a floor board made Ram flinch in fright. An eerie silence filled the room. Footsteps approached as Ram’s heart quickened. One soft, one loud. Was it Tim? Could he have found him already ? But these footsteps were far too loud. He also had the terrible feeling that it was more than one person. It couldn’t be Tim. He tried not to breathe for if he was found, he did not know who these people were or what they would do to him. The footsteps neared, then stopped.

Silence.

No sound came from anywhere. Suddenly, a whisper echoed, shattering the silence. Ram dashed to a cupboard that was ajar, hoping that the people who made those noises would go away. But they continued.

“Where is it, is this the right place?” said a gruff voice.



Trembling, another man stuttered, “Yes master. We must look through every drawer and cupboard until we find the jewels. No one shall stand in our way.”

“Then we shall have the riches soon, whatever it takes. Ha ha ha,” the first man thundered. His voice reverberated in the room.

Ram’s heart pounded, his eyes wide as dinner plates with fear, a sense of foreboding coursing through his veins. Would he be found?

He thought of his best friend Tim, his mother and father, how disappointed they would be if they found his secret candy stash, his grandparents, uncles and aunts, his family. He wondered if he would ever see them again. He wished that this would stop, that he could go home and feel safe again. He trembled and his knees knocked.

More whispering.

It was 8:00.

More sound. Ram’s heart was bursting out of his chest.

8:30.

Ram curled into a ball, tears streaking his face. Could he go home ever again?

But suddenly a man bellowed, “CUT!”

Ram peered through the gap between the two doors and in front of him was ... a gigantic stage, cameras surrounding it. He jumped out and hurried home.

It was just a film shoot.





Mission Snackpossible

K Haasya

“Okay,” whispered Aarav, crouching behind the sofa. “Code Red is live. Repeat: Code Red is LIVE.”

“I thought it was Code Choco,” hissed his little sister Meera, adjusting her walkie-talkie handset.

“That was yesterday. Today’s mission is bigger. Today we go after ... the top shelf.”

Meera gasped. “The one above the fridge?!”

Aarav nodded solemnly. “Where Mom hides the good snacks.”

“But ... but that’s where she keeps the Emergency Only chocolate stash!”

“I know. That’s why it’s called a heist, Meera.”

“Won’t we get grounded again?”

“Only if we get caught.”

A third voice crackled through the walkie-talkie. “This is Base. Repeat this is Base. Paati just started her nap. You have twenty-three minutes.”

“Copy that, Ishaan,” Aarav whispered. “You’re our lookout. Keep the line clear.”

“Roger,” came the reply. “Also, bring me a Kit-Kat.”

“Focus, Ishaan!”

Aarav turned to Meera. “Alright, we do this fast. You drag the step-ladder. I climb. You look out. No sudden noises.”

She narrowed her eyes. “What about the Cookie Alarm?”

“Already disabled.”

“You what?!”

“I shifted the glass jar with the jingly lid exactly 3.7 centimetres to the left. It no longer rattles. Precision engineering.”

Meera looked impressed. “Okay, Mission Impossible.”

“Mission Snackpossible,” Aarav corrected.

Meera dragged the creaky step-ladder across the kitchen tiles, wincing at every screeeeech.

Aarav flinched. “You call that stealth?”

“You want stealth, you carry it next time!”

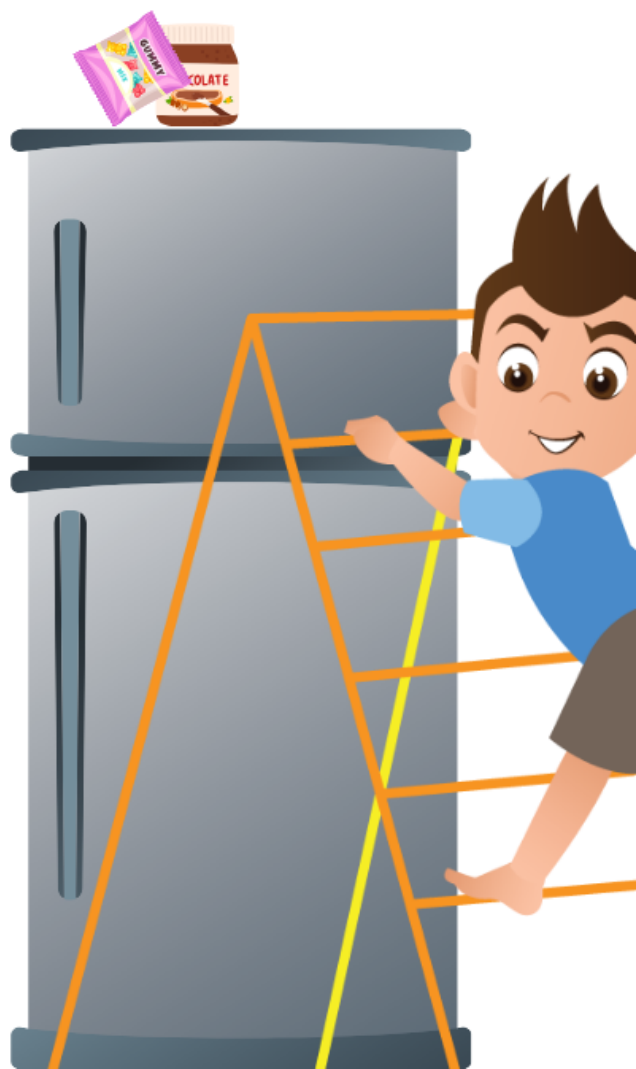
Aarav scrambled up the ladder. First rung, second, third—he wobbled dangerously.

“WHOA—”

“Shhh!”

“I’m fine,” he hissed. “Just testing gravity. Still works.”

He peered over the top.





“Visual on target,” he whispered. “Two Dairy Milks. One packet of gummies. One jar of chocolate hazelnut spread. Jackpot.”

“Take all of it!”

“Amateur move,” Aarav scoffed. “Take all and they know. Take some and they suspect. Take one ... and they think they misplaced it.”

Meera blinked. “You’re a genius.”

“I know.”

The walkie crackled. “GUYS—AMMA’S COMING UPSTAIRS! Abort! ABORT!”

Aarav froze. “She wasn’t supposed to be home this soon!”

“She forgot her phone! She’s got flip-flops on! I REPEAT—FLIP. FLOPS.”

Meera stiffened. “Oh no. The slap-ready footwear.”

“Deploy distraction!” Aarav shouted.

“On it!” said Ishaan.

From upstairs came the sound of a loud CRASH.

Then, “Oops! Paati, I think I broke your elephant statue!”



Meera and Aarav exchanged horrified looks.

“She loves that elephant!” Meera whispered.

“We’ll replace it! MOVE!”

Aarav leapt down, cradling the chocolate like a newborn. They dove under the dining table just as Amma entered the kitchen.

“I thought I heard something down here ...” she murmured.

Silence.

Aarav didn’t breathe.

A bead of sweat slid down Meera’s forehead.

Amma opened the fridge. Closed it. Then:
“Weird.”

She padded back upstairs.

Aarav let out a long breath.

“Mission successful,” he whispered.

Meera grinned. “For once, we didn’t get caught.”

The walkie buzzed. “Guys? Paati says the elephant was already broken. Also, she wants some of that chocolate.”





Prime Time Deception

Ronikaa Vijan

“Good evening, Alaksea! Welcome to Prime Time with Sabrina!” a disembodied voice boomed as two women came in sight.

Sabrina was sitting to the left side of the coffee table, dressed in a slim fit white shirt and black flared pants, her hair pulled up in a slick ponytail. She waved to the camera as her name was called. The woman beside her was dressed in a midi coat dress, her hair in beach waves left open.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have with us this evening, Sehnoor Kaur! Inspector Detective, the best in town!” Sabrina exclaimed, in a British accent.

Fake applause rang through the set.

Sehnoor smiled as Sabrina started, “Miss Kaur has graced us with her presence to discuss her recent cases, to begin with, the disappearance of Ivy, the fifteen-year-old daughter of billionaire Matthew Markson who runs a chain of very successful supermarkets across the world, known for its organic fruits and veggies.” Sabrina paused, took a sip of water and continued, “Sehnoor, it has been more than five days since Ivy went missing. The citizens, and me, are eager to know how the disappearance took place.”

“Well, the disappearance is very suspicious. Ivy is an extroverted kid, known for being able to hang out with everybody at school, and for her constant streak of a 4.0 GPA. After a conversation with her close friends who were at her home when she disappeared, we have found out that at exactly 2:30 in the afternoon, Ivy stepped outside the house to receive an Amazon parcel. When she didn’t come back, her friends went to check outside, and discovered blood on the floor.”

“Oh dear, that is certainly upsetting. How is her father coping?”

“Not well. Ivy is his only daughter, and after his wife passed away, almost his only family. He hasn’t been coping well, and is willing to do anything to get his daughter back.”

“Well, where has the investigation led you? Any suspects?”

“Yes, of course. Mr Markson’s biggest rival, James Lore, is our prime suspect. He has been in heavy debt that a chunky ransom would definitely pay off. He is currently in our custody based on some evidence we have found against him.”

“Any ransom calls?”

“Not yet, though we are certainly awaiting one.”

“Oh dear. I hope with all my heart that the kid returns home safely. Moving on, you recently solved the case of the missing ‘22’ hat*! The newspapers didn’t do the case justice. We would like to hear it from you and--”

Markson switched off the TV, a wicked, devilish grin on his face. After all, top-notch detective Sehnor Kaur had fallen for the story he wanted to sell.

*Read about Sehnor Kaur’s first case, in “Swiftly Vanished”, published in issue 6 of WORDS.



Poor Lore, he thought. After finding the evidence he'd planted, Lore was sure to get convicted. Just one last thing left.

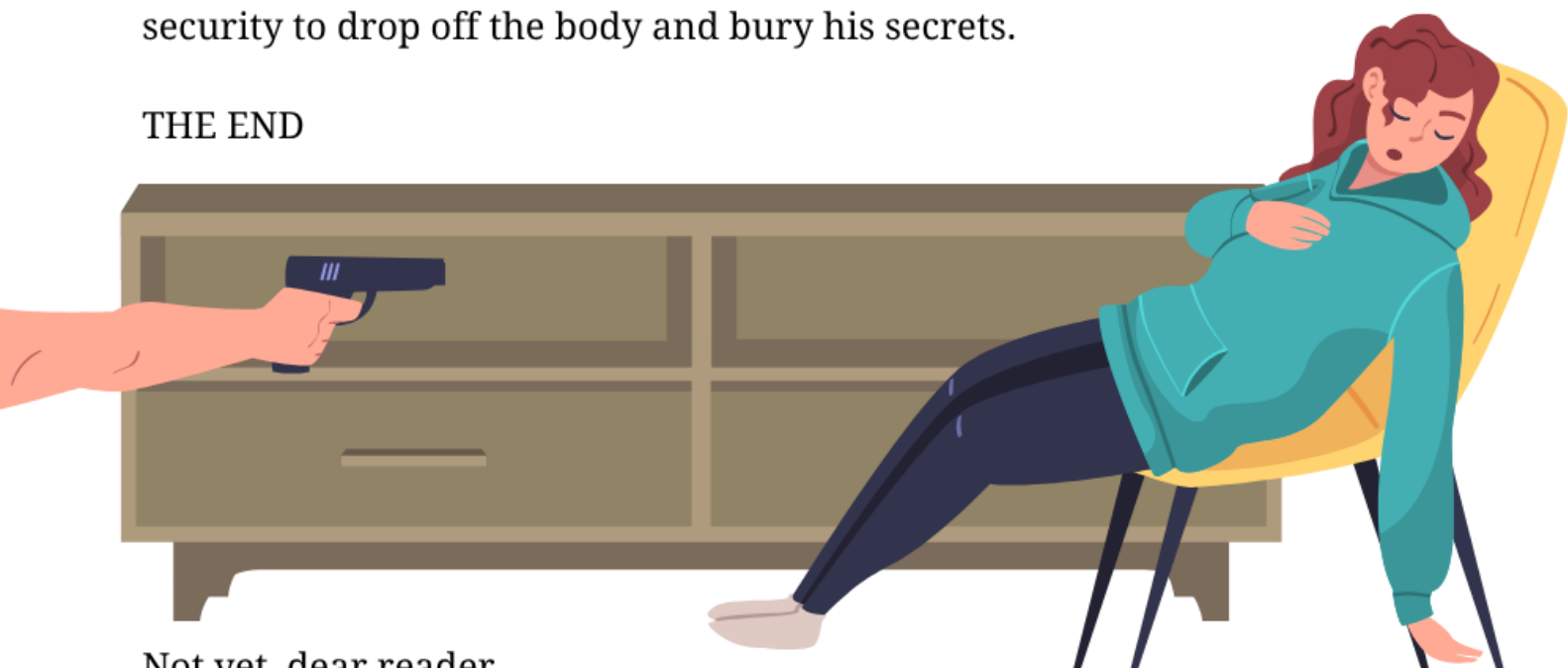
Markson shifted his gaze from the TV to the chair beside it, and the person sitting in it, unconscious. He stood up, slowly walking towards the chair and pulling out a gun from his blazer.

“And that, child, is the lesson you learn for not listening to your daddy.” Aiming at Ivy's stomach, Markson fired. The sound of the shot echoed in the room for a moment, as Markson gently caressed Ivy's face.

“Better drop you off to Lore's.”

With that final statement, Markson walked out to instruct his head of security to drop off the body and bury his secrets.

THE END



Not yet, dear reader.

As soon as Markson left, Ivy sat up and removed the bullet proof workout jacket she was wearing. As quietly as she could, removed the pocket knife strapped to her thigh. Using the knife, she swiftly cut through the complicated rope that tied her feet together.

Ivy grabbed her phone, which was lying on the floor, by Markson's grace and hurriedly dialled up a number. As the phone rang, the first conversation between Sehnoor and her flashed in front of her eyes.

TWO WEEKS EARLIER

“You mean to say, my daddy, HE uses poisonous chemicals in his so-called organic fruits and vegetables and MORE than a HUNDRED PEOPLE have DIED?!” Ivy exclaimed, tears running down her cheeks.

“Yes, darling. I know this is hard for you to process, but you have to help me catch him. Get justice for all those lives. My ... friend. She ...” Sehnoor paused and took a deep breath to avoid crying.

“Oh, I am so sorry. What can I do to help?”

“Tell him that you know and you will tell the people on a specific date. He’ll worry, because this is the truth that could leave him broke if leaked. My bet is he’ll try to blackmail you, murder or kidnap you, based on the past cases. Don’t worry,” Sehnoor added, after seeing Ivy’s horrified expression. “From the day you tell him, you’ll be wearing a bulletproof workout jacket and a knife will be strapped to your thigh, for protection. I’ll have a spy cam attached to your jacket. Once you have enough proof, call me. I’ll be prepared.”

NOW

Ivy took a deep breath and snapped back to reality, as Sehnoor’s anxious voice rang from the other end.

“Hello, Sehnoor? He took the bait! Marky-Sharky really thought that we bought the story of James Lore kidnapping me. Ya, bring in the cops, I recorded the video in the spy cam thingy you gave me in which he CLEARLY states using poisonous sweeteners and chemicals in his fruits and vegetables. All those lives gone due to “accidental poisoning” will finally get justice.”

THE END

For real, this time.





(Im)mortality

Avani Gupta

I roll my eyes.

“Ugh. Wait, why am I doing this again? You know what, I don’t really care. Hi, I guess. I’m Belly Fisher. Two hours old, probably got one left—if that. Not that it matters. No brain, no heart, no drama.”

“Fascinating,” she says in a smooth voice. “You’re refreshingly honest. I’m Jemimah Foster. Two thousand years and counting.”

There’s an awkward silence. What conversation can an immortal jellyfish and one like me possibly have?

“So, I’m here to observe you,” she continues, her tone level. “Part of a psychological study on how worldview, outlooks on life, and general thought processes vary with lifespan.”

“Ask me all your questions together, and be on your way,” I reply, losing patience.

“Of course,” she replies, unbothered. “What matters most to you? How do you spend your brief time? What—if anything—do you care about?”

“Look, I really don’t have time for this. All I do is just float around and try not to bump into anything annoying, like meaning or conversation. I don’t think before I do, I just go with the flow and do

whatever feels good. Everything's loud, weird, and way too complicated. I don't really do caring. About anything. I'll be gone soon anyway, so why bother? Okay, you're welcome for this interaction. Goodbye."

I turn and swim off, her gaze still trailing behind me. Maybe. I wouldn't know. I don't actually have the luxury to float in one place and think. Whatever. Moving on. The current tugs me sideways, and I let it. That's the thing about your life being a whole of five hours long—or short, I guess—there's no such thing as plans. No direction, no decisions. I just go with it. I don't fight the ocean.

A shadow passes overhead.

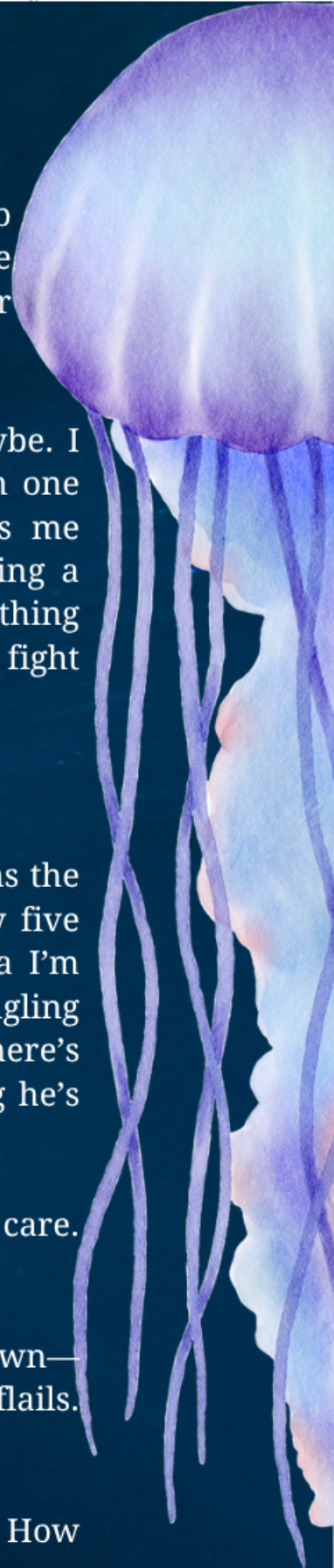
I look up. Turtle. Big one. He's gliding low, lazy, like he owns the reef. Then he dives. I swim away quickly. Can't afford my five hours to be cut short. Then I realise the turtle has no idea I'm there. And I see it—this thing in the water. Pale. Wavy. Dangling like a jellyfish that gave up halfway through forming. But there's something about it that's ... off. Oh. Dumb turtle. The thing he's after isn't a jellyfish at all.

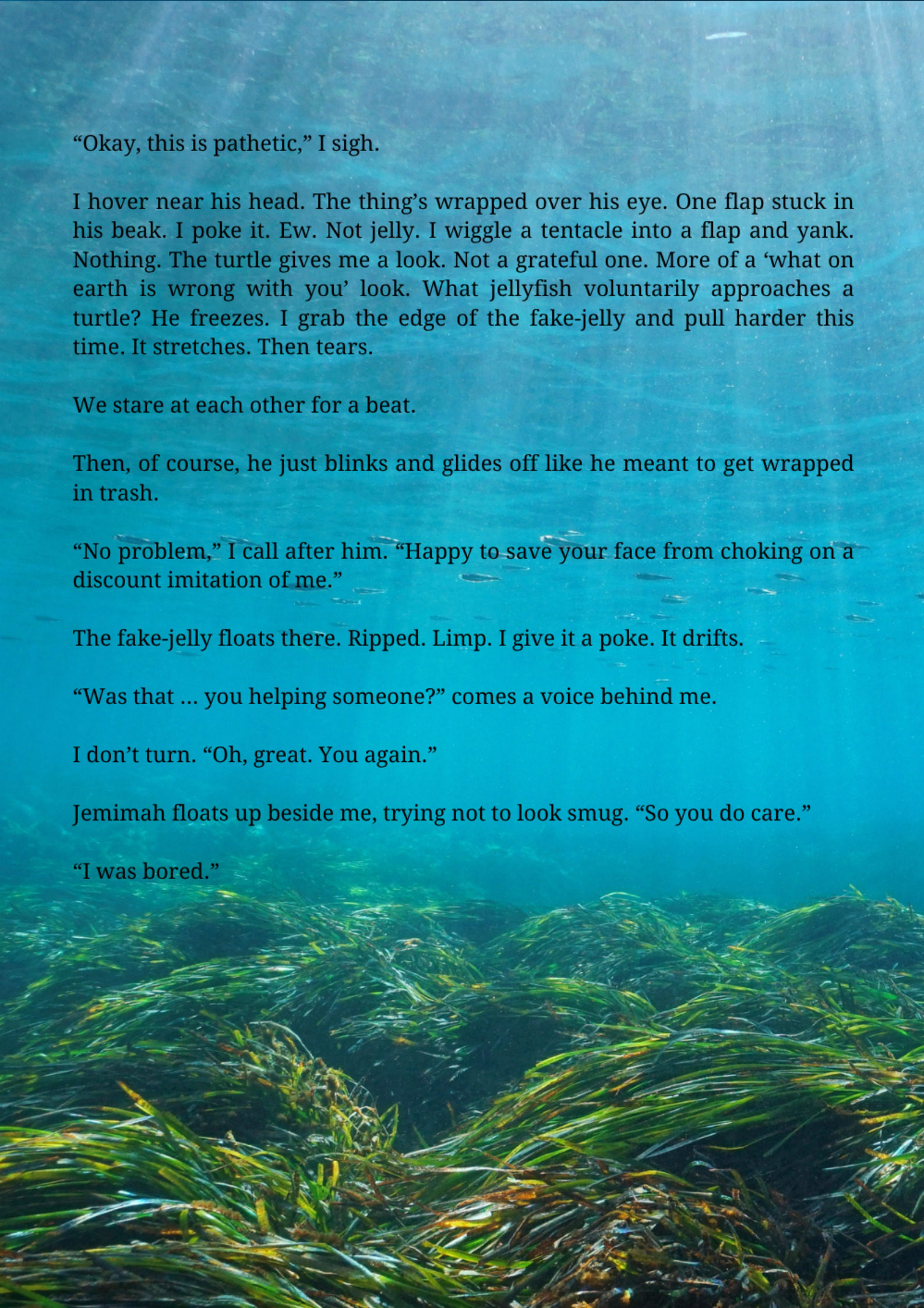
The turtle's heading straight for it. I pause. Not because I care. Just ... instinct, maybe.

The turtle opens his beak-mouth thing wide. He chomps down—and jerks back. The thing wraps around his face. He flails. Flippers thrashing. His back legs kick up a small storm.

"Seriously? You mistook that for one of us?" I mutter. "Wow. How insulting."

Still, I swim closer. Again, not because I care. Just ... curious. That's all. He's spinning now, trying to shake it off. It's not working. I mean, better the fake jellyfish than me, right? This is probably the most exciting thing I'll do in my life though. You know what, screw safety, living is taking risks, right?



An underwater scene with a blue-green background. A turtle is visible in the upper right, and a jellyfish is in the upper left. The bottom of the image is filled with a dense, green seagrass bed.

“Okay, this is pathetic,” I sigh.

I hover near his head. The thing’s wrapped over his eye. One flap stuck in his beak. I poke it. Ew. Not jelly. I wiggle a tentacle into a flap and yank. Nothing. The turtle gives me a look. Not a grateful one. More of a ‘what on earth is wrong with you’ look. What jellyfish voluntarily approaches a turtle? He freezes. I grab the edge of the fake-jelly and pull harder this time. It stretches. Then tears.

We stare at each other for a beat.

Then, of course, he just blinks and glides off like he meant to get wrapped in trash.

“No problem,” I call after him. “Happy to save your face from choking on a discount imitation of me.”

The fake-jelly floats there. Ripped. Limp. I give it a poke. It drifts.

“Was that ... you helping someone?” comes a voice behind me.

I don’t turn. “Oh, great. You again.”

Jemimah floats up beside me, trying not to look smug. “So you do care.”

“I was bored.”

"Mhm."

"You gonna keep following me?" I ask.

She shrugs. "Just curious. Thought you didn't 'do caring.'"

"I don't."

"But you kind of just did."

"You know, it's my turn to ask you a question."

"Oh?"

I tilt slightly. "What do you do with forever?"

She's quiet for a long moment. "Try not to waste it."

"Huh."

I flick a tentacle and start drifting away. Then I shoot forward into the current, fast and loose. Behind me, the reef fades. The plastic's gone. The turtle's gone. Jemimah's probably still floating there.

Me? I've got less than an hour left. Might as well stir something up. Maybe I'll race a dolphin. Maybe I'll heckle a school of fish. Whatever.





The Great Escape

Sunandini Sen

“Great. Bringing a caged bird JUST to see more caged creatures,” I mumbled under my breath and mentally began composing a letter to the one above. “Dear Great Bird,” I prayed. “What did I do in my last life to even deserve this?””

“Shut up, stupid bird,” Tyrant Kid snapped at me. I rolled my eyes. That child was a spoilt brat.

The zoo was something I’d never seen before. I’d lived with humans as long as I could remember, so of course, I’d heard about it sometimes.

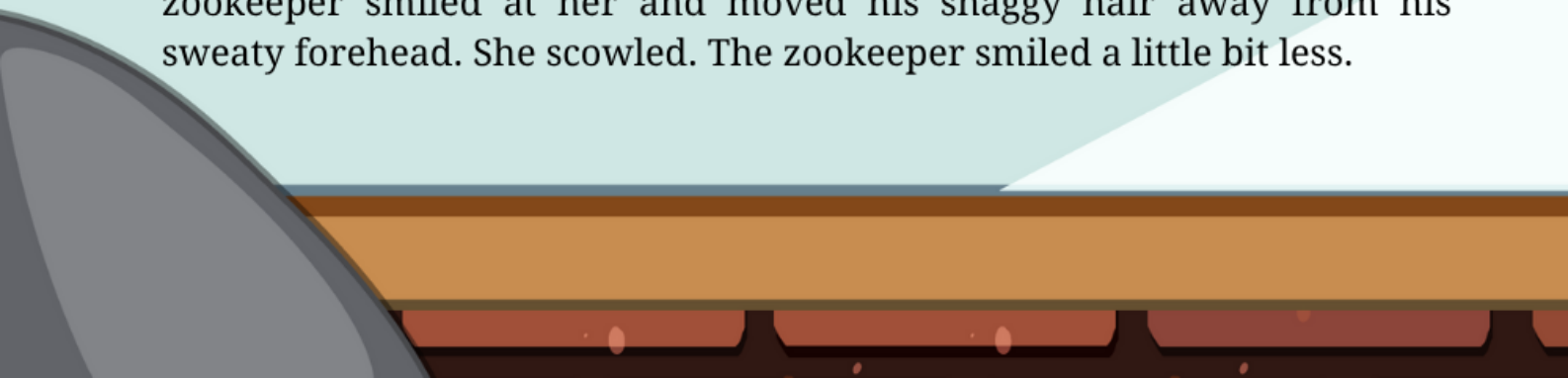
“Ugh, so much dust!” Owner Number Two exclaimed, fanning her face. “And it’s so hot!”

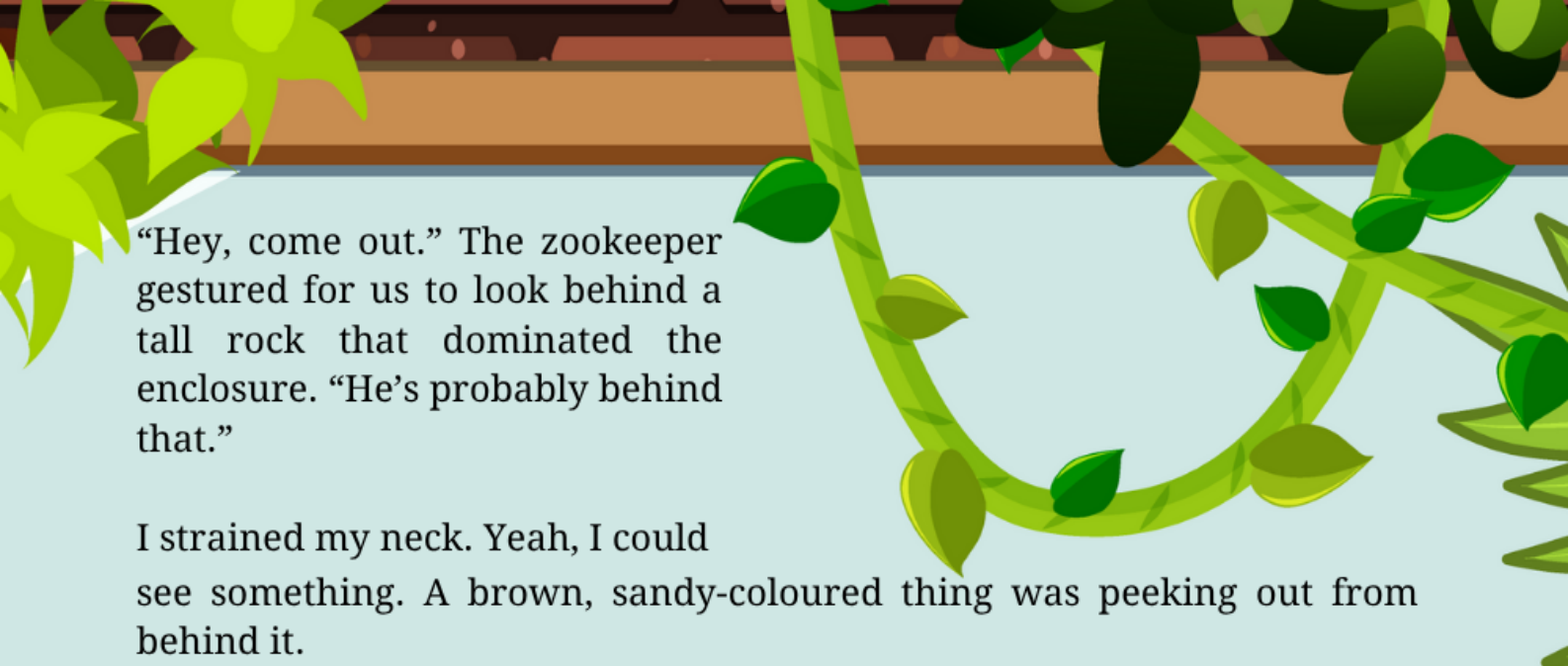
“I want to see the kangaroos!” Tyrant Kid tugged at her father’s t-shirt.

“Fine, fine,” he sighed and tightened his grip on the long, metal chain attached to my leg band. I shifted over to my better right leg, in my position on Owner One’s shoulder. “Can’t have you trying to escape again, can we?” he smirked at me. I winced as he tugged it and took us over to the kangaroo enclosure.

I’d never seen a kangaroo before. I wondered, how would it even look? Would it be really big or really tiny? Would it be furry or feathery?

“Where’s the kangaroo?” Tyrant Kid asked. “This one is a little bit shy.” A zookeeper smiled at her and moved his shaggy hair away from his sweaty forehead. She scowled. The zookeeper smiled a little bit less.





“Hey, come out.” The zookeeper gestured for us to look behind a tall rock that dominated the enclosure. “He’s probably behind that.”

I strained my neck. Yeah, I could see something. A brown, sandy-coloured thing was peeking out from behind it.

“You could say it’s a bit antisocial,” the zookeeper laughed. Owner Number One and Two laughed along with him.

Slowly, the kangaroo walked to the front of the enclosure. To say ‘walked’ would be wrong. It jumped. Hopped, to be honest. Gross Infant started squealing. Tyrant Kid stuck her face to the bars. Definitely an invasion of privacy, poor kangaroo.

“No touching the kangaroo,” the zookeeper warned. Tyrant Kid made a face and pulled herself away. Owner Number One and Two started up a conversation with the zookeeper.

“I’m not antisocial; I’m Kevin. I swear to god, if another stupid family comes to look at me-” the kangaroo was mumbling to himself. I gently flew down from my owner’s shoulder and perched on the railing. “Hey antisocial, I’m Polly,” I said, preening my feathers. “Indian Ringneck Parakeet, at your service.”

Kevin frowned and probably wondered whether he should be talking to a pet bird.

“It’s okay, if you don’t wanna talk, I’ll talk instead. As I said, I’m Polly. Yeah, I’m a pet bird. Life really sucks. I mean, you’d know all about it,” I rambled.



“These are my owners,” I pointed to them with a claw. “Horrid things, humans.”

“Exactly,” Kevin rolled his eyes. “I’m not antisocial, I just don’t like people. These zookeepers don’t even get that. If people want to see a kangaroo, they should go to the one next door. He actually enjoys this circus.”

He looked around nervously, his eyes darting back and forth. “Wait a second, what if the zookeepers see us? Ohmygosh ohmygosh what’ll happen then? Maybe they’ll put me in kangaroo jail—”

“Dude, you need to chill,” I said. “Nobody’s gonna even understand that we’re having a conversation.”

“Kevin, Kevin, listen here! I have the greatest news ever,” the kangaroo in the neighbouring enclosure pushed his nose through the bars and beckoned Kevin. Must be the one who enjoys the circus, I thought.

“What, Kenji? I’m having a conversation,” Kevin deadpanned.

“Wow, didn’t know you had friends,” Kenji replied. “But, I heard a new zookeeper is being trained! Today is his first day here! How exciting, don’t you think?”

“I don’t care—” Kevin was interrupted by Kenji dramatically gesticulating with his paws.

“I got to know this from Bina, she’s a butterfly, and she heard it from a turtle who heard it from a guy talking in front of his pond who heard it from his aunt’s friend’s—”



“Stop, dude. Just stop,” Kevin snapped at him. Kenji walked away with a pout.

“Okay, where were we?” I asked.

“Why’s your foot like that?” Kevin cocked his head. “It’s at a really weird angle.”

I looked down at my left foot and lifted it up. I winced. It really was at an awkward angle.

“Owners?” His eyes softened. “You don’t need to say anything if you don’t wanna talk about it.”

I nodded, lowering my head to my chest. “Yup, you’re right.”

Memories of that evening flashed through my mind. I’d just been caught when I thought that I’d finally escaped this life of imprisonment. My owners were obviously furious. I still remembered the moment Owner Number One angrily hit me, pushing me off the table. It’d been so sudden, and I hadn’t had time to open my wings. I’d landed on my left foot, which had borne the brunt of the accident.

I was shaken out of my thoughts by Kevin.

“I know how that feels,” he said, gently. “I was only a few years old when poachers picked me up. Ever since, I’ve known only this cage as my home. Our lives are terrible. No one’s ever even gonna help us.” Kevin sighed sadly.

“Yeah, you’re right.” I started thinking. “What if ... what if, we help ourselves?”

“What do you mean, Polly?” Kevin asked, scratching his head.

“We can escape, you doofus,” I rolled my eyes. “You escape from this zoo, I escape from my owners. We both help each other.”

“But how?”



“Look, I’ll figure out a way to get you out. You figure out a way to get me out, deal?” I reached out with my claw towards him.

“We could get caught,” he said anxiously, eyes darting around. “Ok, fine.” He reached out with his paw.

“Hey, get away from there!” Owner Number Two screeched. “You stupid, stupid bird—I told you we should leave it home!” She turned towards her husband.

Owner Number One tugged at my leash. I winced in pain. “I’ll figure something out,” I whispered to Kevin. He bobbed his head in understanding.

“Just wait until we get home,” Owner Number One seethed. “You’ll have a nice punishment waiting for you.”

No way I’m going home, I thought. Not if I figure out a plan to escape.

“I want ice-cream,” Tyrant Kid pouted. “Chocolate flavour!”

“Of course, my dear,” Owner Number Two shot her husband a withering look before turning to her kids.

“Yes, let’s all go for ice-cream; it’s a hot day, after all.” Owner Number One attempted to be cheerful.



As the humans were licking their desserts, I was thinking hard. How would I get Kevin out of there? I shut my eyes and tried to remember what the lock on the cage looked like. Yes, it was a huge, metal thing. I’d seen a keypad, so it must have a code. So, get the code and open the door.

“Yup, that sure is easy,” I mumbled.

Two zookeepers came to the ice-cream stall. One of them was visibly nervous and twitchy. “Um, Sir, it’s my first day, y-you know,” he stuttered.

I turned my head immediately. This must be that new zookeeper in training!

“You’ll do fine, champ!” the other zookeeper slapped his back. “Remember the codes well though. Shark is 17865, monkey’s 18234 ...” he whispered to the zookeeper.

I turned my head back again, disinterested.

“As for kangaroo...”

Wait, what was that?



In an instant, my head snapped up and I craned my neck towards them to hear more clearly. “Kangaroo is 06120.”

Yes, that was it. Thank Great Bird, it must’ve been my lucky day. “06120, 06120,” I kept on muttering to myself.

“What’re you rambling on and on about?” Tyrant Kid sneered.

I tried my best to put on a blank, stupid expression on my face. She shrugged and went back to her ice-cream. So easy to deceive stupid humans.

Ok, on to phase two. I’ve got the code, now how to get to the enclosure. I shut my eyes and tried to think.

I had to get my owners to the enclosure again. But there was no way they’d go back there without any reason. I tried to remember what was around it. To the left, there were emus, no they’d already seen that.



“How do I get them there?” I wondered. What else was there nearby? Aha, there was a washroom a few feet away. I looked at the ice-cream Owner Number One was enjoying and smirked. Oh, I’d been waiting for this for a long time.

A few minutes later, we were in front of Kevin’s enclosure.

“Here, take the stupid bird and wait here,” Owner Number One had practically thrown me into Owner Number Two’s hands and hurried to the washroom to clean himself up.

The entirety of the front of his shirt was white. Vanilla, to be exact. I’d struggled to contain my laughter at the sight. Wow, Polly, you’re really smart.

“Back so soon?” The same zookeeper we’d seen before smiled at Owner Number Two, who was, as always, eager to begin chatting again.

I hopped down from her shoulder and perched on the railing. Ok, time to work your magic, Polly.

I nodded to Kevin, who looked like he was about to have a panic attack. He hopped from one foot to another, twitching. What was up with that guy? I rolled my eyes.

I looked around suspiciously. Ok, nobody was looking at me. I strained against the leash, wincing, trying to get closer to the keypad.

“How’re you gonna get me out?” Kevin said, quietly. “I have thought of something for you, though.”

I grinned widely at him and proceeded to tap out the digits on the keypad. I turned back, Owner Number Two was still engaged in conversation.

“Oh no,” I sucked my teeth. “Owner Number One’s coming back.”

True to my words, he was stomping towards us, his face set in an ugly scowl. If he caught me after this, he’d make parrot jam out of me and eat me with toast.

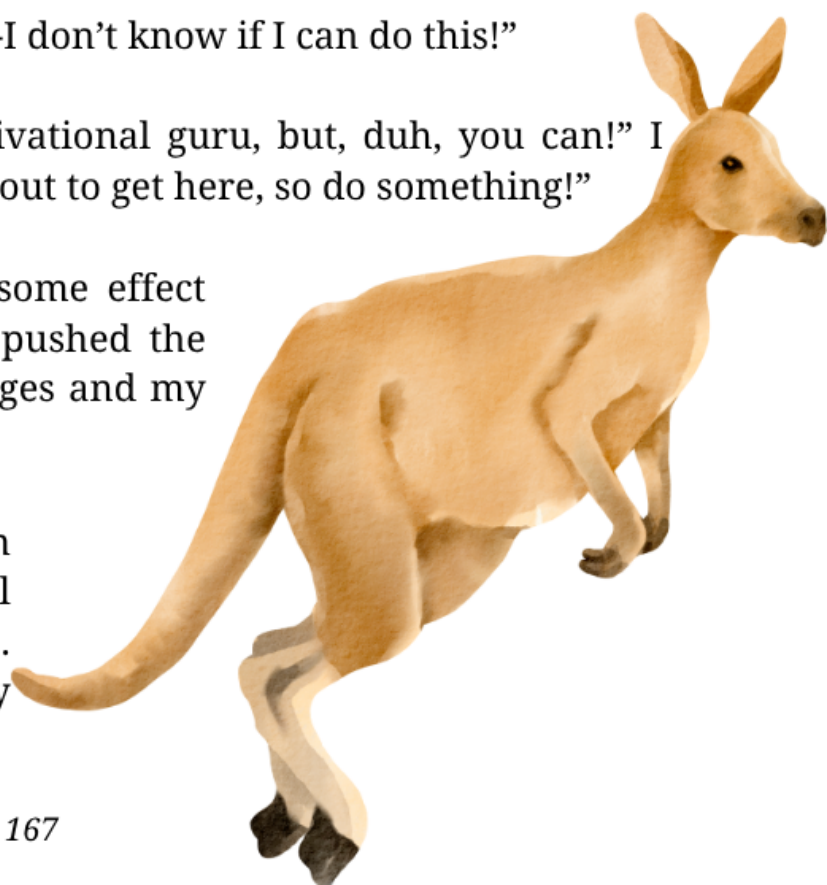
“Need to hurry, need to hurry,” I mumbled as I tapped out the rest of the digits. “Done!” I exclaimed. “Push it and get out, quick. Help me!”

Kevin looked at the gate in fright. “I-I don’t know if I can do this!”

“I don’t mean to sound like a motivational guru, but, duh, you can!” I rolled my eyes. “And my owner’s about to get here, so do something!”

My words must’ve obviously had some effect on him. He nodded his head and pushed the gate lightly. It nearly fell off its hinges and my eyes nearly fell out of my sockets.

It was then I realised that Kevin didn’t play around. With a powerful spring, he jumped out of his cage. Everybody around immediately started screaming.





“Oh god, oh god, it’s gotten out!” Owner Number Two screeched. Tyrant Kid started crying.

“I’m gonna need backup, pronto!” the zookeeper spoke into a walkie-talkie.

“He-hey, nice kangaroo,” he stepped back, with his hands raised, as Kevin advanced towards him and stopped.

The zookeeper breathed a sigh of relief. Kevin smiled before giving him a powerful kick. He went flying into some bushes.

“You go, dude!” I cheered, as Owner Number Two tried to pull my leash. Oh no, this wasn’t good. “A little help here?” I flapped my wings madly.

Kevin immediately turned towards Owner Number Two, who fell down, flailing her arms. He didn’t even have to do anything.

My leash slipped out of her hands. “Polly--you stupid bird, come back here this instant!” she screamed at me, as I hopped on to Kevin’s outstretched paw.

“Uh, I know you’re really enjoying your newfound freedom, but can we get going?” I nudged Kevin with my claw. He grinned before taking another powerful jump.

“You got it.”

As we flew through the open metal gates, I flexed my muscles. It had been so long since my last flight. I’d forgotten what it felt like to be a bird.

Finally, I was free.



Beak and Bite

K Haasya



They call me Peeko. I'm a pied kingfisher--small, sharp-beaked, fast as the wind. I live for fish, sunrises, and avoiding things with teeth. Especially crocodiles.

That's why I still don't understand how I ended up best friends with one. It started on a Wednesday, which, for some reason, is always a weird day. I was perched on a branch over the river, scanning for fish, when I heard a deep groan.

"Urrghhh ..."

I glanced down. There he was. Huge. Scaly. Floating just beneath the surface like a dead log with fangs.

"Everything hurts," he grumbled.

"Why don't you stop lying in the sun all day?" I chirped. "Maybe do a push-up or two."

The crocodile opened one lazy eye. "Easy for you to say, featherball. You don't have algae in your teeth."

Normally, I would've zipped off. But something in his voice sounded ... lonely. So I flitted down to a safer branch. Just high enough that he couldn't snap me up in one bite.

"Name's Peeko," I said. "What's yours, Swamp Breath?"

"Crag," he said with a slow blink. "And I think something's stuck in my gums."

I stared at his jaws. Huge. Cracked. Filled with what looked like a thousand yellow knives. I had to admit—they were in rough shape. “I’m not a dentist, you know.”

“You’re a bird. Don’t your kind clean teeth for a living?”

“That’s offensive.”

“Sorry.”

There was a long silence.

“... But I could take a quick look,” I muttered.

That’s how it began. A cautious fly-by, a few hesitant pecks, and boom—out came a fish bone lodged between two back molars.

Crag sighed like someone had taken a rock off his chest. “You’re ... actually helpful.”

“I get that a lot,” I lied.

From then on, I visited Crag every day. He told me stories—about underwater battles with pythons, about getting his tail stuck in mangrove roots, about once mistaking a hippo’s ear for a snack (bad idea). In return, I brought him news from the sky and picked the gunk out of his gums.

Some of the other birds said I was crazy.

“You trust a crocodile?” they squawked. “He’ll eat you one day!”

But Crag never did. Not even once.





I mean, if he did once ... I wouldn't even be here.

One afternoon, when a young eagle tried to snatch me out of the air, it was Crag who lunged up from the river and snapped its teeth towards the eagle, scaring the feathers off its behind.

"You're mine, Peeko," Crag growled. "And nobody messes with what's mine."

I puffed up with pride. And maybe just a little fear. But mostly pride. Now, every creature in the jungle knows—if you mess with me, you mess with Crag. And if you mess with Crag?

Well, I'll be there. Sitting on his snout. Peeking into his monstrous smile. Making sure nothing's stuck between his teeth.

Because friendship comes in all shapes.

Even beaked and bitey.



HISTORICAL FICTION

P Vimal Adithyan

August 26, 1947

How are you Raheem? I hope you are doing fine. I am good here. How is our dog Kuttu? Everything seems different and my father has got a new job in Salem. Is Uncle Mohammed still working in the railways? My father still says from time to time that Uncle Mohammed and he were more brothers than friends.

Leaving Amritsar was difficult but I'm coping well here. I'm going to a new school and my friends here are nice but I still miss you. It is very hard studying in Tamil even though it's my mother tongue. I read in the newspaper that there are many riots going on in Amritsar. Your family were discussing moving to Lahore. Well, have your parents made up their mind about it? I wish India and Pakistan had no partition and then we could all have stayed together. Do write back.

From your dearest friend,
Raman

September 13, 1947

Raman, I am doing fine. I am happy to hear that you are well. Life there must be fun, exciting and peaceful. Everything here is upside-down. Every day the riots are getting worse around here. I wish I could see you too but to withstand glares of hatred from everybody hurts us more. The situation at the railways is the same, so my father has stopped going to work. My mother and father have decided that it will be safer for our family to move to Lahore. Sikhs and Hindus attack Muslims and vice versa. Our dear Sikh and Hindu brothers are our new enemies now. I also wish the riots stop. I am leaving by train, the Lahore express. Yes, the same train that our families took to Delhi last summer for vacation. But this time it is just my family to Pakistan forever. This might be one of the last letters I will be writing to you in India.

Love,
Raheem

HISTORICAL FICTION

September 30, 1947

Raheem, I am very heartbroken to hear that you are going to leave for Pakistan forever. I wish you and your parents a safe journey to Pakistan. Please write back as soon as you can. Don't forget Kuttu. Please make sure he is safe. Don't forget to write back. I will be waiting for the letter.

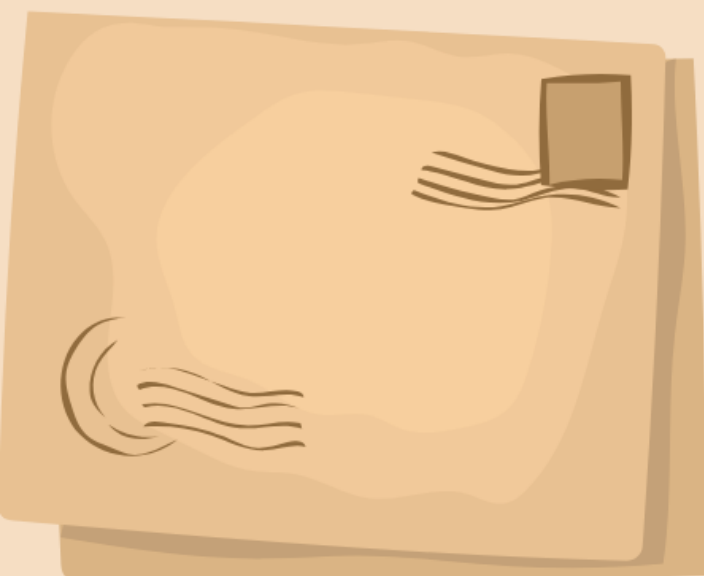
Best friends forever,
Raman

August 25 1949,

Dear Raman,

I hope you're doing fine. Yes, I survived. There were many riots in Lahore, so we decided to move to Karachi. In Karachi it is as peaceful as the Sunrise. I missed one year of schooling. I just joined my new school now. How's life there? Could we ever meet? Maybe we could study hard and then meet somewhere abroad like the USA. Unfortunately, I lost Kuttu on the train. Luckily there were no attacks on the train. I will share all the events that took place from Amritsar to Karachi in the next letter. Not a happy story though. Stay in touch.

Best friends again,
Raheem



HISTORICAL FICTION

Aabha Sardesai

Dear Priya Didi.

How are you? I hope you're healthy and well. How is Bua? I hope she's doing better than Mummyji.

I'll tell you why I said that. The Sultan is moving us. All of us. From Delhi to Devgiri! He's calling it Daulatabad now. It seems he's trying to protect us from those mindless Mongols. Sultan Muhammad-bin Tughluq, care about his people? Us, the common Hindus who he murders every day? Nahin ho sakta! He's moving us to Devgiri on his whims and fancies. Maybe he's feeling too hot.

On the comical side, Mummyji is busy wondering how she'll cook on the way. She's spending every minute groaning about how all our food might go waste, and about how she'll warm the food if she makes and packs it beforehand.

But, to tell you the truth, didi, I don't want to leave. I like staying home, here. Playing gilli-danda every evening with all my friends every evening. I don't know how far away I'll have to stay from all my friends.

But at least Papaji won't grumble about the extra taxes. Land, crops, jaziya, and on top of that the extra taxes on the doab reigon we live on. During this famine? Sultan Tughluq, I tell you.

The journey is going to take about 2 months. We're travelling in bullock carts, around 4-5 families in each. Like I said, where does the Sultan care? He'll be travelling alone, with servants fanning him and cooking for him. What does he have to lose?

But, if you do come to visit, (you probably won't, we're so far away,) we're living in Devgiri now.

I'm just hoping that this "Daulatabad" will be as nice as Dilli.

I hope I'll see you and Bua and Chotu again sometime. Love you
Your FAVOURITE sister,

Asha.



HISTORICAL FICTION

Daulatabad

Dearest Priya didi,

How is everyone at home? I heard from Mummyji that Chotu was very sick. I hope he gets better soon, and that you and Bua are healthy and well.

We've settled in well in Devgiri (or should I say, Daulatabad!) Papaji has got a good job in the nearby temple, and things have settled down.

I had to part with Sonu and his gang, but the rest of my friends are close by. We sometimes meet in the nearby maidan to have a quick game of gilli-danda or lagori, but sunsets seem to happen more quickly here.

Mummyji was very happy to be reunited with her chula. She made all our favourites for 10 days before returning to the customary karele ki sabzi. I don't know how anyone could ever like something so bitter and disgusting. Maybe it's just Mummyji's cooking. (Don't tell her I said that!)

Vinayak Chacha from next door says he was a warrior, a swordsman, in the Sultan's army for 27 years! You should hear some of the battles he narrates to me and Naina from across the road. He's lost so much, but he's gained so much too! Mummyji says he's a kshatriya and a good Brahmin girl like me shouldn't be influenced by his tall tales, though they're rather short. They get over in about two minutes each.

There isn't much else to tell you. Devgiri isn't very different very different from Dilli, but it isn't the same either, if you get what I mean. I miss all the people and the bazaar and the Qutb Minar... maybe I'll see it again if I'm lucky.

I'll write soon, but you should write sooner!

Love you lots!

Your loving,

Asha



HISTORICAL FICTION

Daulatabad

Dear Priya didi.

Thank you for writing back so quickly last time! I'm glad to know that Chotu has learnt his Sanskrit grammar well. He's going to grow up to be just as good as his older sister. I find it a pity that girls can't work. They should shouldn't they? WE should.

But, coming to my real reason for writing this letter, that Sultan Tughluq, he's moving us back! Back to Dilli. We've just settled down, become familiar with the seasons and days and people and places, and we're moving BACK?

That Tughluq, I tell you. He's a piece of work. If I could storm down to his palace and give him a good tongue lashing, I would.

But, on the brighter side of things, at least I won't have to get married yet! I'll have some more days of roaming about in a ghagra-choli. You know how uncomfortable sarees get sometimes!

Plus, that boy they were marrying me off to, was, well, he kept picking his nose with his pinky finger and inspecting it like it was something tasty. Disgusting habit!

(I hope Chotu doesn't have any disgusting habits like that! We wouldn't want a letter like this about him!)

Mummyji is very happy we're going back. But she's worried about how she's going to cook while we're travelling. Again. Honestly, I would've that one journey should do the trick, since we managed perfectly well last time, but no, she has to fret and sweat and worry.

I'll write again, once I reach home. I can't wait to see the Qutb Minar again!

Love,

Asha.

(I wonder what happened to keeping us safe from the Mongols!)

HISTORICAL FICTION

Avani Gupta

24th November, 1913

Dear Diary,

The visions come without warning. Sometimes it's a man stumbling over a cobblestone before it happens. Sometimes a fire, a scream, a broken teacup. No matter how many doctors I visit, not one of them has diagnosed me as something other than borderline crazy. I've given up on trying to fight the visions. I've given up on trying to explain them. Completing the incident in a vision or preventing it from happening at all is the only way I can get the vision to stop. At least until the next one shows up, that is.

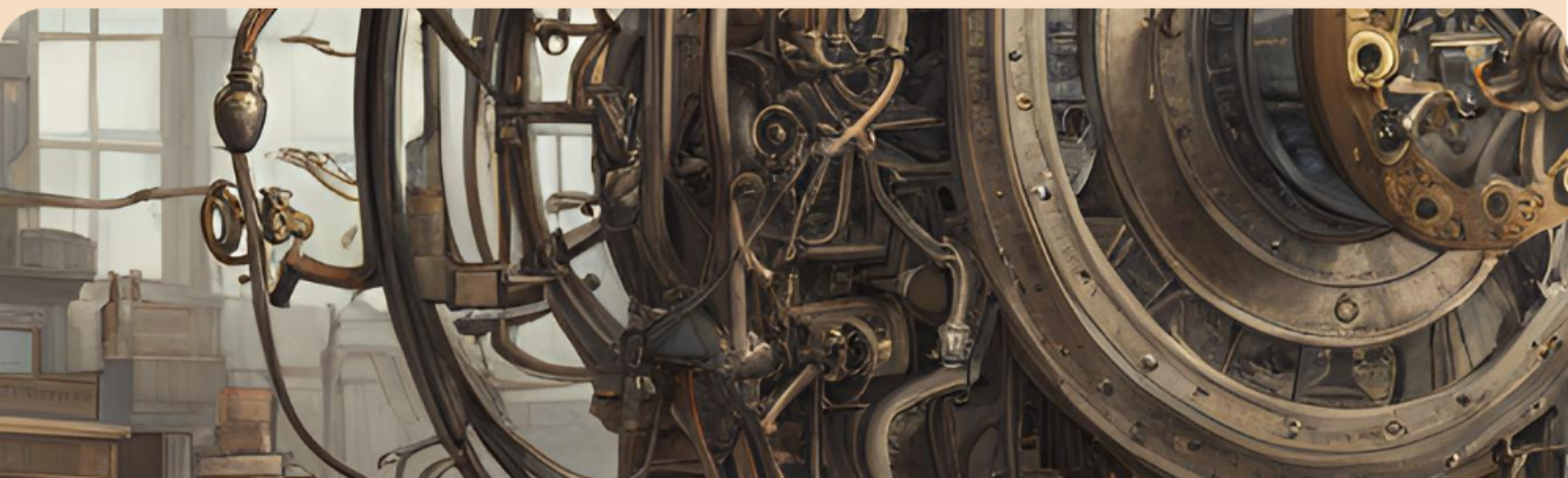
Today I saw something new. Not a person or an accident. A machine. I recognised it instantly. It stood alone, forgotten—an iron beast made of gears and glass, glowing faintly, humming. The time machine. The vision felt different this time. None of the others have ever felt this powerful, this urgent. And of course, I knew exactly where to find it. It had been lying down in my basement for as long as I could remember. The vague memory of father building it played in my head all day until I finally went downstairs and pulled the sheets off it.

It was just as the vision showed. I placed my hand on its rusted panel. "Set: 24.11.1943" flickered faintly on a small display in the centre of the panel.

I've walked the same streets of Sarajevo for years. I have no people I care for. I have no money to spend and nothing worth spending it on. I have nothing to live for. I'm not needed here. I'm not wanted here. There's nothing left for me here. I've made my decision.

Tomorrow, I go. Forty years into the future.

—Princip



HISTORICAL FICTION



25th November, 1943

Dear Diary,

It worked. I don't believe it. The machine only trembled, and then it was as if I was falling upward into silence. And now—Vienna. 1943.

I don't know what I expected. Machines that think? Flying vehicles? A world unrecognisable? It's ... not that. It's just alive. Brighter. Faster. The buildings are boxier with steel frames, large windows. The hum of electricity, jazz from radios, and the scent of petrol and fresh coffee replace the smell of horse dung. Radios are common in homes. Planes crisscross the skies more regularly. Trains are faster and cleaner. People bustle through cafés. Children run with kites. Music drifts from every open window.

I rented a room above a little bookshop with whatever money I had. I am no longer a forgotten boy from Sarajevo. This is a fresh start—new roots, new life.

—Princip

HISTORICAL FICTION

6th December, 1945

Dear Diary,

Last month, everything changed. I was walking through the Naschmarkt when I saw her. Clara. She was leaning over a crate of old books, turning each one gently, like it might shatter if handled too quickly. Her coat was threadbare, patched at the elbows. Her hair caught the late afternoon sun. She smiled with her whole face. I watched her walk away with a book tucked beneath her arm and a bag of oranges in her hand. I felt something collapse in my chest. Like every moment before today I had just been waiting—for her.

Her laugh was the kind of laugh that made you want to laugh. We've known each other for only a short while, but I've never met a woman quite like her. I wake up thinking of her and I go to bed hearing her laugh echo in my mind. She speaks and I listen like every word matters, like every glance could change the course of my life. When she's near, it's like the rest of the world fades, and all I want is to be wherever she is.



HISTORICAL FICTION

Letter from Princip to Clara
6th December, 1945

:Unsent:

Clara,

You are a miracle. You are the moment my world tilted back toward light. There are truths about me I cannot yet tell you. But one thing, at least, is simple: I love you. With a desperation that borders on foolishness. I see things before they happen, Clara. But I never saw you coming. And now that I have, I never want to lose sight of you again.

Yours,
Princip



13th December, 1945

Dear Diary,
The visions returned today, after a long time.

I didn't want them to. I thought I'd left them in the past when I traveled to the future.

But there she was. Clara. In someone else's arms.

He is tall, well-spoken, and carries himself like royalty. Because he is. He's the son of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Sophie. The child not yet born in my time.

Clara loves him. Not me.
—Princip

HISTORICAL FICTION

17th December, 1945

Dear Diary,

I had another vision. Of him. Well, not exactly. I had a vision of his mother, Sophie. Dead. Shot. Pregnant with him.

He doesn't belong here. Not in this life. Not in Clara's.

Sophie is pregnant in 1914. She will give birth to him. Unless she doesn't.

I can still fix this. I can return. I know when the Archduke's motorcade will pass. I know the street. I've seen the route. I've seen the mistake—the driver's wrong turn.

I won't miss.

This is the last rewrite. The last intervention. When I return, Clara will be mine.

She has to be.

—Princip



HISTORICAL FICTION

28th June, 1914

Dear diary,

Today's the day. Is it insane to be doing this? Absolutely. Could it be a complete disaster? Probably. I have no idea what the consequences may be. If I do this, I may not recognise the world I return to. But it's worth it. For her.

29th June, 1914

Dear Diary,

It is done.

Yesterday, the others in the group tried and failed. Their bombs missed. Their hands trembled. I watched them crumble, one after the other, and for a moment, I thought the plan was lost. Then—light. The vision. The wrong turn. I knew the corner. I knew the moment.

I stood there, waiting, the pistol hidden beneath my coat, my heartbeat matching the ticking of history. The car stopped ten feet from me. I fired once into the Archduke's neck. He slumped like a broken clock. Sophie screamed—so I shot again. Not at her head. Lower.

The child will never be born.

I vanished into the crowd before the second echo faded.

Tonight, I will return to Vienna. To Clara. I will arrive before he ever existed. The future is mine now.

—Princip



HISTORICAL FICTION

8th June, 1945

Dear Diary,
The sky is black.

Not with night—but with smoke.

Vienna is scarred. Buildings lie like corpses. Ash falls like snow.

I asked what year it was. The man stared like I was mad. "1945," he said. "The war just ended."

The war.

But there wasn't supposed to be one. There hadn't been. Not in the world I left behind.

I went back to erase him. Not to split the world in half.

I don't know if Clara ever existed in this version. Or if she did, whether she survived the firebombs. I looked for the shop. It's a crater now. There's no trace of the girl who once made me believe the future was kind.

I wanted to rewrite fate for love. Instead, I wrote the century's obituary.

—Princip



This piece is a fictional reimaging inspired by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, an event that directly triggered the First World War. Several historical details are accurate—including the name of the assassin (Gavrilo Princip), the wrong turn taken by the Archduke's driver, and the political weight of the assassination. However, the story takes significant creative liberties, introducing fictional elements such as time travel, visions, and a romantic arc.

Why would you ever think that?

Advika Gupta

“Alex! Can I borrow your red dress?” Bree yelled as she stood staring at Alex’s never-ending wardrobe which she had somehow magicked into Connor and Bree’s apartment.

“Which one? I have, like, three,” Alex yelled back from the kitchen.

“The one with no frills,” Bree had reluctantly convinced herself to change out of her jeans and beanie for this special dinner Connor was insisting that they dress up for. She loved her boyfriend, but honestly, she’d rather watch Netflix and eat ice cream out of the tub in a loose hoodie for a date night.

“Yeah, sure,” came Alex’s reply.

Bree took a step into the huge walk-in and lost herself in the perfectly color coded rows of green, blue, pink and purple, trying to work her way into the ‘red’ section, when she tripped on something.

“Yow,” she groaned, hopping on one foot. She knelt down to inspect the shiny golden box, resemblant of a ring box.

“Should I ... oh, who am I kidding?” Bree laughed. She promptly picked up the box and flipped it open to find ... “Oh my God,” she gasped.

The box’s lid was scrawled with Connor’s messy handwriting:

Will you marry me, Bree?



“Oh my god.”

Bree let out a shaky breath as her hand trembled, tracing the letters. A million questions flooded her brain. *‘Where were we going for this?’*, *‘This was supposed to be a surprise ... now what?’* and most importantly, *‘What will I say?’*

She ran her hand through her hair. “I’ll say yes ... I would say yes if it was a surprise. Of course I’ll say yes ... *oh my god, I’m getting married.*”

Just then, Alex walked in, Cornelius sauntering behind her. “Did you find the--BREE, WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH THAT?”

“I’m-I’m sorry, I--Alex, I tripped over it and I found--” Bree stuttered, still in shock.

Cornelius shook his mane slowly, tscking at Bree.

“Oh, shut up Cornelius.”

Alex ran over to Bree and wrapped her arms around her. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m ... shocked, but also ... on top of the world. Like ... I’m getting married!” A happy tear escaped Bree’s eyes as she let out a small chuckle.

Alex smiled, but then her face fell. “Ugh, I totally forgot I had hidden the ring here. Shoot, this is all my fault. Connor was so excited. This will break his heart.”

“What are we going to do?” Bree asked.

“How good of an actor are you?”

Bree grinned slyly, a bit of sass returning to her face. “I’m excellent ... but I have a better idea.”



“Do I look okay?” Connor asked, standing by the door in a sleek black suit, patting his pocket to make sure the ring was there.

“You look amazing, Connor. Dad would be so proud. I am too,” Alex said, straightening his tie. She stood beside him in a beautiful sky blue gown. Even Cornelius stood cockily in a bow tie.

“She’ll say yes, won’t she? She will, right, Alex?” Connor fidgeted nervously.

“Connor, I have never seen anyone look at anyone ever the way you and Bree look at each other. Trust me, she’ll say yes.”

“And you’re sure she has no clue?”

“OF COURSE, Connor, god, why would you ever think that?”

Just then, Bree came down the stairs, in a red minidress, red Converse shoes, and a purple beanie.

Connor’s eyes went to the beanie and he laughed.

“What?” Bree glared.

“Nothing, you look perfect. Absolutely perfect.”

“So, where is this place so important that we have to go that you had to cancel movie night for?” Bree played her part perfectly. “And also, they make bow ties for unicorns? That is adorable.”

Cornelius huffed proudly and flipped his mane.

“Shall we?” Connor asked.

Bree crossed her arms. “Where are we going?”





Alex and Connor exchanged a smile. Connor pulled out a book from behind his back and Alex handed him a small vial.

“The portal potion ...” Bree breathed. “We haven’t used it since ...”

“I thought it was a little less unromantic than falling into the book.”

Connor laid *The Land of Stories* down and poured four drops of the glowing purple liquid onto the pages. A beam of light erupted from the book.

Connor held out his hand, and Bree took it, as they stepped into the portal. Alex and Cornelius followed suit.

Bree closed her eyes tightly and let herself be whisked away into the whirlwind of light. She would never admit it, but this feeling had always scared her, and ten years later, it was pretty much the same.

When the spinning came to a stop, she shakily stepped out of the portal and opened her eyes. They were in the Dwarf Forest.

“Is this where we are doing it?” Bree asked excitedly. She loved the Dwarf Forests. They were the perfect blend of mystery and fear.

“Doing ... what?” Connor asked, a little suspicious.

Shoot. "Um, whatever you've brought us here to do, genius, I don't know," Bree covered. Alex gave Bree a small nod.

"Um ... no. This is not where we are doing it." Connor said slowly, looking at Bree funnily.

"Cool, cool."

"Connor! Connor," said Alex quickly, "Looks like our rides are here."

Two unicorns, a little bigger than Cornelius, cantered out from the dense woods.

"Woah." Bree stared. Connor beamed at her happy face.

"M'lady, your carriage," Connor said in a mock British accent.

Bree jumped onto the back of one, Connor on the one beside her, with Alex leading on Cornelius.

"Follow me," Alex told the other unicorns.

"Can you please tell me where we are going?" asked Bree.

"Don't you know?"

"Y-whaaat, nooo! Of COURSE not, why would you ever think that?"

"Mhm."

"Connor, seriously?"

"Okay, okay,"

Bree exhaled and Connor just smiled. The three of them sped through the forests, passing witches and trolls, wolves and deer.

Bree laughed as the wind tickled her face. "I missed this," she thought to herself.



Soon, they came to a stop in a small clearing. Connor promptly hopped off his unicorn and wrapped a purple blindfold around Bree's eyes.

"Wha--CONNOR, getitoff--" Bree protested convincingly. She knew exactly what was about to happen, but she couldn't suppress the little bubbling in her chest.

Connor helped Bree off her unicorn and guided her gently through the clearing until he had positioned himself perfectly. Alex whipped out an Otherworld camera (which took her a second to remember how to use) and angled herself.

He removed Bree's blindfold and let her take it in. "The Curvy Tree ... oh, Connor."

Bree's wide blue eyes glistened for the second time in a day. She was starting to not recognise herself.

She drank in the millions of little fairy lights that dangled from the circle of trees around them, with the Curvy Tree as a centrepiece, lights draped perfectly along its intertwined trunk.

"Bree, you're too smart to not know what I'm about to do next. And I know you somehow knew about this anyway."

Bree smirked.

“I know you hate sappy speeches. I know you already know everything I love about you because I tell you everyday. So I’ll just say, will you let me tell you everyday for the rest of our lives?”

Connor pulled a box out of his pocket and knelt down, revealing his messy words and a silver ring studded with a small amethyst.

“Bree Campbell, will you do me the honour of becoming Bree Bailey? Or, letting me become Connor Campbell, I don’t mean to assume, I mean, I’m a feminist, I swear--”

Bree burst out laughing.

“Connor Jonathan Awkward Bailey ...” Bree got down on one knee to meet Connor’s eye, and she pulled out her own ring box.

“Wait, what--” Connor stuttered.

Bree popped open the box to unveil a simple silver band embedded with a sapphire. On the lid of the box, in perfect loopy letters,

I’m going with you--whether you like it or not.

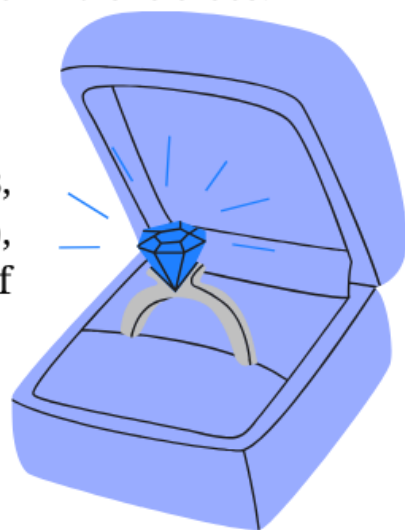
Connor threw his arms around Bree, crying, and she squeezed him back.

“It’s too beautiful,” came a hiccupping wail from behind the trees.

Connor jumped. “Who was that?”

Mother Goose ambled out from behind the trees, sobbing. One by one, Goldilocks, Jack, Hero, Froggy, Red and Trollbella poured out, not one of them dry-eyed.

“Wha--how--” stammered Bree and Connor.



“Surprise!” yelled Alex.

“Oh my goodness,” Bree laughed.

The whole mob piled on top of Bree and Connor’s hug, bustling with tearful congratulations.

Even Trollbella begrudgingly mumbled, “Congrats, Butterboy. She’s pretty cool.”



Later that night, Connor and Bree sat snuggled up in a blanket on the couch, eating mint chocolate chip ice cream out of the tub.

“Was I really that obvious?” asked Bree, after narrating how she had found the box.

“*Oh, is this where we are doing it?*” *‘Of course I don’t know anything, Connor, why would you ever think that?’* Connor mocked in a high voice.

Bree picked up a pillow and bonked him on the head.

“Ow. And, oh, the blindfold, God, Bree, if I had ever blindfolded you and you didn’t know why, I would have been tackled to the ground within a millisecond and the blindfold would have been on me.”

“No it wouldn’t, I trust you that much,” Bree replied, crossing her arms.

“I don’t know, Bree, do you?” Connor teased.

“Oh you bet I do,” Bree scooped up every pillow she could reach and proceeded to pummel Connor until they both lay out of breath on the floor, laughing.

Disclaimer: Based on the characters and fictional world of *The Land of Stories* by Chris Colfer. Advika does not own the characters or fictional world featured here.

Percy Jackson and the Theft of Posiedon's Trident

Kabir Srinivasan

In Camp Half Blood, a sanctuary for demigods, there was a scrawny teenage boy called Percy Jackson who stood next to Chiron, a centaur, who was the camp activities director. Percy had been at camp for quite some time as he was a demigod and there was nowhere else safe for him.

He stayed there with his best friend, Grover, who was a satyr. Being a satyr meant that Grover had a human torso and head, but if you removed his baggy jeans; instead of legs, he had furry hindquarters and cloven goat hooves that he covered with athletic looking shoes that fit snugly on his fake human feet.

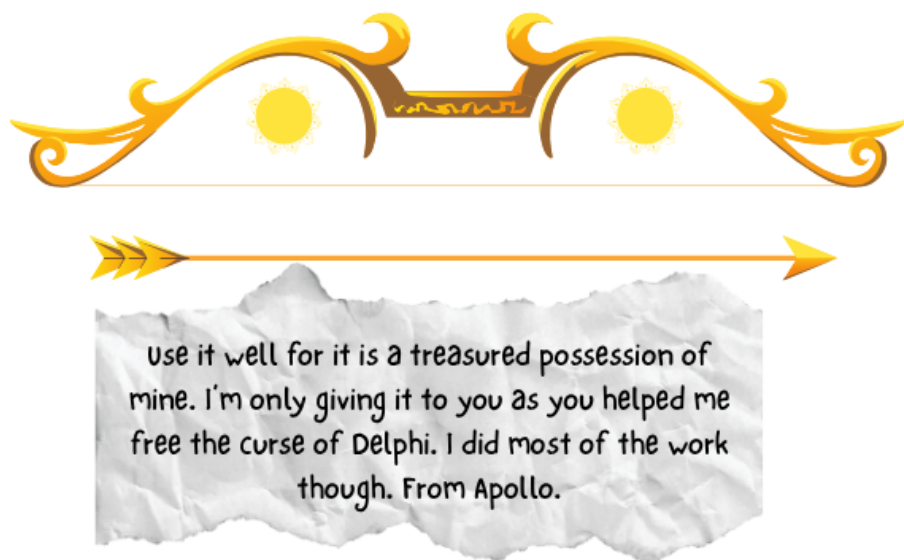
Chiron, who had trained Achilles and many other heroes, stated something that would change Percy's life, "Percy, I know this is dangerous, but someone has stolen Posiedon's trident and hidden it in the Taj Mahal in India. Without it, the titan of the sea, Oceanus, will take control of the water. You have to go on a quest to retrieve it."

With a hint of fear, Percy stammered, "I accept this quest and I wish Grover and Annabeth to accompany me."

They began packing their bags with food, water and drachmas.



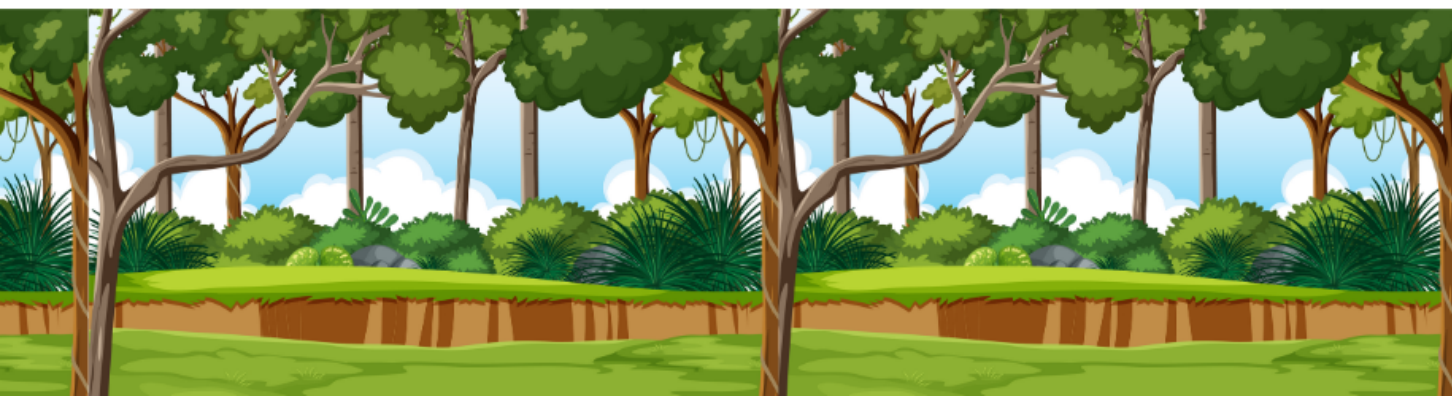
Suddenly, thunder crackled menacingly overhead and a beam of searing light blinded them. A bow dropped from the heavens. On it read a note stained with dirt and faded, rushed handwriting:



"Apollo was actually in chains when the curse was freed, actually I--ugh--that's another story for later," Percy said with a clear note of irritation.

"Shut up, seaweed brain," Annabeth interrupted.

Percy, Annabeth and Grover set out, armed only with Percy's pen/sword Riptide, Annabeth's bronze knives and a bow that did who knows what (probably play a tape saying "Apollo is the best in the planet and beyond" on loop). Venturing through the sinister forest next to Camp Half Blood, Percy, Grover and Annabeth continued their journey to the missing trident of Poseidon. Every nerve in Percy's body screamed in fear and doubt. Determined to complete the quest, Percy and his friends embraced their fears and pressed on, their hands trembling like wobbling jelly. They trudged along for days. At least they had been able to pack well and the camp food was delicious. They passed the cityscape and entered the jungle.



Then, right in front of their eyes, was the largest river they had ever seen. Undeterred, the trio sprang into the turbulent river.

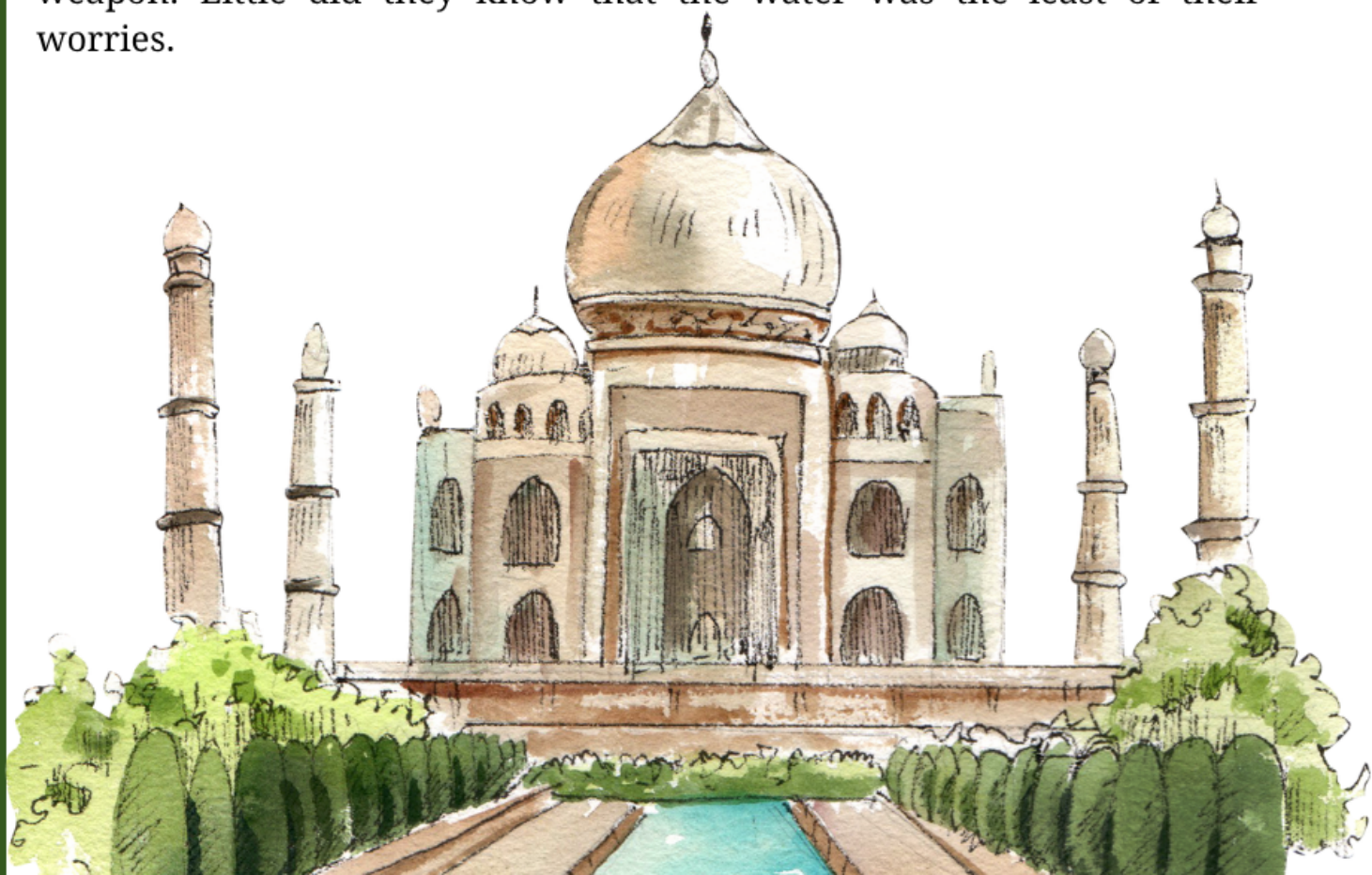
“AAH!” screamed Grover and Annabeth in sync as they tumbled down the river.

Sympathetically Percy replied, “Relax, my father is the god of the sea.”

But it was hard to relax when he was about to be washed into a waterfall! Clinging onto some jagged rocks that jutted out of the water, Annabeth, Grover and Percy desperately hung on the moss covered stones.

Then, slowly but surely, Percy’s fingers slipped off. Muttering a silent prayer to the gods, his eyes slowly closed and he plunged into the roaring river. The next thing he knew, he was lying down on the riverside, safely out of the treacherous waters.

Where were they? The river must have carried them far away. Struggling to get up onto their feet, the three teenagers carried on towards the Taj Mahal where they would find the magical three pronged weapon. Little did they know that the water was the least of their worries.



Looking at the horizon, they saw their destination, the Taj Mahal. It rose majestically, gleaming in the sunlight. But, up close, the wonderful sight was covered in dirt; there was a tunnel in the lush patch of grass behind the awe inspiring construction. A roar echoed from the chamber below. Terrified, Percy crept to the trapdoor hidden in the greenery. Finally, the frightened crew stepped down the ladder to the underground room.

Inside was a monster; it was at least ten feet long skulking in the shadows. Right behind was the magnificent turquoise trident.

“What is that? There is the trident,” Grover stuttered, trembling.

Suddenly, a voice echoed, reverberating around the room, “Who dares enter my tomb?”

“Who are you and what is that?” Percy replied, pointing at the beast.

“Who are you?”

“I am Percy Jackson and we have come to take that trident.”

“I am the ghost of Shah Jahan, the great Mughal king.”

“You still haven’t told us what that monster is.”

“It’s an asura.”

“And I suppose you won’t tell us what an asura is.”

He came closer, his green, translucent body fluttering. “An asura is a demon. How dare he invade my wife’s tomb?!”



“We shall slay him for you but, you must tell us how to defeat him and we will take that trident he is guarding.”

“Fine, if I must. He can be slain when pierced in the ear.”

The trio slashed at the grotesque beast as he lunged at them. A blood curdling roar emerged from the demon as he was struck in the chest. Blood oozed out of his wound. He leaped, landing on Grover who was frantically playing the panpipes his daddy goat had given him. They jabbed and rolled, dodging his claws that were as long as kitchen knives. The armour on his ear would not give way to the swords.

Percy couldn't bear to see his best friend being attacked. He had to do something. An idea sparked in his head. He dashed and grabbed the bow, praying it would work. He notched an arrow and let it fly. Percy stumbled back with the effort. His eyes rolled back in his head. The last thing he heard was Annabeth calling his name, a screech from somewhere when the arrow hit its mark and everything went black.

When his eyes finally opened, the demon lay motionless on the floor. His mind was a whirl. What did he have to do? A faint memory came to him. The trident! He needed the trident! He saw Grover and Annabeth cheering him on. He marched proudly towards it. But being Percy, he chose that moment to fall flat on his face. He ran to the trident and grabbed it. On their rigorous journey back, the water was still as the trident hummed with energy. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, they reached camp. Poseidon was already there in his leather sandals, Bermuda shorts and a shirt with coconuts and parrots all over it.

“Thank you for saving the planet,” the god said.

“You're welcome, Dad,” Percy replied.

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction that stems from a love for the *Percy Jackson* series. Kabir does not own the characters featured here, and all credit for their creation goes to Rick Riordan.





Harry Potter and the Salamanca Connection

Zaheer Vakeel

It was 2002, like early 2002, and Saul Goodman—well, Jimmy McGill still, technically—was in his rundown nail salon office, feet on the desk, drinking a Mountain Dew and pretending he knew the law and stuff. Then his Nokia brick phone rang. He picked up. “Need a will call McGill at your service! Who’s this?”

“Saul,” a voice said, all whispery and stressed. “It’s Harry. Harry Potter.”

Saul sat up like he’d just heard his name in a will. “Like the wizard kid? The glasses? You real?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m real. And I’m in trouble. Voldemort’s back and he’s hunting for me. Like, serious dark magic murder vibes. I need legal help. Magical law or whatever. Maybe witness protection.”

Saul’s face went pale. “Wait—you mean He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named? Like, the actual snake-face death dude?”

“YES, Saul!” Harry hissed. “And I’m trying to kill these Horcruxes, but he keeps popping up like a cursed Facebook ad.”

There was a pause. Saul blinked twice, then slowly took the phone away from his ear and just ... hung up.

“Nope. Not today, Satan.”

He stared at the wall for a second, real serious-like. Then he pulled out another phone—this one old and crusty—and hit speed dial. A beep was heard, then a vibration, then another beep.



“Hector,” Saul said into the line. “Yeah, I know you can’t talk. Just blink or something if you’re listening.”

DING.

went Hector’s twisted bell.

“Good. Listen, I got a problem. Some Brit kid’s in trouble with a psycho, like, a real magic psycho. Yeah, I know. Sounds dumb. But this guy’s got more bodies than the cartel. I need ... the Twins.”

Somewhere, miles away, in a quiet desert shack with an old Spanish television, Hector Salamanca stared at a photo of his nephews. The cousins. The twins. The Axeman Brothers of New Mexico.



He hit his bell once.

DING.



In Hogwarts or whatever ruins were left of it, Harry Potter was in a full-on panic in the new Room of Requirement. Voldemort was floating around throwing death spells, and Ron and Hermione were doing that “We’re in love but also useless” thing. It was all going down. Final battle stuff. Dragons, giants, teenage drama.

Then, out of literally nowhere, two bald dudes in suits stepped out of the shadows like final bosses in a video game.

No wands. Just big axes. Silver ones.

“Who the--?” Voldemort said, floating.

They didn’t talk. They just nodded at each other, and suddenly one of them threw an axe straight at Voldemort’s wand hand.

CRUNCH.

“AAAGHHHH!!!” he screamed, twitching.

Then the other twin ran up and yeeted Voldemort off a ledge like it was WWE. He landed with a splat. Nagini tried to attack, but the other twin plunged the axe into the snake so hard it looked like someone had spilled tomato soup everywhere.

Harry just stood there like, “What just happened?”

Ron blinked.

Hermione almost fainted.

One twin looked at Harry and tossed him a burner phone. “No llames otra vez,” he said.

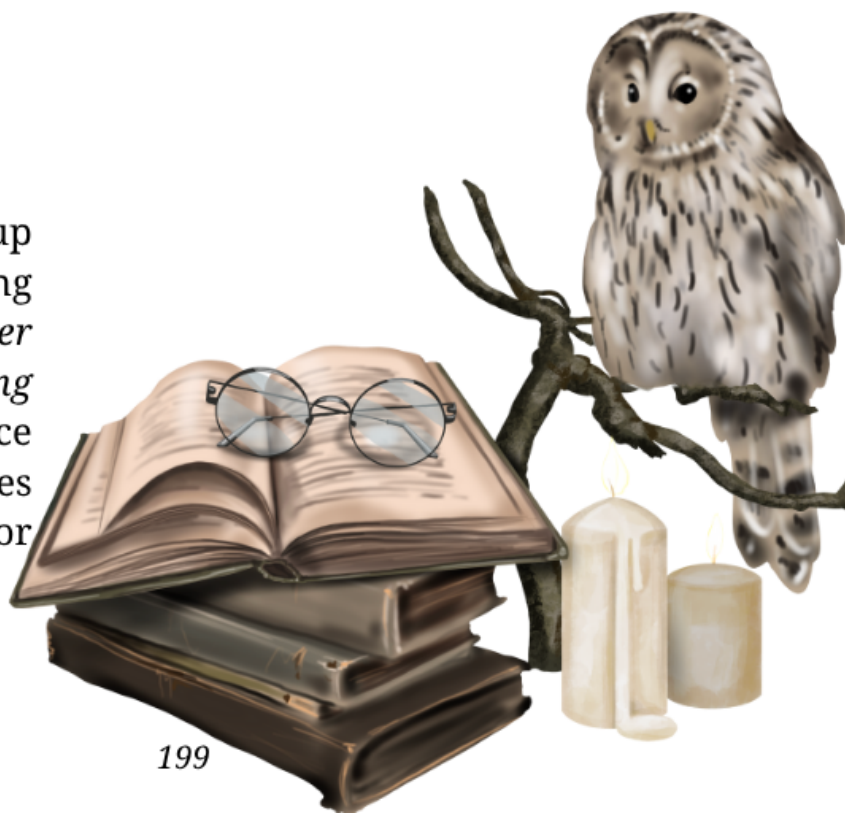
Then poof—they were gone. Just ... gone. Like they didn’t exist.

Back in Albuquerque, Saul got a text that just said:
DONE.

He smirked, leaned back in his chair, and cracked open another Mountain Dew.

“Magic!” he said to no one.

Disclaimer: This is a mashup fan story featuring characters from *Harry Potter* by J.K. Rowling and *Breaking Bad/Better Call Saul* by Vince Gilliganwork. Zaheer does not own the characters or setting featured here.





Peril and Rocc

Aymen Hussaini



It was a bright sunny day. Peril roamed through her room. Shimmers of light reflected on the rock ledges, as Peril looked for things to burn with her firescales. Just then, she found something.

“Ooh! This looks cool!” Peril said happily to herself as she glimpsed a black rock which she just found hidden. “Oh, wait I’m supposed to eat ya because of my condition.”

All of a sudden, the rock cracked in four places, and turned into two eyes, a nose and a mouth. “AAARRRGGGH,” the rock shrieked. “Please don’t eat me!”

This gave Peril a small scare. “But I have to,” Peril responded. “If I don’t eat one of you every day, I die!”

“Please don’t!” the rock begged. “I’ve experienced way too little to be eaten already!”

“Ok, fine, I guess you could hang around,” Peril responded. “You know what? I’ll name you Rocc!”

As Peril went back outside to view the arena to see who her next match was, two guards were standing by the gates. She tried to hide Rocc under one of her wings, but the guards saw her doing so.

“Hand it over, Peril,” said one of them.

“Yeah, or else Her Majesty’s going to destroy it herself!” said the other one. Hearing this, the rock got angry, and suddenly jumped on the first one, teeth ready. As the other dragon rushed to help the first guard, Peril put her hand out and seared him with one touch of her scales.

“AAAAAARGH! GRRRR! That’s what you get for messing with my owner!” Rocc said in anger.

The guard dragons lay there, blood splattered all over, and the second one with an extra sizzling burn.

“Woah. You’re brave.” Peril gasped in awe.

“I know, right?” Rocc responded. “I don’t even know how I was able to kill TWO dragons! Leave alone one!”

After that, an enormous SandWing and a SkyWing emerged from the distance.

“Well, well, what do we have here? Peril and her tiny wittle rock friend ... am I right, Burn?” the Skywing with jewels purred.

Peril’s heart beat rapidly.

“Scarlet, this is an easy situation. For once, you let her have a day to herself, without fighting, and she brings a disgusting I-don’t-know-what to our arena,” said Burn. “Kill her and destroy that thing!”

“Ok, ok! If you insist!” Scarlet said. She then breathed in a smoke of fire, and sharpened her claws, but just before that, Peril launched herself on Scarlet, and Rocc launched itself on Burn. Scarlet and Burn shrieked in agony. Peril, holding Rocc, shot up through the pavilion.

“Wow, we really do get along,” said Peril in happiness, looking down at Rocc.

“Yeah, we’re a good duo,” said Rocc, looking up.

The both of them shot into the evening sky, laughing.

Disclaimer: Based on the characters and fictional world of *Wings of Fire* by Tui T. Sutherland. Aymen does not own the characters or fictional world featured here.



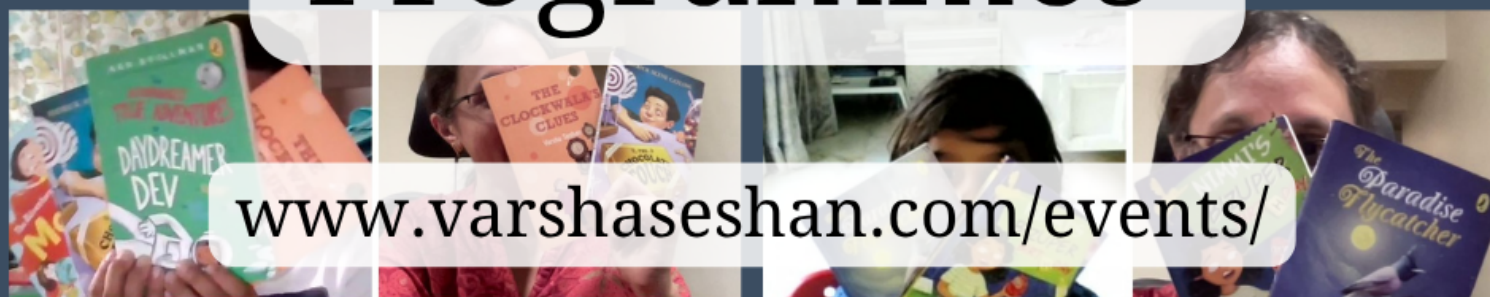
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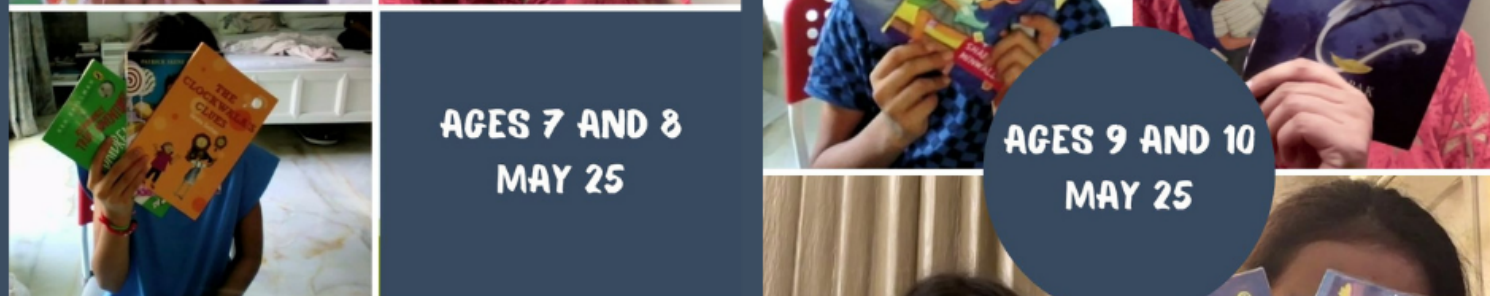
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