Varsha Seshan's Creative Writing Programme

W O R D S

Issue 2 | January 2023

by writers aged 9-14



Poems ***Plays*** ***Stories***

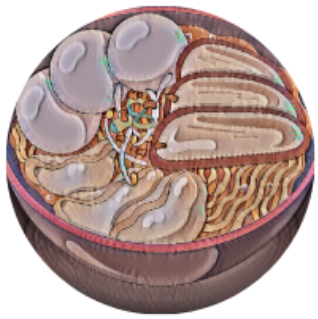


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Hello!



I'm thrilled to present the second issue of WORDS, our very own zine! We've taken 12 weeks to write, rewrite and edit these poems, plays and stories. Happy reading!

Varsha Seshan

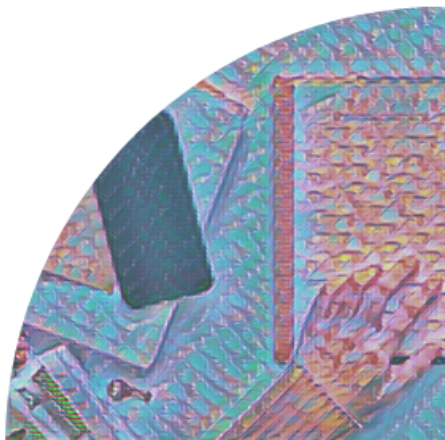
children's book writer
creative writing trainer

Meet the writers

If she's not dancing
Her nose is in a book. Meet
Advika Gupta

Hola! I am **Geet**
Coding, reading and playing--
These are my passions

Himarsha Mulchandani
Playing with the stars,
New worlds, countless dreams, science geek.
People call me **Mars**



headphones on, brain off
that's just how i spend my time
janvi is the name

Phone out and flash on
Taking pictures all the time
Call me **Pranika**

Music in my ears,
a book in my hand, you would
know me as **Prisha**.

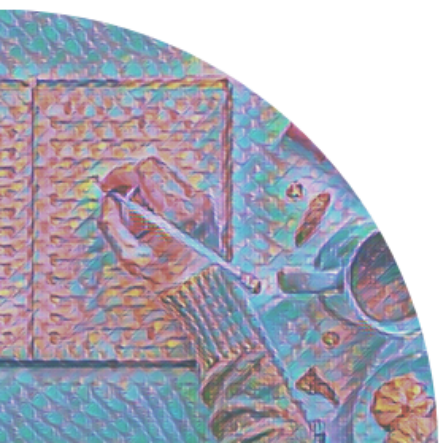
My name is **Ruhaan**,
I like drawing and reading,
That is who I am.

Sunandini Sen
Books, music, and food,
All join to make a jigsaw,
That's uniquely me.

Bonjour mes ami(e)s
Je m'appelle BL (**Vivaan Chaudhry**). So what's up?

WHAT'S THIS ABOUT?

On many pages, you'll find a bubble like this telling you how the pieces on the page came about.





Free Verse

Writer's Block

As blank pages loomed before my desperate eyes,
I struggled, in vain, to write something.
Something good, interesting, moving.
As the cursor approached the last line, I read through the piece again--
Nope.

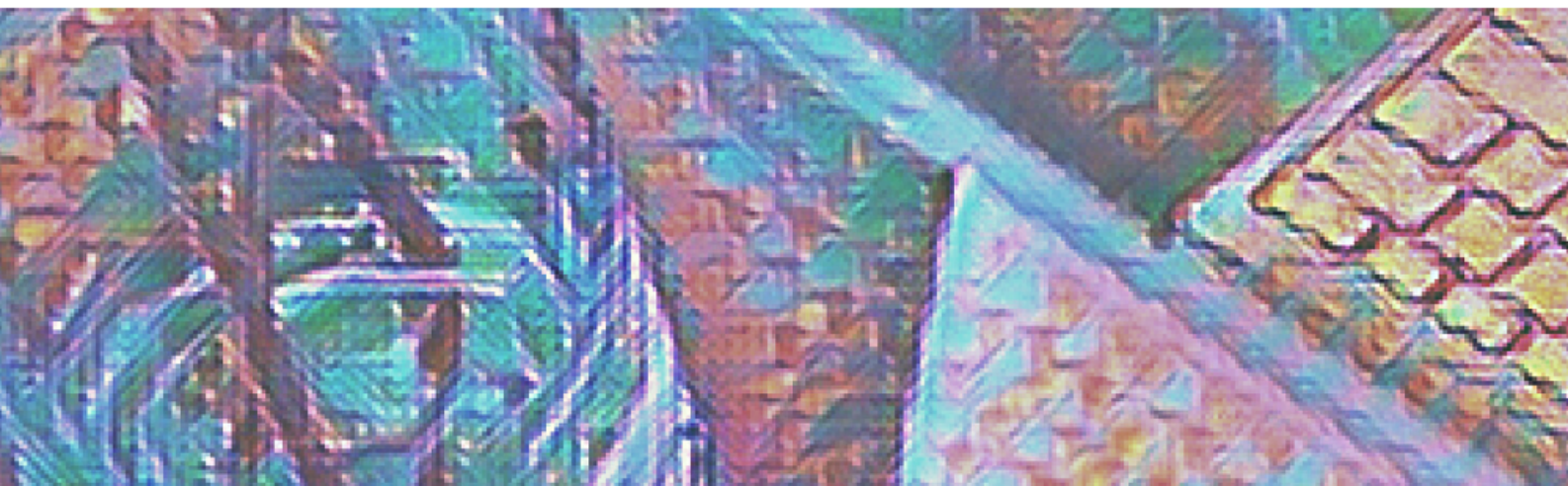
Ctrl A. Backspace.

That undo command was right there,
But I didn't use it.
It was easy, I could've done it
I chose not to; I knew I wasn't good enough
That my writing was not good enough.

Ctrl A. Backspace.

What I wrote seemed pointless, emotionless to me.
I could imagine my readers' faces,
They'd laugh and mock my stories, or exclaim in disgust at my plotlines.
The voices in my head didn't make me feel any better,
Those judging voices I was afraid of.
'This is a terrible poem, delete it right NOW!'
'No one would ever want to read such a piece!'

Ctrl A. Backspace.



Deep down into an abyss of hopelessness,
It felt like falling into a black hole
With inky dark walls on all sides,
Threatening to crush me whole.
With those same judging voices,
Echoing off the walls, never fully going away.
I tried to stop them, tried to scream, "Leave me alone!"

Ctrl A. Backspace.

That same command for hours
Had been at my fingertips,
Used over and over again.
The voices added fuel to the fire raging in my mind.
I was sick and tired of it,
Tired of listening to those voices,
The boundaries around me, cracked, shattered,
As seeds of hope rose in my heart, giving me wings,
And power to fight those voices.



In the past, I wish I'd known and understood,
Known we all feel like this sometimes,
That our writing is just silly, like we aren't good enough,
Should've told judging voices to keep quiet!
Shouldn't have listened to them.
Now, no more Ctrl A and Backspace.

It's time for Ctrl A and Ctrl S.

Sunandini Sen



Acting Out

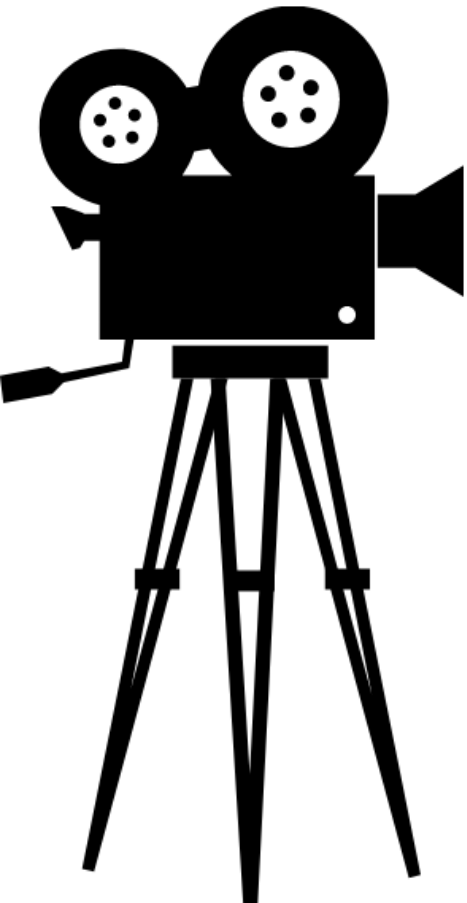
Advika Gupta

Characters

HAILEY THATCHER - a 14-year old girl, an aspiring actor
DAWN - a woman in her mid-thirties, HAILEY's acting instructor
GRACIE THATCHER - HAILEY's mother
CASSIDY
ELLIOT - another aspiring actor HAILEY meets during auditions
GIRL
BOY
Other members of the jury (no speaking lines)
Others young aspiring actors (no speaking lines)

SCENE ONE

HAILEY, DAWN and GRACIE are in the greenroom of a movie-making studio along with other aspiring actors. The room is strewn with playscripts, parts of costumes and headset mics.



HAILEY But what if--

DAWN Hailey, relax! I'm pretty sure you just broke the record of 'most worrying a person can do in an hour'.

HAILEY The only record I care about breaking right now is the first person ever to play Alex Bailey in a movie!

DAWN Look, Hails, I appreciate how much you've stayed in character the past week, what with Alex's overcautiousness and all, but I think it's seeping into Hailey Thatcher's character too.

HAILEY glares at DAWN.

DAWN Woah, okay, if you're not laughing at my jokes, something must be really wrong!

HAILEY Okay, I may be a nervous wreck, but one thing I am sure of is that I never, in the history of Hailey-Dawn, have ever laughed at your jokes!

DAWN **(laughing)** That got ya out of it! Hey, c'mon, do some last-minute vocal exercises with me. Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh ... Ooooooooh ... Eeeeeeeee ...

HAILEY **(breathes deeply before vocalising)** Aaaaaaaahhhh ... Oooooh ... Nope, I'm too nervous!

GRACIE Kiddo, Dawn is right. You've worked so hard, whatever you do, we all know you'd have done your best.

HAILEY **(under her breath)** Exactly the kind of thing you'd expect any parent to say ... not at all helpful ... **(to Dawn and Gracie)** Mom, Dawn, stop smiling at me like that, yeesh! It's creepy.

GRACIE and DAWN quickly look away, still smiling.

HAILEY Dawn, remind me again what to keep in mind with Mr Cassidy?

DAWN Uh ... just don't, um, make your performance too dramatic or emotional ... You know, don't improvise too much. Stick to the script. Mr Cassidy isn't a very, ah, liberal director. If, oh, I mean when you get into the movie, you can start taking liberties. You'll most likely have easier people to work with then.

HAILEY **(deep breathes again)** Wish someone else was casting director, but okay. At least I've prepared according to this Cassidy guy.

Loud bell dings from the studio room.

GRACIE Well, Hails, I guess that's our cue. We're not allowed here anymore.



Everyone pauses for a few seconds.

HAILEY So ... are you guys leaving ... or ...?

DAWN Yeah, yeah, we're ... we're just ...

Pause of a few more seconds.

HAILEY Y'know, you kind of have to move to leave ...

GRACIE **(choked)** Yep, yeah, we're--

HAILEY Guys, quit getting emotional! Get out, before this gets awkward or you have to be pushed out by security, I can't decide what's worse.



DAWN **(with a sigh)** Okay, okay. Good luck, kiddo. I am so proud of you! No matter what happens, I couldn't ask for a better student--

HAILEY Yeah, yeah, love you both so much too and all that but seriously, guys!

DAWN and GRACIE slowly start walking out. HAILEY walks towards the studio door.

GRACIE We love you-

HAILEY MOM!

GRACIE Going, going ...

DAWN and GRACIE exit stage. HAILEY pushes open the door to the studio.

SCENE TWO

The main studio. It is a large room with a table of judges in the front and about 50 chairs filled with aspiring actors off to the side. HAILEY enters and joins the group of kids. Mr CASSIDY rises from the judges' table.

CASSIDY Welcome to Dreamstar Productions, everyone! It is such an honour to be part of the movie production of my most beloved book series: The Land of Stories! And before you judge, I'll just say that the books are too good not to be read, regardless of age!

Cheers and laughs echo through the room.



CASSIDY **(laughing)** From the sound of it, I'm amid many fellow fans! Hmm, and I also believe I am amid many aspiring actors! Today is the first day of auditions for my two personal favourite characters: Alex and Conner Bailey! I can't wait to see them come to life through all of you!

Loud cheers and applause. Mr CASSIDY continues talking in background.

HAILEY **(whispering to person next to her)** Hey, sorry, I was just wondering, um, when do we get to meet Mr Cassidy?

ELLIOT Uh … that is Mr Cassidy … how do you not know that …?

HAILEY Wait-wha-but he's … smiling …

ELLIOT **(laughing)** You're funny, um, Whatever Your Name Is.

HAILEY Hailey Thatcher, but, no, seriously. I thought Mr Cassidy was all boring and strict and not liberal! This guy is, like, everything but!

ELLIOT Okay, Hailey Thatcher, I don't who told you that, but whoever it was, they've really got their facts wrong. Oh, and I'm Elliot by the way.

HAILEY **(to herself)** But … why did Dawn say-

ELLIOT Okay, now shush, I want to hear what he's saying.

HAILEY Sorry!

Both silently listen to Mr CASSIDY.

CASSIDY … making you audition in pairs, one boy, one girl, Alex and Conner, to save time as well as to make it easier for us to visualise the actual thing. I'm sure you all know what

scene you will be acting out: one of the first few chapters, where Alex and Conner have just fallen into the Land of Stories. Our first pair will be ... hmmm, let's see ... Elliot Brown and Hailey Thatcher!

HAILEY and ELLIOT exchange a nervous smile. They walk up to the main stage area.

CASSIDY All righty, lights, camera, ACTION!
HAILEY **(as Alex)** Where am I--
ELLIOT **(as Conner)** Wait, what just--am I alive? Am I dying? Am I dead? What in the world--if we're even in the world ...
HAILEY You're alive.
ELLIOT Alex? Is that you? Ummm, where are we?
HAILEY It looks like some kind of forest.
ELLIOT Look!



ELLIOT runs forward.

ELLIOT Are-are these all the pencils you dropped into the book?
HAILEY So this is where they all went!
ELLIOT But where is "this"?

HAILEY runs a hand through her hair.

ELLIOT Argh, this is all your fault, Alex!
HAILEY My fault? We wouldn't be here if you had just knocked on my door instead of barging in like the house was on fire!

BLACKOUT

Lights come back on. Lights are dimmer, and the BOY and GIRL are auditioning.

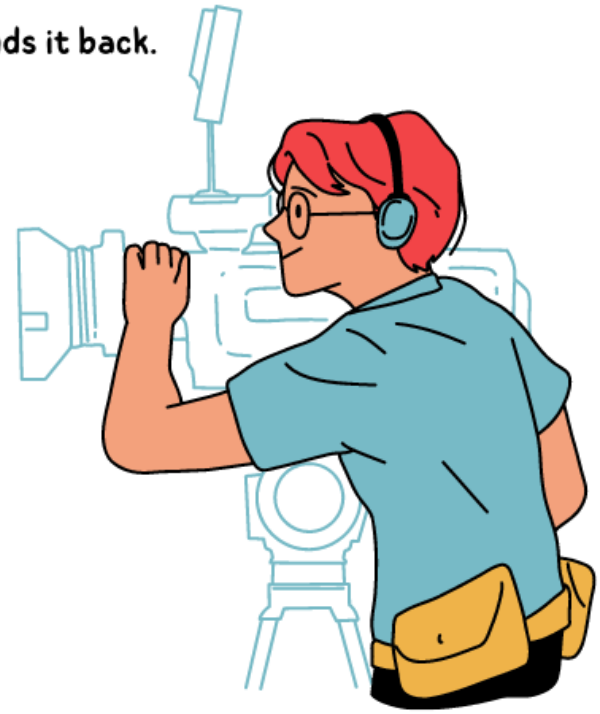
GIRL Is it possible ...?
BOY Is what possible?
GIRL I think I know where we are ... I think we went into the book Conner! I think we're in the Land of Stories!
CASSIDY Aaaaand, cut! Okay, amazing job, everyone! You all did so well today that no matter what happens, be very proud of yourselves! The casting list will be emailed to all of you in a week, once all the auditions are over. If you have any questions about

anything at all, feel free to give me a call whenever you want. My number is on the Dreamstar Productions website. Hmm ... what time is it ...? Woah, it's late! Okay, sorry to keep you guys waiting for so long! You're free to go now! Goodbye and have a great weekend!

Everyone starts to shuffle out of the studio.

HAILEY **(as they walk out)** Hey, Elliot, right? Could I get your number?
ELLIOT Sure!

HAILEY hands him her phone. He enters in the number and hands it back.



HAILEY You were really good today!
ELLIOT Thanks! Uh, you were ... great too!

HAILEY smiles.

HAILEY Well, see you around, I guess!
ELLIOT Yep. Bye!

Exit.

SCENE THREE

The Thatchers' dining room. GRACIE THATCHER is sitting at the table, eating pancakes. HAILEY bursts in, waving her phone in the air, still in her nightsuit.

HAILEY THE LIST IS OUT!
GRACIE Oh, honey, that's right! Well ...?
HAILEY I haven't opened it yet; I want to wait until Dawn comes over.
GRACIE **(laughing)** You've been so nervous and jumpy all week, and when you finally get it, you're willing to wait even a few seconds?
HAILEY I just really want Dawn to be there! But you're right, Mom. I won't be able to resist--which is why I want you to take my phone. And you can't peek either! Okay?
GRACIE Ummmm ...
HAILEY OKAY?
GRACIE Okay, okay, kidding.



HAILEY hands her phone to GRACIE.

GRACIE How 'bout you go change and then come have some pancakes?

HAILEY nods and runs offstage. GRACIE continues eating and smiles to herself. The doorbell rings. GRACIE goes and opens the door.

GRACIE **(whispering)** Hey Dawn! Come on in, just keep it down, I told Hails you'd be coming only by 10, just to surprise her. The poor thing wasn't opening her email just because she wanted to wait for you.

DAWN **(whispering)** Awww! Okay, where is she? I think I'm just as nervous as her!
GRACIE You must be, you both worked so hard on this! She'll be here in a second.

GRACIE and DAWN sit down at the dining table.

GRACIE Would you care for some pancakes?
DAWN I'm good, thanks, Gracie. I just ate.

HAILEY comes running into the room wearing a fresh set of clothes.

HAILEY Mom can I have strawberries with my pan--Dawn! Wha-I thought you were coming at--

DAWN and GRACIE laugh.

DAWN You didn't think I would torture you by making you wait for a whole hour, did you?
HAILEY **(smiling)** Mom, give me my phone!

GRACIE gives HAILEY the phone. HAILEY sits down and opens her email.

HAILEY Okay, one ... two ... three!

HAILEY clicks on the email.

HAILEY What ... but--

She swallows and blinks very hard.

DAWN Hails ... I'm so sorry.

HAILEY No, no, I shouldn't be surprised. There were so many people ... But still, the Land of Stories and I didn't get to ...

GRACIE hugs HAILEY.

GRACIE I know you love those books, but hey, you had fun practising and that's what matters! Besides, you make mistakes to learn from them! I say you give Mr Cassidy a call and see what he felt could be better. You and Dawn can work on it together for the future.

HAILEY nods.

GRACIE We'll leave you to talk alone.

GRACIE and DAWN walk offstage. HAILEY dials CASSIDY's number. The phone beeps.



HAILEY He-hello? **(Listens.)** Ye-yes Mr Cassidy, this is Hailey Thatcher, from last week's audition. **(Listens.)** Um, yeah, so I just wanted to ask, um, what made you, um, choose someone else for Alex's role? I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm not, um, upset, I mean, I am a little, but I'm not calling to convince you to give me the role or anything. I just want to know where I could have been better, you know, so I can improve. **(Listens and smiles.)** One second, let me just write this down or I'll forget. **(Listens and smiles again.)** Thank you, Mr Cassidy, I try. **(Listens and writes while murmuring to herself.)** More personal input ... okay .... More emotion and drama ... I stuck to the script too much ... felt like it was a bit rote memorised ... could've taken more liberties ... wait, but Sir ... **(Listens.)** No, nothing's the problem, Sir ... thank you for your time. **(Listens.)** Thank you, Sir, I will. **(Hangs up the call.)** That is literally everything Dawn told me not to do! How could she get it so ... wait ... DAWN!

DAWN and GRACIE enter.

DAWN What'd he say?

HAILEY You KNEW! You knew the entire time; you never wanted me to get the part! This is all. Your. FAULT! How could you?

GRACIE Hailey Thatcher, Dawn has put so much effort into this, how can you talk to her like that? I don't know what she "knew" or what "her fault" is but I know I need you to apologise right now!

DAWN **(softly)** No ... no Gracie, Hailey's right. Um, would it be ok if I just got a moment alone with her?

GRACIE Wha-but ...

HAILEY Mom, please.

GRACIE **(glaring in turn at DAWN and HAILEY)** Fine ... 10 minutes only!

GRACIE trudges off the stage.

HAILEY You told me not to put too much emotion or drama or take my own liberties! Mr Cassidy said all those things, word for word, were what my performance was missing. You lied to me! Dawn, how could you?

DAWN Hails, I would never lie to you on purpose, I-

HAILEY **(scoffs)** Ugh, give me a break! How do you not lie on purpose? "Oh, Hailey, Mr Cassidy is super-strict; don't be too dramatic. Oops, that was a lie, well, can't do anything about it now!" Yeah right, Dawn.

DAWN Hailey, hear me out, at least! What I meant is that I would never lie to you to hurt you. I-I ... **(taking a deep breath)** I was trying to protect you.

HAILEY Wait-what-but you admit you didn't want me to get the part, right?





DAWN Yes, but--

HAILEY Then how is that protecting me?

DAWN That's what I've been trying to tell you. Hailey, you know what, let's sit down.

HAILEY and DAWN sit down at the dining table.

HAILEY **(glaring)** I'm listening.

DAWN I was about eight years old when I first started theatre. I'd fallen in love with it and I trained so hard, I tell you--

HAILEY Gah, this is not one of those "inspirational" stories that grown-ups drone on about, right? Stories that make us "grateful for the time we live in" and all?

DAWN I know you're mad at me, but Hails, please, just listen. Anyway, one day, a poster for auditions came out. From Dreamstar Productions. It was a completely new script, I forget the name, but not from a book or anything. So when my teacher saw it, she said she thought I'd reached a certain level and that I should give it a go. Of course, I was thrilled. I went to audition, and even got a part. Again, I was ecstatic. The problems started when I started rehearsals. The first one itself was awful. The director was a nightmare. He didn't let us say a word or give any opinions unless it was part of the dialogue. The costumes were hideous, the sets kept falling apart, and the director was mean to everyone. Not once did he compliment any of us and rehearsals went on until midnight sometimes. So, I quit. I just couldn't handle it. They cast my understudy as my character instead. Later, when the movie came out, I watched it, and it was terrible. I had been regretting my decision all the while, but when I watched that movie, I couldn't have been more grateful.

So you sabotaged my audition to get revenge on Dreamstar?

HAILEY No, of course not! I prevented you from getting the role because the minute you

DAWN showed me the Land of Stories audition poster, I went and checked who the current director is. It's Isaac Martin, son of Noah Martin, who was our director. With a dad like that, well ...

Not necessarily! He could've been nice, Dawn. I could've had an amazing experience.

HAILEY See, I'm nothing like my mom.

DAWN raises one eyebrow.

HAILEY Fine, I'm a lot like my mom. But that's not the point! Also, why didn't you tell me before the auditions? We-we could've figured it out together. I wouldn't have had this disappointment. Why didn't you tell me, Dawn?

DAWN Because I knew you wouldn't believe me, Hails. You would have said everything you just said about kids not necessarily being like their parents. Besides, Dreamstar's core principals can't have changed that much. About Mr. Cassidy, he's just casting director, you won't be working with him much.

HAILEY But still, if someone as nice as Mr Cassidy is willingly working for Dreamstar, they must be doing something right.

DAWN Hailey, I'm sorry, I don't know how to explain to you why, but the minute I heard the name Dreamstar, my gut just told me no.

HAILEY You can't explain to me because you don't know! You're just applying all your experiences to my life, and just assuming that I'm going to face the same thing. You know what Dawn; I just need to be alone right now.

HAILEY gets up and runs off stage. DAWN holds her head in her hands. GRACIE enters the room.



GRACIE Dawn, thank you.

DAWN looks up at GRACIE.

GRACIE I heard the whole thing. Thank you so much.

DAWN Seriously? Did you see Hailey's face? I should've talked to you before ruining her audition. I should've talked to her. I should've--

GRACIE Dawn, while I won't deny you could have handled it better, Hails is so lucky to have a teacher who cares enough to do this, even if she may be hurt right now.

DAWN Clearly, she disagrees.

GRACIE She'll come through. Trust me, I've seen this before - I'm her mom. She'll sulk on her own for a bit, then come out and declare her "verdict", no matter what she feels now. Usually, the verdict is sensible enough.

DAWN I don't want to leave without sorting this out with Hailey in person. But ... I do have a couple other things to do. How long does Her Majesty take to come out with the verdict?

GRACIE Ten minutes tops. Half the time she's just doing drama to make us feel guilty.
DAWN **(smiling)** That's my girl.



SCENE FOUR

HAILEY's bedroom. There is a bed on one side and a desk on the other. Hailey is sitting at the desk, watching a YouTube video on her computer. Her chin is rested in her palm, and she looks disgusted.

HAILEY **(murmuring to herself)** Ugh, are you serious? **(Watches for some time)** Why? Just why? **(Watches a little more)** Dawn was right … this is terrible!

HAILEY's phone rings. She picks it up.

HAILEY Hello? **(Listens)** Oh, um, hello Mr Cassidy! **(Listens again)** Oh! **(Listens)** Me? But- but you said I was lacking-- **(Listens longer)** Well, that's very kind of you but … um, could I get back to you in a second? **(Listens)** Thank you. Just a second.

HAILEY hangs up and sits on her bed. Then she starts to smile and runs out of the room clutching the phone.



SCENE FIVE

Back in the Thatchers' dining room, where DAWN and GRACIE are seated. HAILEY sprints into the room.

HAILEY DAWN!
DAWN Hailey, I'm sorry, I know I--
HAILEY Yeah, yeah, yeah, apology accepted, all forgiven.

DAWN Wait, what--

HAILEY Mr Cassidy just called; the girl who had been selected for Alex dropped out!

DAWN Oh ... great, I guess. You can go see how that Isaac guy is ...

HAILEY NO. Absolutely not. I went online and saw the first ten minutes of one of his movies. My eyes and brain are still recovering from it. I refuse to disgrace the Land of Stories by making a movie with him. Thank you so much for sabotaging me. Wow, never thought I'd say that.

DAWN and GRACIE exchange a smile.

GRACIE **(to DAWN)** Told you.

DAWN **(to HAILEY)** Well, then go tell Mr Cassidy you can't be Alex.

HAILEY Yeah, but why can't I be Alex?

GRACIE Hails, seriously? That's what Dawn and you have been arguing over for the last half hour, and you just agreed to say no--

HAILEY No, Mom, what do I tell Mr Cassidy about why I can't be Alex? I can't tell him that I think the director's movies are useless pieces of junk!

DAWN sniggers.

GRACIE Tell him that ... um ...

DAWN Ooh, make up this looong sappy life story about how you've been in love with art since you were a baby! And ... while on your journey to become an artist, you ... uh ...



discovered that you love theatre too, and until now, you could do both side by side, but now the time has come to choose, since the rehearsal schedules clash with your art class. And art is just too dear to your heart.

HAILEY Hey, quit teasing, my art is not that bad either, okay? I can draw decent flowers. Oh. Wait a second. That was your serious voice. Should I really?

DAWN Why not? What'd a little white lie do to anyone?

HAILEY **(starting to smile)** Mom?

GRACIE Well, personally I see no need for the long life story part. Just the fact that it clashes with another class you love seems enough. But then again, I'm talking to two thespians who will do anything to have fun, so I won't even try to argue.

HAILEY and DAWN grin. HAILEY dials the number.

HAILEY Mr Cassidy? Hey, yeah, so ... as much as I love the Land of Stories, the consequences of producing it are way too high for me. You see, ever since I was an infant, I have been in love with art. As a baby, I used to trace all kind of shapes in the air and the clouds and my food and ...

HAILEY's voice starts to fade out. DAWN and GRACIE smile and bite their lips trying not to laugh.

CURTAIN



Halloween: The Villains' Story

Vivaan Chaudhry



"How exactly will we release him?" Sico asked.

"Sico, let Skullnundrum find the haunted house. And I told you, this gem is only one piece of the device," Z-cluck said calmly. Z-cluck had told Sico many times about the device. Usually villains would get angry with stupid questions, but Z-cluck was different. Most teams of evil had expendables, but Z-cluck made his team with no expendables. That is why his team was the most powerful team of evil ever.

"Here. We've reached. After we enter we will be trapped in a dimension. We have to find that gem and get out," Skullnundrum said. As soon as they entered the dimension gave them a piece of its mind.

"QUACK QUACK! Hahahahahahahahaahahahaahahahahaahahahahah! Oohhhh oohhhh. Screeeeeeech screech," the dimension went on. Z-cluck and Skullnundrum noticed nothing. Mexamillion found it annoying. Exfernos used his oni powers to destroy anything in his way. He also made sure to stay far away from Halfdream and Sico. Halfdream was very powerful and made sure that Sico didn't cry. Sico was very scared.

"Okay. There's a turn here. Be ready for anything," Mexamillion said. They continued walking, but after they turned, nothing happened.

"So I guess this house is just--"



"Boo!"

"AAAAAAAHHHH!"

they cried.

"JORDAN'S GHOST!" Sico shouted. "I heard that Jordan was searching for the gem to trap Evil 101 and got turned into a ghost!"

"Okay, look, Jordan is a phantom. He lost his body, not his life," Exfernos said.

"But 'Jordan's phantom' isn't as catchy as 'Jordan's ghost'," Halfdream said, uselessly defending Sico.

"WHO CARES?"

"Thank you, Exfernos. Are we going to sit here and argue about ghosts and phantoms or are we going to get that gem and release my dad?" Skullnundrum asked.

"I honestly don't think that's even a question. If it was we wouldn't be here," Mex said.

"A very reluctant way of defending me Mex."

"Let's go," Z-cluck said.

Evil 101 sat in his prison, listening to the foolish comments of his soon-to-be allies. They had the power to find the gem; he was sure of that. But the gem was only one piece of the device, a small test to see if they were indeed worthy of the bigger test that lay ahead. Jordan's ghost was the only obstacle here, and since it was Halloween, the ghost was powerful. They had to overcome him, find the gem, and escape. Then, Evil 101 would reveal the next step and perhaps he and his allies would be successful in the bigger test too.

Meanwhile, back in the dimension of havoc, the team stopped in their tracks.

"So which path do we take?" someone said.

The team looked back. They saw nothing.

"Boo!"

"JORDAN'S GHOST IS FOLLOWING US! RUN FOR SHELTER!" Sico screamed in absolute terror.

Mex, ignoring Sico, said, "We can find the gem easily. I just need peace and quiet."

Mex was a sorcerer. Quickly, he separated his spiritual self from his physical self and mapped the three paths, ignoring the wailing ghost. "The gem's down the left path," he said, finally.

Sico, Halfdream, Exfernos, Z-cluck and Skullnundrum followed Mex and arrived at the gem. "We did it!" cried Sico.

Evil 101 appeared, smiling. "You have all passed my test. But there is a real gem. I had to see if you had the courage to face this and you do. The real gem is Z-quack's heart. You all are powerful enough to destroy him and get it."

Evil 101 knew that destroying Z-quack was crucial. The only problem was ... would Evil 101 and his allies be able to do it?

More Free Verse

The Place of Darkness and Beasts



I am running,
surrounded by darkness.
I hear it again:
the rage-filled roar.
I run
faster, faster, faster.
My bare feet are aching, crying for me to stop.
Ouch! I bump into a wall.
To my left, I see light.
Oh, thank heavens!
The footsteps are getting louder and louder as it comes closer
thump, thump, thump.
Suddenly the rasping beast goes silent.
And I slowly start moving again
towards the light.
All of a sudden, it roars,
making my heart skip a beat.
I start running again
I am almost there.
Five steps, four, three, two
As soon as I step out, the grass seems to hug my feet
the sun welcomes me with its warmth.
I take a breath
I am safe,
I remind myself
They can't leave.
I am safe, I am safe, I am safe.

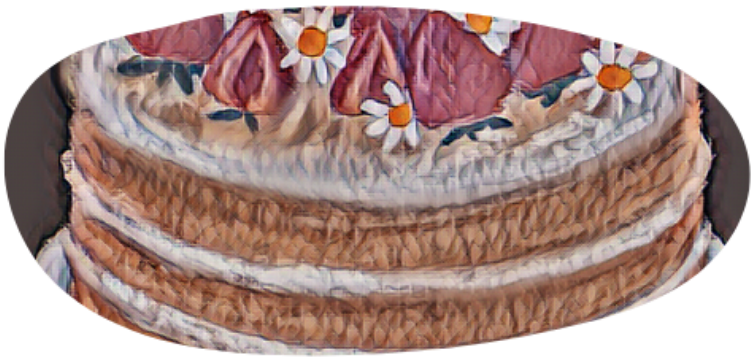
Prisha Kamboj



Haiku Recipes

A Recipe for Your Favourite Cake
Convince your parents
Go to a sweet shop, and buy
your favourite cake

Pranika Garg



Pastry, cookies, cake,
or fries and chips ... hmm! What's that?
That's the smell of cake!

Ruhaan Garg



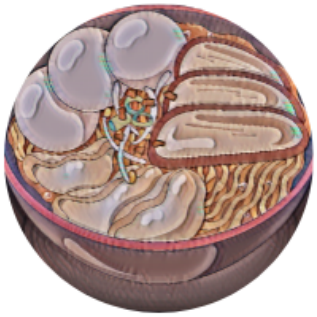
Waffles and ice-cream
I don't know how to make them
But they sure taste good

Pranika Garg

Creamy Cups
Swirl cream in the cup
Go nutty and chocolatey
Cool in fridge and ... done!



Advika Gupta



squiggly strings of flour
spicy, tangy, sometimes sweet,
hot bowl of ramen

janvi barman

More Haikus

Kathak with puppies
Reading by a chocolate pool
One day, me, one day

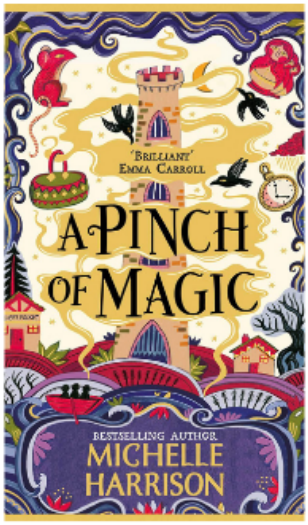
Advika Gupta

The wind is blowing,
I feel the leaves below me,
I know it's autumn.

Ruhaan Garg

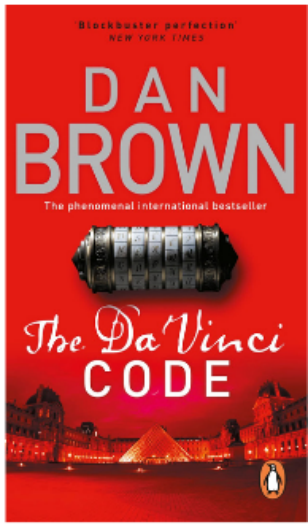
Haiku Reviews











Quite a boring read
You learn many things, I am
A dictionary

Pranika Garg

Secret rituals,
A crypt and a dead person,
ǝbɔ ıɔniV ɒƆ ǝHT

Himarsha Mulchandani

A great story: crows,
Sisters, curses, and of course,
A Pinch of Magic.

Sunandini Sen

Books can change your life
Mine and the twins' too. Get lost in
The Land of Stories

Advika Gupta

Fliss, Betty, Charlie,
This time, they're falling into
A Tangle of Spells.

Sunandini Sen

WHAT'S THIS ABOUT?

We read Brian Bilston's book review haikus and wondered whether we could write our own. And then we went one step further - what other unusual themes can we explore through haikus?





Flaming Ruckus

Himarsha Mulchandani

Characters

MATEO (16)
KIRA (10)
MOM
SPACE MONKEY

MATEO and KIRA are standing in the living room. Dirty tissues are strewn across the floor. Green goo is splattered on the furniture. The sofas are upturned and the legs of a table have been badly damaged. There are scorch marks on the walls.

MATEO Don't you ever listen to me?

KIRA **(indignantly)** I'm sorry, all right? It looked cute.

MATEO **(huffing)** "Cute?" Are you out of your mind! It was a space monkey. And that too with superpowers. "Cute" isn't the right word choice, Kira; it's straight up delusional!

KIRA But I didn't know it could burn stuff. Or spout goo out of its mouth. When the auctioneer said it had "superpowers", I just thought it'd do something cool like, fly or have superhuman strength.

MATEO **(spluttering)** T-this is a dangerous space monkey! Not a Thor monkey! Grow up for gods' sake, Kira! What were you even thinking when you bought it at the auction? **(murmuring)** It looked cute.

KIRA **(rolling his eyes)** Well ... this monkey is quite the jackpot, but we've got to clean

MATEO this mess up before Mom comes back home. Last time she left us alone, we literally burned the house down. Get to work, chop-chop.
Wait, did you hear that?

KIRA Hear what?

MATEO

A soft purr comes from a corner. Suddenly the SPACE MONKEY jumps out of its hiding place and lands on top of MATEO's head.

MATEO GET IT OFF ME!! DON'T STAND THERE AND LAUGH! OUCH!

KIRA **(shocked, but laughing at the same time)** Wait, I'll get my lasso!

As KIRA rushes into her bedroom, the main door opens. MOM steps in. All heads turn to look at her.

MOM **(smiling)** Kira, what's the hurry? Why are you running into your bedroom like you just saw a ghost?

MATEO We'll clean it up, promise! I swear it was a mistake. It won't happen again.

MOM Wait ... is that Ruckus?

KIRA Who?

MOM The monkey - it's Ruckus! Where did you find him?

MATEO Rewind, please, you actually KNOW him?

MOM **(laughing)** Of course! This little guy ran away from me when I was a teen. Oh the adventures we had had together! We called ourselves the Flaming Ruckus Bandits. But never mind all that--

KIRA Wait! How can you not mind all that? You were a BANDIT? What? Why didn't you ever tell us that before?

MOM Oh, please! Can we leave it at that? Just forget I mentioned anything about bandits.

MATEO C'mon Ma, you've got to tell us! We're not going to leave you alone until you do.

MOM **(sighing)** Fine! We once stole the mayor's car and Ruckus drove it halfway through our district with the police at our heels. We had a small encounter with ... your father ... which may have resulted in a fire that the space monkey started. Ruckus saved me from going to jail – we had to stay invisible for one hour straight, all the while dropping off the mayor's car near his mansion!

MATEO Dad was there too? That was ... unexpected. But-but what about the name Flaming Ruckus Bandits? Where did that come from? It's a bit of a mouthful, don't you think?

MOM Well, I sort of heard the policemen saying that we made a flaming ruckus. **(chuckles)** So I just stuck to that idea, I guess.

MOM then realises that the house is a mess. She takes a moment to process the situation as her eyes grow wide with shock.

MOM **(stuttering)** I ... well! How exactly do you think we're going to clean this up?

MATEO Uh ... About that-

KIRA MY LASSO!

MOM A lasso doesn't solve every problem, dear.



KIRA Sure it does! If your teddy bear is stuck up the tree, use a lasso! If you want to catch a thief, use a lasso! If someone is too annoying and needs to be strangled, a lasso works just as well--

MOM Kira, stop. We get your point. Mateo, answer me honestly, where did you find Ruckus?

MATEO **(shuffling and looking down at his feet)** We were ... uhm ... playing and we stumbled across--

MOM You went to the auction, didn't you?

MATEO No! That's not--fine, we did go to the auction. Well, Kira did anyways.

MOM When are you two ever going to be responsible?

KIRA But Ma, on the bright side, we found Ruckus! Can we pleaseeeee keep him?

MOM I'm not sure, sweetheart. I don't think we have enough money--

MATEO Money won't be a problem! I-I'll work double shifts at the café.

KIRA Yeah mom! I'll help him too.

MOM Okay, okay, I'll think about it. It's late now. Go to your room and sleep. We'll clean up in the morning. But you're not off the hook yet. You're making up for this accident and I won't take any excuses. Also, if I catch both of you sneaking off at night with Ruckus, you will be in deep trouble. I've done it all before, so don't expect to fool me in any way. Is that clear?

MATEO and KIRA Yes, Ma.

MOM exits the stage.

MATEO **(shaking his head in disbelief)** – I can't believe you bought this for 10 dollars. Whoever sold this was either an oaf or wanted to get this nuisance out of their hands. Kira, my lovely sister, you just brought Mom's old pet back into our house! Can you imagine our mom going around with a space monkey, stealing stuff?

KIRA **(giggling)** It's kind of hard to believe!

MATEO Y'know, we'll continue this legacy. The fearsome Flaming Ruckus Bandits are back in business, baby!

KIRA Really? You think mom will let us? After the mess we made? I don't think it's a good idea.

MATEO **(winking)** She won't have to know anything. Ruckus does have invisibility powers. It's only fair, Kira. How can she deny us the freedom that she had enjoyed in her childhood? We'll somehow find a way to sneak away at night. Plus, you'll get to use your lasso.

KIRA I'm totally in.

MATEO and KIRA exit with triumphant smiles.

More Free Verse

Muscle Memory



Left to middle, right to middle, left to middle, right to middle
A motion stored in their memory
They sway, once again,
My hands.
My head,
cocked to one side,
Tries to get those threads of black silk
To fall onto a shoulder.
As my hands reach the end,
my chin rests on my chest
Those folds barely remain united
Pinched between my fingers.
That vibrant strip of fabric
Comes floating back, here to save the day.
Breezing around
like Leila's tail when she's happy
Loop, pull, loop, pull
The ribbon wraps around
letting that tiny bit of hair swirl
free, the odd one out
I flick the string of crisscrosses off me
and it embraces me as I twirl.
A friend that will follow
my every dance, my every move.

Advika Gupta

Rainbow

Happiness when we see her
The colours of life, prismatic
Always smiling at us, though we can't reach her
How big, bright and beautiful she is!

Geet Valecha

Cover Up

janvi barman

Characters

DHRUV – a single father
SAVITA – DHRUV's older child
YAMIR – DHRUV's younger child

YAMIR lounges on the living room couch. The door opens and DHRUV enters. YAMIR sits up straight.

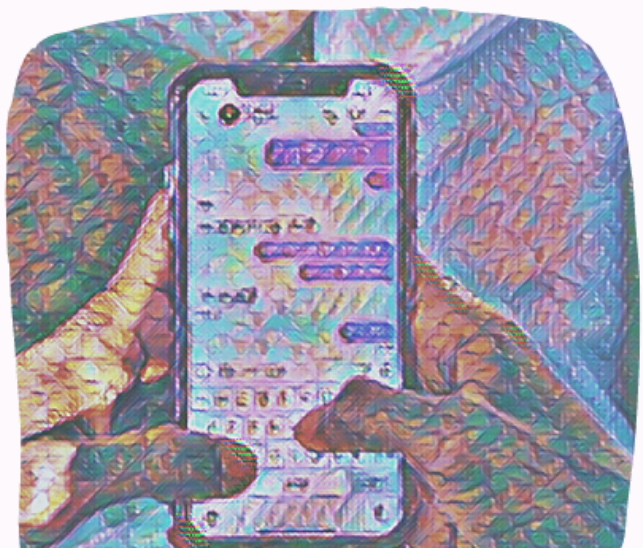
YAMIR Did you bring it?
DHRUV Bring what?
YAMIR **(sighing)** The stuff for my project! I reminded you so many times, Papa!
DHRUV I'm sorry, it's been a long day at work. It slipped my mind. I can quickly go get it for you; is that okay?
YAMIR It's fine, I'll text Savita to get it on her way back.

YAMIR picks up his phone and texts SAVITA.

DHRUV On her way back from where? She's not at home?
YAMIR She … I … she's up in her room. Sorry. I just got confused for a second.

DHRUV walks over to the staircase. Meanwhile, YAMIR quickly sends SAVITA another text.

DHRUV Savita! You up there? **(He gets no response and turns to YAMIR)** Okay, where is she? I won't tell her you snitched, promise.
YAMIR No, I genuinely thought she was home. I'm as confused as you are right now.



DHRUV This girl is off the rails. Call her and see where she is.

YAMIR pulls out his phone and rings SAVITA. DHRUV takes a seat beside him on the couch.

DHRUV A million times I've told her, let me know where you are. How can she leave the house unannounced? Especially at this hour? I mean, it's six-thirty in the evening! Right?

YAMIR Mhm.

DHRUV It's not safe. She thinks she knows what's best for herself, but she's only twenty - one! Imagine, she was thinking of moving out at eighteen. That girl can barely make an omlette without burning the house down.

YAMIR **(scratching the back of his neck)** Totally.

DHRUV You also are a headache. Always lying to me about her whereabouts. Don't you know I only want the best for her? I'm just trying to protect her.

YAMIR For real.

DHRUV I've always tried to trust her, always tried to be a lenient parent, but she just won't listen. I only have a few rules whereas other parents have an entire constitution for their children.

YAMIR **(tapping his fingers against his thigh)** So true.

DHRUV All I ask is for her to let me know where she is and with who at all times, and no staying out without trusted family after seven thirty. And no electronics after nine. And no staying up past ten. And--

SAVITA picks up the call. YAMIR hands the phone to DHRUV.

SAVITA Hello?

DHRUV Where are you? I've been worried sick! **(pause)** Why is there so much echo?

SAVITA **(offstage)** I'm at home, what do you mean? There's echo because you can hear me talking from upstairs, Papa.

DHRUV Nonsense! You didn't answer when I called from downstairs!

SAVITA cuts the call.

DHRUV How dare she! Such insolence, no respect for parents these days. I can't beli--

SAVITA walks down the stairs and enters the living room. Her hair is wrapped in a towel.



SAVITA I was taking a shower, that's probably why I didn't hear you.

YAMIR See, she is at home!

DHRUV Oh. I-I'm-s-I'm sor-wait, you took a shower at six-thirty p.m.!? Twenty one years old and still no common sense. You'll catch a cold! I'm sure you didn't use hot water also, this generation and their "cold shower vibes". I--

DHRUV's phone rings. He stands up and takes his phone out of his pocket.

DHRUV You're lucky I need to take this **(picks up call and brings phone to his ear).** Hello?

DHRUV leaves the living room and walks into the kitchen to take his call.

YAMIR How did you pull that one off? I thought you were done for sure.

SAVITA The universe was on my side today, dude. Thank you for the text by the way, I would have waltzed in through the main door and would have been turned to stone immediately.

YAMIR No problem.

SAVITA I was climbing through the window when you called, I managed to change while the call was happening, I wrapped my hair at absolute Godspeed after cutting the call and ran downstairs.

YAMIR I actually almost blew your cover, but then I pretended to just be stupid, and it worked flawlessly because Papa thinks I am braindead.

SAVITA That's fair.

DHRUV enters the living room.

DHRUV What about your project, Yamir? Don't you need the materials by tomorrow? Honestly, quite foolish of you to tell me only one day in advance. Your time management is so poor, always waiting till the last second ...

SAVITA **(whispers)** I think that's my cue to leave ...

SAVITA discreetly runs back up the stairs.

Curtain falls.

In Reverse

Delicate Memories

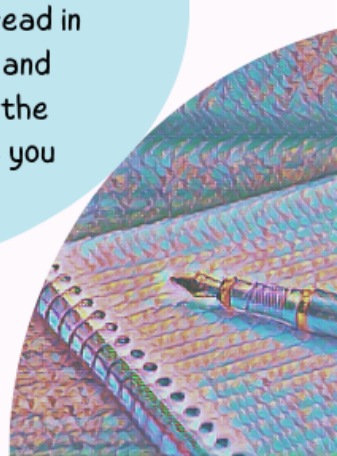
Shadows, fluctuations, clear to see, yet not
they left me behind.
I was wrong to think that
till the end of time,
Memories will stay with me,
they crushed me into pieces.
I was a fool to think
they'll stay by my side
here, but not;
butterfly-like memories,
fluttering - never still,
they're temporary,
a myth that
they're enjoyable - sweeter than honey
The truth:
they're bittersweet, the taste of the darkest chocolate.
Memories are slippery;
they're a manipulation of my mind.
I'm deceiving myself by saying
Memories will forever be mine.

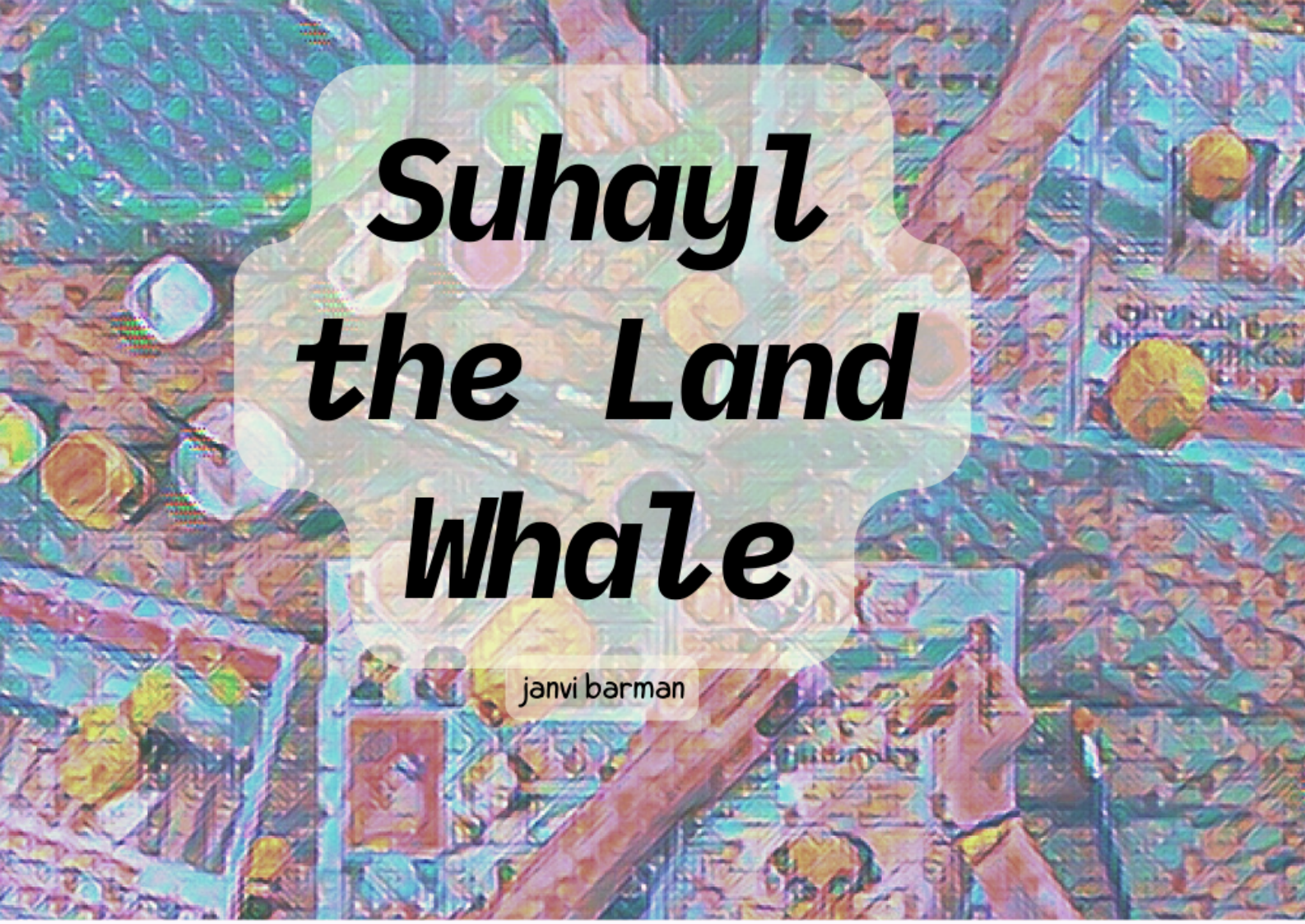
(Now read it from the bottom to the top)

Himarsha Mulchandani

WHAT'S THIS ABOUT?

This was one of our most challenging, rewarding exercises. Each of these poems can be read in two ways - top to bottom, and bottom to top. Notice how the meaning changes entirely as you read it the second time!





Suhayl the Land Whale

janvi barman

Characters

DHRUV – a single father
SAVITA – DHRUV's daughter
YAMIR – DHRUV's son

SCENE ONE

SAVITA and YAMIR are sitting on their bedroom floor. Art materials are scattered everywhere, and an incomplete chart is spread out between them. YAMIR is sticking pictures to the chart, and SAVITA is cutting pieces of tape. There is a knock on the door before DHRUV walks into the room.

SAVITA What's the point of knocking if you don't wait for a response?
DHRUV It's an "I'm coming in" knock, not a "can I come in?" knock.
SAVITA That makes no sense--
DHRUV I have some good news ...
YAMIR **(mumbling)** Please, god, no.

SAVITA and YAMIR share a glance.

DHRUV Guess who's coming over next week!

SAVITA sighs. YAMIR slaps his hand to his forehead.

DHRUV Oh, come on! I don't know why you despise him so much, he always brings you such lovely gifts!
YAMIR Papa, please.
DHRUV Please what?
YAMIR Don't do this.
DHRUV Now, Yamir, this was not my doing. I didn't invite him over. He asked, and it would have been impolite of me to refuse.
SAVITA You didn't think to check with us?
DHRUV Well, no, because you'd throw a fit over your loving uncle coming to visit. Imagine how he'd feel if he knew how much you resented him.
SAVITA Fine, fine. When is the man leaving?
DHRUV I don't remember, let me get his letter. Another thing about Suhayl I love, he doesn't get sucked into all this modern day stuff. Text messages, Whatsapp, Instargames ... so refreshing to receive a real, physical letter--
SAVITA Please, just get the letter.
DHRUV Alright, alright!

DHRUV exits the room.

SAVITA 'Lovely gifts?' Last time he was over, the land whale got me a pencil case with 'Avneet' embroidered on it. My name is not Avneet, as you may be aware, and I do not know anyone named Avneet.

YAMIR picks up a pencil case from the ground.



YAMIR This one?

SAVITA nods.

YAMIR What if I, like, pretend to be allergic to him or something?
SAVITA **(laughing)** That'd actually be stupid funny. Do that.

YAMIR Wait. Next week? I can't cater to this idiot's needs every second of every day next week! I'll be at Jayden's most of the time to set up for the project.

SAVITA Don't worry; you go have fun with Jayden. I'll be Suhayl Uncle's personal slave while you're gone.

YAMIR Dude, do you think Papa will even let me leave the house if Suhayl Uncle's here? No! I need to sit there and have "family bonding time" and play Monopoly.

SAVITA For real. Just because the guy can't stay in his own house for more than a month and his own wife can't stand him. Okay, that's harsh, but you get the gist. He was here, like, two weeks ago.

YAMIR He was! I'm so done with this--

DHRUV enters with a letter in hand.

SAVITA Okay, so this time we don't even get the "I'm coming in" knock?

DHRUV You've lost your knock privileges because of all the talking-back you're doing. And to answer your question, he didn't mention when he's leaving.

SAVITA Are you sure he's not asking if he can move in?

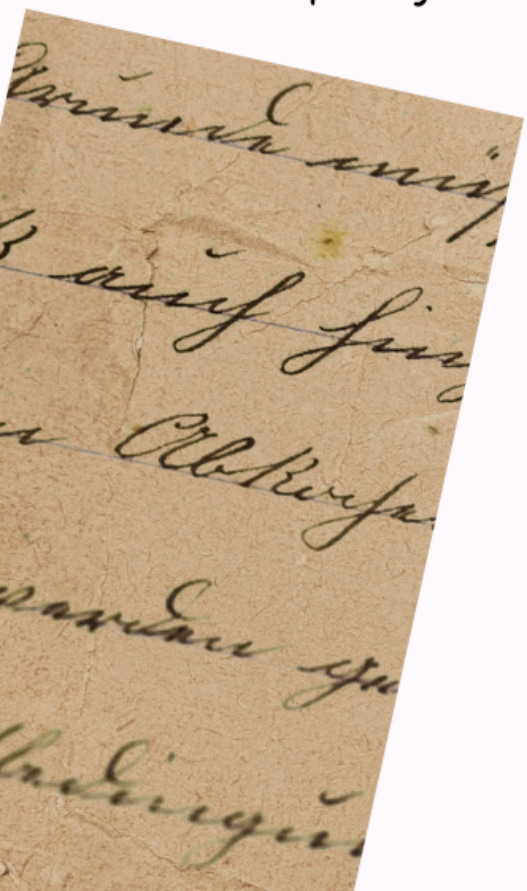
DHRUV To be frank with you, no. That may very well be what he's suggesting. He's not very clear with his messages, Suhayl.

SAVITA Communication issues. **(mumbles)** Maybe that's why his wife ...

DHRUV What? I'm growing old, Savita, I can't hear well. Speak louder.

SAVITA Nothing, nothing.

YAMIR sits up straighter.



YAMIR Can I see the letter?

DHRUV hands the piece of paper to YAMIR.

YAMIR He's not a doctor, is he?

DHRUV No, why?

YAMIR His handwriting looks like one's.

YAMIR puts the letter down and scratches his nose. He sneezes.

SAVITA Ha, it's like you're allergic to him.

YAMIR Y-Yeah, maybe I am!

DHRUV Don't be ridiculous, Yamir. Now, can you find his favourite pillow case? We need to start preparing for his arrival.

YAMIR **(mumbling)** What is he, a flight?

DHRUV For the last time, speak louder!

YAMIR Sorry, I was just asking where the pillow case is.

DHRUV It's where all Suhayl's things are.

YAMIR Which is ...?

DHRUV Can't you remember anything? So unobservant, no curiosity, don't care about anything apart from yourself ...

SAVITA **(whispering)** Cupboard, second drawer from the bottom.



YAMIR nods and walks to the cupboard, opening the second drawer from the bottom. He picks up a sweater. He sneezes loudly, interrupting DHRUV's lecture.

DHRUV Now, who told you to snoop through your uncle's things?

YAMIR You- I- you just told me to find his pillow case!

DHRUV Yes, and you are holding his sweater, not his pillow case. Well, don't just stand there, find it.

YAMIR rolls his eyes. He continues rummaging through the drawer, looking for the pillow case. DHRUV sits down where YAMIR was sitting previously. YAMIR continues to sneeze, scratch his nose and sniffle.

DHRUV See, now you've got a cold from sitting on the floor. All the time, I tell you, spread a mat or something and sit on it. But will you ever listen? No.

DHRUV picks up Suhayl's letter and reads it again. He picks up the envelope too, examining them both. SAVITA walks up to the cupboard to help YAMIR search for the pillow case.

SAVITA I was joking when I said the allergy thing was a good idea, by the way.

YAMIR Okay, well, I sneezed when I was holding the letter and then I just ran with it.

YAMIR glances over his shoulder and sees that DHRUV is still engrossed in the letter. YAMIR sneezes again.

SAVITA Are you actually … you know what? We don't have a better option. Keep going.

YAMIR sniffles and sneezes again.

DHRUV Yamir, I can't have you infecting Suhayl's things. Lie down. Now that you've made yourself sick, you need to rest.

YAMIR **(to SAVITA)** Wait, I think I'm on to something.

SCENETWO

The next day. YAMIR is lying in bed and SAVITA is sitting cross legged on the broad bay window sill. DHRUV places some pills and a flask on the bedside table.

DHRUV I can't have Suhayl catching your cold. I'll have to write to him and tell him to come a different week instead. Let's hope you recover by then. I'll bring dinner for you in a bit. Take a nap.

YAMIR **(smiling)** Okay, thank you, I will.



DHRUV smiles back at him, and then leaves the room.

YAMIR Dude, I can't believe he actually thinks I'm sick.

SAVITA At least it half-worked! No more Suhayl the land whale.

YAMIR Yeah, but also no Jayden.

SAVITA It's alright; you have time for your project.

YAMIR rolls over, facing away from SAVITA.

YAMIR I don't care about the project, frankly. I just like spending time with him.

SAVITA That's … that was unexpectedly wholesome.

YAMIR Should I call him?

SAVITA Yes, yes. Talk to the kid. You're depriving him of attention, you bully yourself out of talking to him on a daily basis.

YAMIR I'm not bullying anyone, okay? He's just a busy person, I don't want to disturb him.

SAVITA Just call him, already.

YAMIR picks up his phone and calls JAYDEN. In a matter of seconds, the call is answered. SAVITA smiles and listens to her brother's side of the conversation.

YAMIR Hi, yeah. Not the best, thank you for asking though. **(Listens)** Well, Papa told Suhayl he couldn't come. **(Listens, laughs)** No, Jay, I do not consider this a win. **(Listens)** It's alright, I'll spontaneously recover in a bit. I doubt Papa will let me out of the house in the next week, though. **(Listens)** The guilt has worn off. **(Listens)** You don't have to call back, I know you're busy. **(Listens, laughs)** I appreciate it, I do. Okay, bye-bye!

YAMIR puts down his phone.

SAVITA I'm glad you're making friends.

YAMIR doesn't respond for a few seconds. He then rolls over to face SAVITA.

YAMIR I'm glad too.

Curtains fall.





Fighting Darkness

Himarsha Mulchandani

A lacy veil fluttered lightly. I tried to reach out to it. Why? I don't know. I just had to.

But before I could, icy fingers gripped my hand in the darkness. I screamed in agony as razor-sharp nails cut deep into my skin.

"The light doesn't always win, Hemera. Sometimes it has to succumb to the darkness," my mother's voice echoed around me.

I swear it was still resonating in my head when I woke up, screaming.



Dreams often turn into nightmares.

I always wake up with a splitting headache and a nagging sensation at the back of my mind that tells me that she's still here, sneering at my weakness.

Then, I breathe in, reminding myself that I'm on Earth. Far away from her realm of darkness. She can't harm me. I'm safe.

Well, I admit that "safe" is exaggerating my situation. With the powers I have, I can never be safe. Adding to that, I have a goddess for a mother. Not just any goddess, mind you, but The Bringer of the Night herself – Nyx.

As I mull over my thoughts, eating my peanut butter sandwich, there's a loud bang on my door. I snap out of my stupor, my senses on full alert.



Last time that happened, a big slimy spider was on my doorstep, apparently sent by Nyx to kill me. Long story short, it was a big hassle all around and I had to somehow convince the authorities that the dead spider inside my apartment was a pre-Halloween costume.

I grab the nearest weapon (which I later realize sheepishly; is a spatula) and open the door cautiously. My hand shoots out a yellow beam of light and I almost die of embarrassment.

It's my friend – Kumar! He's doubled over, laughing so hard that he's actually crying. Considering I'm in my Tom & Jerry pyjamas with a spatula in my hand, I'm definitely looking like a psychopath. Not to mention the dark circles under my eyes.

I splutter, "W-what are you doing here?"

He raises his eyebrows. "Is that the kind of greeting I get after 20 years?"

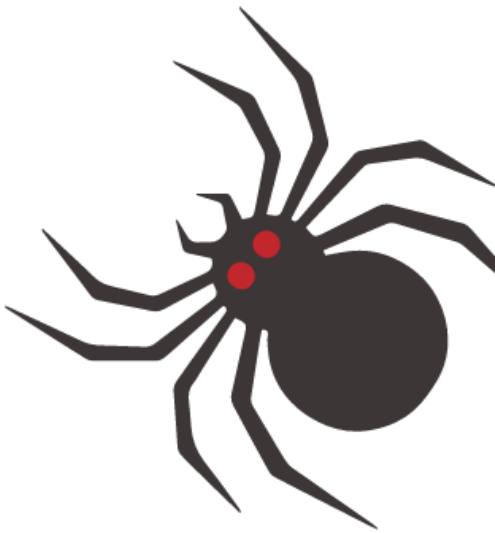
I laugh as we both hold our broken selves together in a warm hug. Kumar has changed. A lot. His hair is messy, as usual, but there are streaks of grey in them. His olive skin glows as the sun rays fall on him.

I finally state the obvious, "I'm supposed to be undercover, Kumar. But I guess that doesn't change the fact that Nyx already figured out where I live. Also, if you're here to warn me about a spider at my door, then don't worry. It's dead."

He gives me an incredulous look, "Dead? You're serious, right?"

"Yeah, why?"

His face goes white and he whispers hoarsely, "You really shouldn't have done that. The spider didn't come all the way from Tartarus to kill you; Nyx could've done that easily with her powers now that she knows where you live. It was a messenger, Hemera. The spider was there to take you back to your original home."



I slowly let that sink in. Why would Nyx want me back? What could her master plan be? Could Kumar be a part of this? No, no, I cannot – must not – let doubt overshadow my thought process in these dire circumstances.

I keep my composure and calmly ask Kumar, "How do you know that?"

Kumar looks at me with a glint in his eyes. Red ones. Just like the spider. His voice turns silky. "Come home, Hemera. Great opportunities wait for you."

Before I can process what's happening, Kumar lunges at me with a guttural cry. One punch on my carotid and I'm out like a light.



I hear a sniffle. A sob. Then, a wail. Full of raw agony.

It's a little girl. My sister. Lu.

I realise, with overwhelming anguish, that it is a memory I have tried so hard to bury beneath layers of false hopes and lies. I feel the pain wash over me. I don't want to see what happens next. But I already know. And that fear is enough to push me further into this cold abyss of sleep.

Nyx's footsteps echoed as she entered the dark room with her black cape billowing behind her.

"Get up," she said tersely.

Lu got up, her eyes puffy and her knees wobbling.

I barged in, livid. I screamed, "You can't! You can't ...! She just sat on your throne for a second, mother, what's so bad about that? I swear we were just playing!"

Nyx glared at the stricken guard standing behind me, "You had ONE job." She gave me a cold-hearted look, "Playing? This is not a playhouse, Hemera. It's my throne. And you have to stay away from it. Or do you plan on being punished, just like your sister?"

I clenched my hands so hard that my knuckles turned white, "Why are you being so protective about your throne? Throwing Lu out just because she sat on it? I don't see any sense in that!"

Nyx snarled and said, "Insolent fool! You are in no position to tell me what's right and what's wrong. Guards, take her back to her room and make sure she doesn't come out for the next week."

All these years, staying with Nyx had made me sure about two things – one, she planned to destroy me since I was the only living person in the Realm of Night who could produce light. She was a power-hungry maniac and she could do anything to hold on to that power.

Two – she was overly protective about her throne for some reason. I had heard some rumours from the guards about an object of power hidden inside it, but living in the Realm of Night, I had learnt the hard way not to trust these sources. But this was getting out of hand.

For now, I had to save my sister. Somehow. Anyhow.

So I did the only thing I could. I glowed. Every bit of light slowly drained out of me as I was distinctly aware of Nyx yelling curses in the background. Then, taking Lu's hand in mine, I ran. I ran like my life depended on it. It probably did.

But I knew Nyx couldn't be defeated like this. My mother had her secrets buried so deep down in ancient texts that looking for them was next to impossible. Even if I did manage to find them, the language used would be very hard to decipher. My light could only harm her in the smallest of ways. Her darkness was eternal and omnipotent – it could only be harmed with the thing that was inside that throne. I could mull on these thoughts later. For now, I had to keep my sister safe.

But at the end of the day, Lu would be dead and there was not a single soul who could change that.





I wake up to crows pooping on my face. Zero-out-of-ten rating. Would not recommend.

"Welcome home, Hemera," Nyx says, smiling. "Hope you liked the little present."

Funny, because when I had left this place, I'd said something along the lines of crows pooping on her face. My mother is very petty that way.

I force a smile, failing ridiculously at being nonchalant. "Very much so, thank you."

I am lying on the floor of a cavernous black onyx chamber. Nyx sits regally on her throne while looking at me, evidently contemplating different ways to torture my mind. She drops her act and pounces on me (this is the second time today) with blinding speed. A blur of black and I'm flung across the room like a rag doll.

"You can't defeat me, child. Join me, or perish, just like that weakling Lu," Nyx hisses.

How can a mother be so cruel to her own child? Her heart yearns for power, every single second of the day; it's devoid of all emotion. She stands in front of her throne – a quick glance betraying a look of protection towards whatever lies inside it – but it only lasts for a second.

I get up gingerly, trying not to focus on the throbbing pain in my ankle, and put on my best poker face. "Don't try to lie to me. I know what you're hiding. Beneath these layers of power and youth, you're terribly weak, mother. Everyone knows that."

A shadow of doubt passes over Nyx's face, but she is quick to hide it. "These little games won't--"

I interrupt her with a mocking laugh, "Games? So now you're trying to mask who you really are. You're nothing without your secret little weapon. And I will be the one to destroy it."



I know that I'm playing a risky game here – it's practically like betting my life on a rumour. Who would've thought I could go from eating PB&Js in my kitchen to betting my life without getting money for it in one day?

Nyx looks seriously troubled. That only adds to my suspicion. I go on, digging deeper, joining all the dots as I frame unspoken thoughts in my head as solid facts. Whispers building into loud words, thoughts finding free reign as I force open my dry mouth, knowing the consequences will be rough if this goes wrong. "You killed your own daughter for power, mother. You are afraid. Weak. The throne hides the weapon from which you feed on power like a bloodthirsty leech – but only for so long."

She moves towards her throne, poised like a panther who's about to attack. I shoot out a beam of light from my hand, which hits her directly in the heart. She crumples to her knees and I sprint forwards, shooting another beam of light on the throne for safe measure.

An unexpected thing happens – the black obsidian falls apart, shooting out shrapnel in all directions, only to leave a small black cloth amidst the wreckage. As I look closely, it's not a cloth; it's a veil. I vaguely remember seeing something like that in my dreams. I walk towards it triumphantly.



"I must admit the veil is a clever representation of night, Nyx. Ever wondered what will happen if I shine a little light on it?"

The only response I get is a howl and a bundle of black trying to rise up from the dais. Give me some credit, people. I did manage this all alone.

Once the veil is in my hands, I'm hit with a jarring sense of darkness overpowering my senses. Black dots start clouding my vision as I fall to my knees.

I drop the cursed cloth, realizing that it may be pretty useful to Nyx, but not to me. I'm the light, it repels me. In a matter of seconds, a hobbling Nyx is on to me, pinning me in my place. I'm too weak to resist. But I can't give up. With the last ounce of strength, I reach out the veil and glow with all my might, while ripping the soft to two. A blast fills the room and I'm left unconscious, with a withering black top of me.



I wake up, half afraid that I'll be in The Chamber of Night again, but mercifully, I'm in my bed. I almost jump out of my own skin when I see Kumar by my side.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?" I scream at the top of my voice.

"Whoa, calm down! Relax, Hemera, I'm not possessed by that nasty spider. And uh ... I guess I'm sorry for knocking you out, but honestly, it was fun." Kumar grins at me idiotically and I smack him on the head.

"What happened, Kumar? How am I back on Earth?"

"Well, we both know Nyx is immortal. You just made her extremely weak and she won't be coming back for you anytime soon. I was locked up in the dungeons when the blast happened. It knocked out all of the gaurds. I didn't know you were capable of doing that, but it was so cool. I broke out and called for help – don't ask me how – and carried you back here. It was a piece of cake."

I look at my friend incredulously, "Are you bonkers? A piece of cake! I literally had to defeat the Goddess of Night single-handedly. And man, it was hard!"

Kumar actually has the audacity to say, "Eh, it was fun." Ruining his nonchalance, his stomach rumbles loudly.

I grin. "Who's up for some PB&Js?"
Without a word, Kumar dashes towards the kitchen like an excited puppy. Old habits die hard, don't they?



In Reverse

Survive

Life never seems to be on my side
Even when everyone says
it will be just fine.
I can feel
the world crumbling beneath my feet.
I look around and don't see
the light.
That is why I see nothing but
the end.
I don't want to see it,
I want to survive.

(Now read it down to up)

Prisha Kamboj

Being Happy

I am boring
And I refuse to believe that
I am a funny person
Some people find me interesting:
This is a lie!
I am nothing but a nerd
I do not think
I will be happy
In the future

And all of this will come true unless we reverse it.

Geet Valecha

There?

I'm never even there
No one makes me feel as if
I'm part of their group
They always say that
I look weird and weak
They never say
"You're so smart and sweet"
I hear whispers
about a party I wasn't invited to
I've never heard
compliments about me
I always hear
people make fun of me
so nothing can make me believe that
I'm always there

(Now read it down to up)

Pranika Garg





Toilet for a Train

Sunandini Sen

Characters

SUNANDINI
AARAV

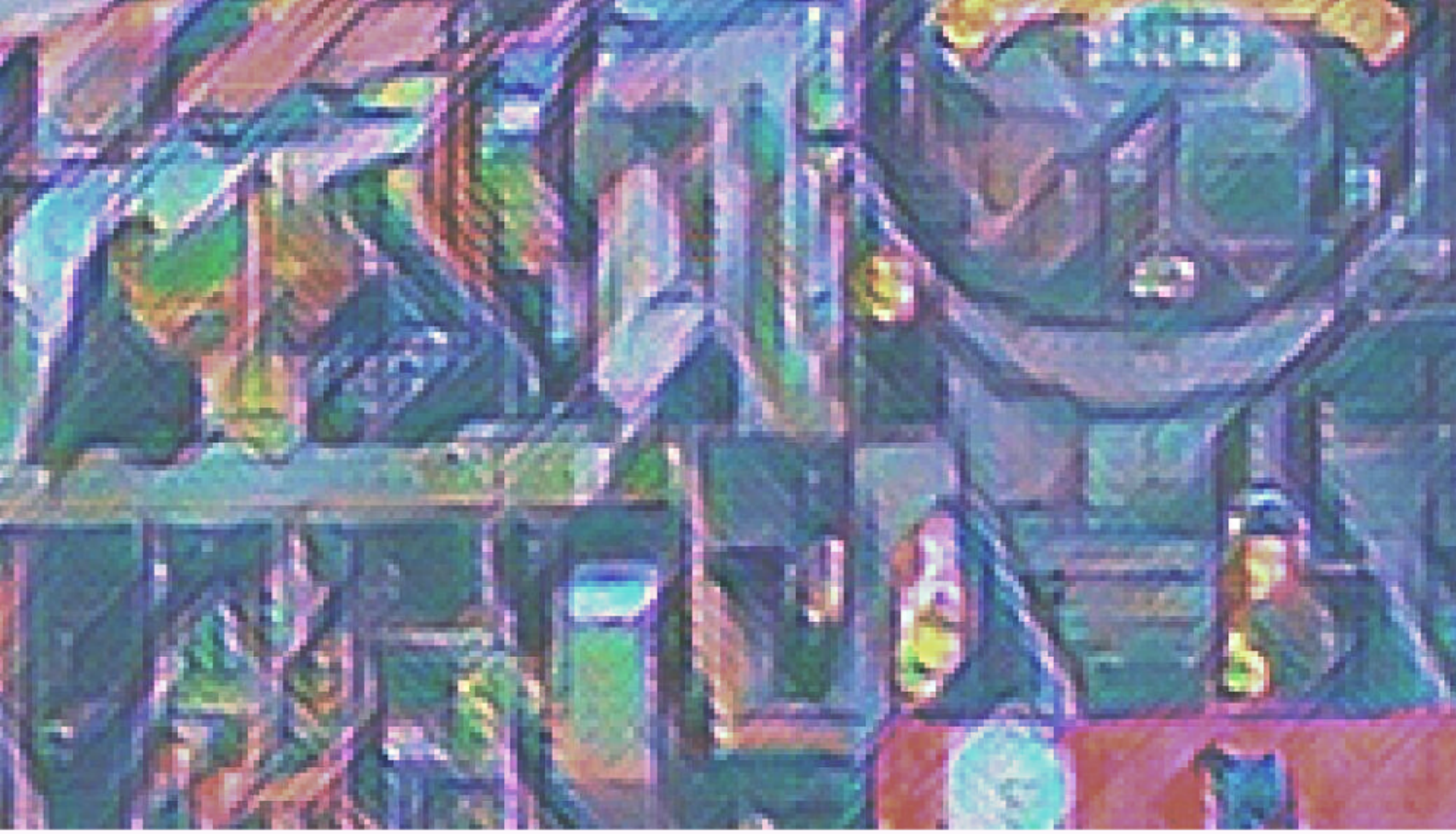
The compartment of a train, with several maroon seats against the wall. The backdrop is painted like the view from a window - a clear blue sky and green meadows. SUNANDINI stands with her arms crossed, angrily looking at AARAV, who stands beside her, looking sheepish.

SUNANDINI Ugh! Don't you ever listen to me, Aarav? I was pleading with the guard to wait; he was about to blow the whistle to signal to the train to start moving! And you were taking your own sweet time in the washroom on the platform. Don't you ever think about your friend here, who was shouting at the top of her lungs for you to come back, and was telling the guard, "Please, two minutes more, just two minutes, and he'll be back!"? What do you have to say for yourself?

AARAV **(mumbling incoherently, with his head down)** Sorry, Sunandini. I really didn't mean to take so much time.

SUNANDINI What do you mean, "Sorry"? Sorry doesn't fix everything. You know how much I was stressing and worrying about you? You ... are irresponsible! Can't be trusted with anything!

She stamps over to a seat and sits down. AARAV sits opposite her.



AARAV **(sighing)** I'm sorry, for making you worry so much. But, you've got to understand I really did have to go to the washroom, and I do take some time, you know ...

SUNANDINI **(slapping her forehead)** It wouldn't have happened if you'd just listened to me, and not been your usual stubborn self! There IS a restroom on this train and I know it!

AARAV **(hesitantly)** Well, probably not, but you never kn--

SUNANDINI There IS a washroom, you silly kid. Go and check if you don't believe me.

AARAV gets up and walks offstage. After a few seconds, he comes back and nods at SUNANDINI, grinning. There is a moment of silence as the two settle down in their seats and look out of the window.

SUNANDINI **(stretching her arms)** Did you know that 55 years after its maiden run, the East Indian Railways still didn't have washrooms? The story of why the restrooms were installed, **(chuckling)** is a truly hilarious one. I've told it so many times; I feel like it's etched in my mind!

AARAV Tell, me then! What are you waiting for?

SUNANDINI **(clearing her throat)** Okay. So, there was this Bengali man, called Babu Akhil Chandra Sen. He was travelling by train somewhere, but something quite unfortunate for him, but funny for us, happened. He even wrote an angry letter to the then transportation superintendent, Sahibgunj. The letter goes like this. "Dear Sir, I am arrive by passenger train at Ahmedpore station and

my belly is too much full of jackfruit. I am therefore go to privy. Just as I was doing the nuisance, the guard making whistle blow for train to go off. I am running with lotah in one hand and dhoti in next hand."

AARAV **(laughing)** What in the world is a lotah?

SUNANDINI It's basically like a washroom pot or a mug. Yeah, you could call it a mug. Anyway, moving on. "When I am fall over and expose all my shockings to man, females, and woman on platform. I am got leaved at Ahmedpore station. This too much bad, if passengers go to make dung, the damn guard no wait train five minutes for him?"

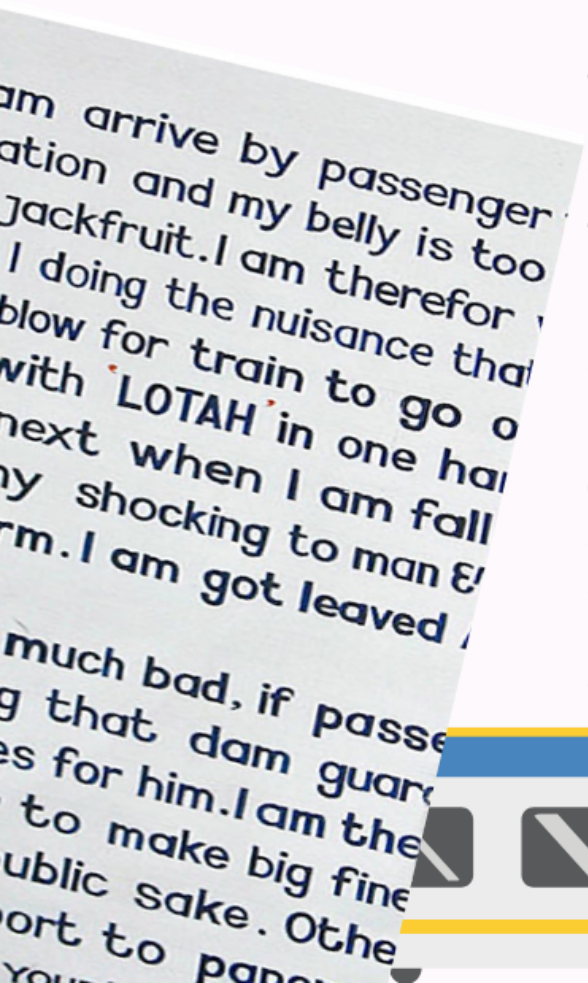
AARAV **(giggling)** Hehe! The damn guard! Make dung!

SUNANDINI Shh! Don't interrupt! "I am therefore pray your honour to make big fine on that guard for public sake. Or, I am making big report to papers. Your faithful servant, Akhil Chandra Sen."

Both SUNANDINI and AARAV collapse into a heap of helpless giggles and chuckles. They laugh for a few seconds and then calm down.

AARAV **(grinning)** Well, I certainly did NOT know that. Now, every time I recall it, I know I'm going to burst out laughing.

They smile at each other for a couple of seconds. The train rattles on.



AARAV **(relaxing in his seat)** Umm ... Sunandini, you know, I had a question, actually.

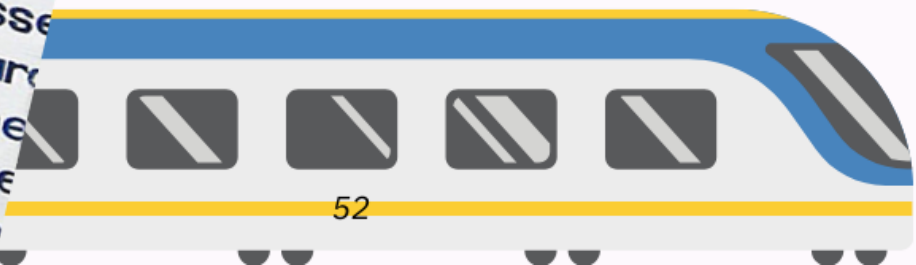
SUNANDINI Mm?

AARAV **(fingering his chin)** If this man's name was Akhil Chandra Sen, then in some way, are you, Sunandini Sen, related to him?

SUNANDINI **(laughing)** What do you think?

Both laugh again, then settle down into a comfortable silence and relax in their seats, looking out of the windows, at the horizon and the clear blue sky.

Curtain falls.



More Free Verse

Skin Deep

"I saw a monster tonight."
Well, what made it one?
The sabre-toothed grin,
or sapphire-like skin?
The devilish eyes,
the ice-cold cackle?
The intimidating glare,
or the warty head?
A heartless monster, you say!
But did you look beneath?
Beneath the ugly skin,
beneath the cold eyes,
beneath the eerie voice,
down
down
down
down into its heart?
I think not.
A veiled monster
your eyes perceived,
inhuman, surreal.
You think you know best -
Ignorant imbecile!
You let the truth escape -
the yearning for love, in its "unseeing" eyes,
for friends, in its "unfeeling" heart.
Look inside
and discover a kindness,
a warm smile,
a real person,
And not the cold-blooded monster
the world made him.

Himarsha Mulchandani

Mess Up

arms tired, bag heavy
sanguis dripping out
drip
drip
drip
children screaming,
parents worrying
what should I do now?
my vision's blurred,
fuzzy.
I hear a cry
why is he still alive?
I really messed up this time.

Pranika Garg



Midnight Venture

Pranika Garg

Characters

ALIYA, BLAIR and CAMILA - three best friends in the tenth grade

SCENE ONE

The school hallway, near the bathroom. ALIYA and CAMILA are standing near the lockers.

ALIYA We told Blair to come at 7:45 right?
CAMILA Yeah, we did.
ALIYA Then why isn't she here yet? It's almost 8:10.

A thud comes from the far left of the stage.

ALIYA That must be her.
BLAIR **(whispering offstage)** Guys, where are you?
CAMILA In the hallway, BleyBley.

Enter BLAIR.

BLAIR Sorry I'm late. I got stuck in traffic.
CAMILA You live a block away and can't drive. How much 'traffic' was there?
BLAIR Uh, Well I--
ALIYA It doesn't matter. After being so late, please tell me you brought it.
BLAIR Yup! Wait, what did I have to bring?
ALIYA Seriously?! You are so irresponsible. **(to CAMILA)** Please tell me you have it.
CAMILA Obviously I do. "By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail."
BLAIR **(rolling her eyes)** Now is not the time to be quoting Benjamin Franklin.
ALIYA At least she brought a torch.

ALIYA plays with the torch, turning it on and off a few times.

CAMILA Before we do this, what's our game plan?

BLAIR We find the tests and burn them, simple.

ALIYA What? No. We're gonna go to Mr John's office, find the file, change our scores to something a bit higher - nothing too suspicious - and then put everything back the way we found it. Got it?

CAMILA Got it.

BLAIR If you say so, but I like my idea better.



They exit the stage.

SCENE TWO

Mr John's office with the door close to the wings. Enter CAMILA, BLAIR and ALIYA. They stop at the door.

BLAIR **(trying to open the door)** It's locked.

ALIYA You really thought it wouldn't be? Let me show you how it's done.



ALIYA takes a bobby pin out of her hair and picks the lock.

CAMILA You're going to have to teach me how to do that later.

ALIYA Sure.

BLAIR If we make it out of here in one piece. If Mr John catches us, we'll be the ground beef served in the cafeteria.

CAMILA **(elbowing BLAIR)** Stop it! Happy thoughts, happy thoughts.

BLAIR You need to chill.

They enter the office, close the door and find the file they need on the desk.

BLAIR See, we already found what we need. Now what?

ALIYA I already explained the whole thing two minutes ago. Find, change, put back.



CAMILA finds each of their tests and hands it to them.

BLAIR On a scale of one to 10, how bad is 37%?
ALIYA About 11.
BLAIR Should I make it 87%?
CAMILA No offence, but he would probably get suspicious if you scored that high.
BLAIR You have a point. I'll make it 57% then.

They sit in silence for a minute, changing their scores.

ALIYA Okay, I'm done changing my score, what about you guys?
CAMILA Yup, done.
BLAIR Same.
ALIYA Let's quickly put the tests back.

They hear the door behind them open.

CAMILA **(whispering)** Please tell me only I heard that.

BLACKOUT

Acrostics



Hi I'm stuck on planet Tenla**P**
Exasperatingly enough we take ten laps every day on this planet like hel**L**
Leaving this planet is impossibl**E**
Please save me. I feel like a dog on a very tight leas**H**

Vivaan Chaudhry



socks on your hands, gloves on your feet
drones on the floor, in the sky ships meet
roads made of leaves, grass made of rocks
and just for a dime you can buy a dozen socks
water is lava, volcanoes are geysers
keep it cool, everyone's in freezers
cats taking baths and rainbows all grey
and to clear up your questions, one word i'll say –
backwards

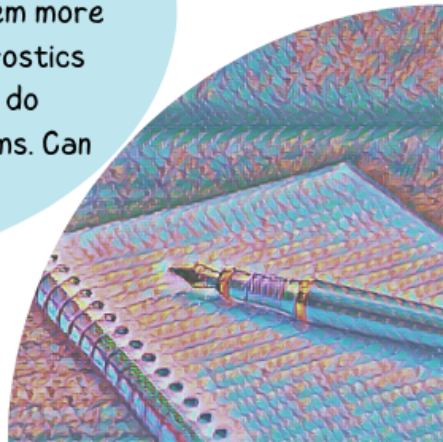
janvi barman

Art is hard! You can paint or draw
Real life or fiction
Those who practise find it simple

Ruhaan Garg

WHAT'S THIS ABOUT?

Acrostic poems are fun to write, but what can we do that makes them more fun? We began with simple acrostics and then went on to try to do something clever with our poems. Can you see what we did?



The Aunt Epidemic

Himarsha Mulchandani

Characters

SUSHIL (13)
NAVYA (25)
AUNT BATHILDA (60)
MOM (40)

The kitchen. MOM is frying samosas. The room is a mess, with all kinds of vegetables strewn across the table. SUSHIL is sitting on the kitchen slab, playing games on his iPad.

MOM Sushil, tidy up your room this instant!

SUSHIL **(agitated)** Again? I literally just did that five minutes ago, Maa. Why are you making me do this anyway? I'm pretty sure Diwali is eight months away. And that's a lot of time.

MOM Diwali is eight months away, but your aunt isn't. She's going to board her flight soon. She's coming back to India after nine years, Sushil. We should show some hospitality. Now, go clean your room. I shouldn't see a speck of dirt in the whole house. And if you shove your stuff into the cupboard like last time – believe you me, I'll ground you for one month straight.

SUSHIL I was just trying to save time!

SUSHIL starts walking back to his room. Suddenly, he turns around with a bewildered expression on his face.



SUSHIL Hold on; what do you mean "aunt"?

MOM Don't act like a five-year-old. How many aunts do you think will be coming back to India after a decade? A thousand?

SUSHIL **(frantically)** Aunt Bathilda! Call her up now! Uh … There's something important I need to tell her.

MOM What?

SUSHIL There's a ... uhm ... a hurricane! Yes, a hurricane; it's swirling around North America – waiting to gobble up Aunt Bathilda. We have to stop her now! If she boards the flight, she'll probably die!

MOM **(worried)** She'll know better. I'll call her up--

SUSHIL NO! Wait, just please tell her not to come here! I swear I'll die!

MOM **(angrily)** Now what's this dying business here? What's the matter?

SUSHIL **(nervously)** Maa, don't get angry when I say this, but it's the truth! I'm seriously allergic to Aunt Bathilda. Her perfume makes me gag! I don't know why, but every time I'm around her, I feel like I'm living my last days – the awful cookies that she bakes, Maa! They absolutely taste like hell.

Silence follows this monologue. MOM stares at SUSHIL, shaking her head at him. SUSHIL's sister, NAVYA, steps in.

MOM Oh Navya! You came at just the right time. Knock some sense into your brother, will you? He says he's allergic to Aunt Bathilda.

NAVYA **(eyes widening)** Who?

MOM **(irritated)** What's the matter with you both? I said Aunt. Bathilda.

Both the siblings quickly come to a silent agreement.

NAVYA Yes, he is right. A deadly virus is breaking out in America and our beloved Aunt might be carrying it. I'm a qualified doctor Maa. I'm well informed about all these things. This news is confidential and I'm putting my job at risk by telling all of you, but it's the truth! There's a 100% chance that she's infected with the virus.

SUSHIL **(nodding vigorously)** Yeah, that's right. I'd better call her up and tell her not to come here.

As soon as he dials Aunt BATHILDA's number, the door opens, again, only to reveal a very fat, sweaty and cranky 60-year-old with two huge suitcases and a Persian cat.

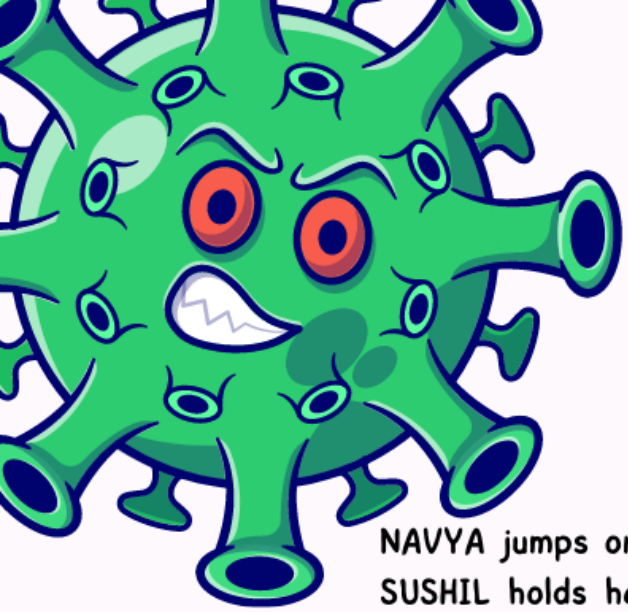
EVERYONE Aunt Bathilda!

MOM You're here early!

AUNT BATHILDA Oh yes, I might've informed you about the wrong flight. Ah! Is that delicious food I smell?

SUSHIL **(with a sneeze)** Oh no! The virus! I've caught the virus!





NAVYA The big fat VIRUS is in our room, people! Mom, hurry, you'll get infected too! Everyone, hide inside your rooms. It's time the doctor stepped in.

AUNT BATHILDA **(confused)** What's happening? Why is everyone--AAAAH!

NAVYA jumps onto her aunt with a sanitiser spray in her gloved hands. SUSHIL holds her cat and ties BATHILDA's hands with her own scarf. NAVYA gags her with a mask.

SUSHIL **(triumphantly)** The virus has been contained.

MOM **(horrified)** What have you done?

NAVYA We were all in danger! You couldn't just expect me stand there and watch Sushil die, could you? Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to study the virus. I'll be taking our beloved aunt to the lab, where I'm sure she'll get her fair share of Indian samosas. Wait there, young lady--

MOM There's no stopping a determined doctor, Mom. Aunt Bathilda will be gone and we'll

SUSHIL all be fine.

NAVYA exits the stage with a terrified Aunt BATHILDA alongside her.
Blackout.
A few seconds later, a spotlight focuses on NAVYA and SUSHIL having a conversation in hushed tones in the middle of the stage.



SUSHIL That was some awesome acting, today, Navya! What did you do with her?

NAVYA Oh I just threatened her with a few injections and sent her back to America. It was quite easy, you know. A few of my friends at the lab supported me so we all got her to believe that she really has a virus! Awesome! I just hope she doesn't come back

SUSHIL for the next few hundred years.

Curtains fall.

In Reverse

What's in a book?



You can't see the world if your nose is in a book.
I refuse to believe that
books are a portal, to life and beyond.
I know
When those printed pages call out to me,
I should just look away and roll my eyes at those lies
I one-hundred percent agree when people say that
"Books are a waste of money, a waste of time."

(Now read it from the bottom to the top)

Advika Gupta

Imagination



Imagination is an utterly useless thing.
It is a lie that
Creativity helps us solve world problems.
The sensible know that
Magic and fantasy are only for children
So people have to stop saying that
Creative thinking matters!
I believe that
Fantasy can't take us places
And I refuse to accept that
Creativity and magic are empowering,
Actually, the truth, when brought to light, is that
Magic and fantasy will never help us in real life, they are just stupid!
I shall shout out into the world and object to the idea,
Imagination, creativity, and fantasy matters.

(Now read it from the bottom to the top)

Sunandini Sen

A Capsule of Happiness

Sunandini Sen

"Anya!" Mum calls from the living room. "Come here, please!"

Startled, I spill orange juice over my homework. "Oh shucks," I mumble and grab a few wads of tissue paper to clear it up.

"Are you coming or not, Anya?" Mum scolds. I roll my eyes and trudge into the living room. Mum pats the space next to her on the sofa. I plop down beside her, as she turns to me. "Anya," she begins, slowly. "I think you're hiding something from me."

I bite my lip. Oh no, has she found out already? I stopped taking the pills very recently, about a few weeks back. I know I am not supposed to experiment with this kind of stuff, but, for ever so long, every time I was about to take the pill, a voice spoke in my mind, whispering "No". Kind of like a sixth sense.

Normally, I'd ignore this voice as some nonsense, but one day, I decided I'd listen to it. The more I paid attention to the voice, the more I understood it.

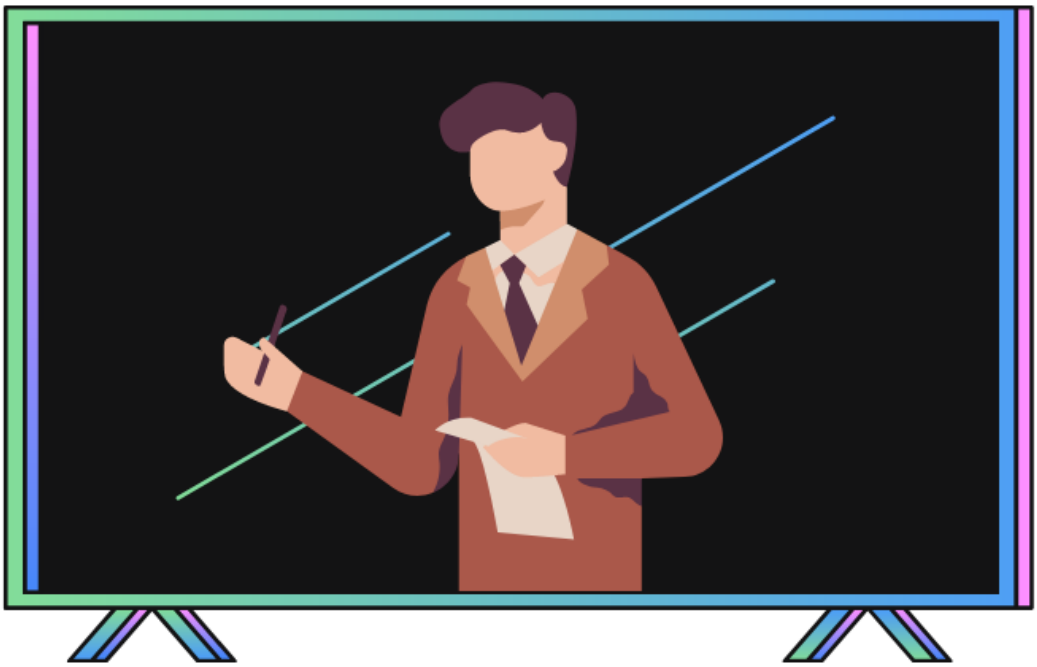
Then I stopped taking the pills.



"No," I reply. "Why would I hide anything?"

Mum's about to possibly answer shrewdly, when the flat-screen television sparks to life, opening a news program of a man announcing something very important.

Mum stares intently at the screen, drinking in every word the presenter utters.



"Ugh!" I huff in annoyance at Mum's obsession with the news, though, secretly, I'm overjoyed. Another minute of Mum's investigation would've killed me.

I turn to the screen only when the man declares the government has scheduled a blood test tomorrow, and medical officials will visit the locality of Damacia for a mass testing of all residents for traces of important pills in their blood. If these traces are not found, the guilty shall be taken away for counselling and rehabilitation in a special home.

My breath hitches in my throat. Oh great, the government totally HAD to schedule this test tomorrow. What shall I do now? If I take the pill today, they'll still catch me; traces of the medication won't be as deep in my blood as the others who take it regularly.

"Alright, enough thinking about the test tomorrow," Mum says, getting up and dusting her pants. "Time for dinner." I silently walk behind her, my mind whirring. I am about to take my dish to my room, when she stops me with a smile.

"What are you doing? I'm just going to my room to eat," I say, trying to move away from her.

She replies gently, "Honey, it's been a long time since we ate dinner together. I feel like it'd be nice for us to spend some quality time, you know. So, let's eat! I made your favorite today, broccoli and cheese!"

I try to smile and follow her to the table. What shall I do now? First, the blood test tomorrow, and now dinner with Mum! Honestly, I don't mind eating with her, but the end, when we take the pill is the only reason why I've avoided eating with her over the past week, making up all kinds of excuses.

As if I don't have enough problems already. If I get exposed in the test, everything's over for me. God knows where they'll drag me to! A rehabilitation center? I'd rather eat dog poop for an entire week!

The entire meal passes in awkward silence. When we are almost at the end, I begin to panic and fidget. Mum, being Mum, notices, and asks me quietly if there's something I want to tell her. I shake my head vigorously.



As Mum clears the plates, I worry, my elbows resting on the table. Should I take the pill? Or should I just tell Mum whatever has been happening? No, I decide against it. Who knows how she'll react?

As Mum sits down, I gulp and sit up, ramrod straight, waiting for the white pill box to emerge from behind her back. Waiting for her to pass me those pale pink Happy Pills.

But it doesn't.

Mum says, very quietly, "I know." There's pin drop silence in the room.

Then, the entire truth comes out of my mouth, as I explain. How I used to take the Happy Pills, but had nagging doubts. How the voice inside my head convinced me that it was wrong, how I stopped, and the lengths to which I went, to make sure no one suspected a thing. And how, tomorrow, the officials would come, and I'd be exposed.

Mum explains too, "I noticed changes in your behaviour, and at first, I didn't say anything because I thought you were just growing up, and this was a phase of change. But later, I realised, you weren't as happy as the others; you weren't as optimistic. You were just …" she struggles. "Different. Unique. Honestly, I wasn't sure whether you were taking them or not, until now. But I'm glad, and proud, that my daughter could see something I couldn't. That she could stand up for her beliefs, and speak up in her own way," she ends, looking at me.

"Yeah, that's great and all, but what about tomorrow? They'll surely take me away to some rehab center!" I say, wringing my hands. "It's hopeless!"

Mum bites her nails, and thinks for a while, as the silence stretches. Then, her eyes light up and she says, "I've got it! You'll have to run away."

I arch my eyebrows and remark, chuckling, "Interesting."

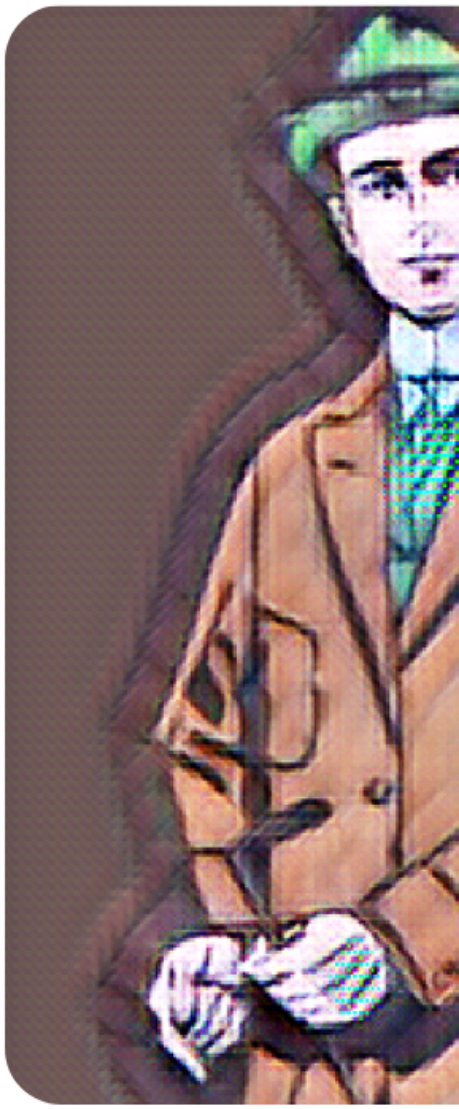
She answers firmly, "Do you think I'm joking? I mean it." I'm taken aback by her hardened voice. Run away? Why, that's ridiculous. I voice my thoughts.

"No," she says, shaking her head. "Let me explain."

"I'm listening," I reply, my elbows on the table.

We talk late into the night.

The next day



The doorbell rings as I get up, smoothening the creases in my skirt. I sigh deeply. This is the moment when I'll need all my acting skills. I'm not doing this just for Anya, but also for myself. Ok, here goes nothing.

I open the door, a fake smile plastered on my face. "Good morning, sirs. Do come in, what would you like to drink? Tea or coffee or juice?" I ask, my voice, almost robotic.

The two men, dressed in brown suits, barge in, and shove me out of the way. "We don't need anything. Just sit down and get ready for the blood test!" one man says, roughly. I take a deep breath and sit down on a chair.

In a few minutes, it's over. "You're fine!" the other man barks, looking at a strange device. "All traces of designated medications are there! Now, where is the girl?"

I turn around and call, "Anya! Anya? They are here to take your blood test! Come now, no need to be shy!" I repeatedly call her for a few minutes, but when it becomes clear she's not in the house, the men march grimly about, searching everywhere. They even use a tracker, but they can't find her.

After a while, one man tells the other, "We can't find the girl. Where could she possibly be?" He glances at his watch. "But we have to get going, there are a lot of other people to test, Boss told us to be back by afternoon, and it's nearly time."



The other shouts at him, "Keep quiet! We will find that girl, or her mother will tell us!" He turns to look me, dangerously.

"I don't know where she is either, the poor girl," I weep. "Sir, please help me find her! She's probably gone off somewhere; maybe she ran away!" I say, dabbing my eyes. "After all, where could I possibly hide her, you've searched everywhere!"

The men look at me suspiciously, and then say, "We'll send out search parties for the girl. If you find any clues, report them to us! We'll be back."

And they leave, slamming the door behind them.

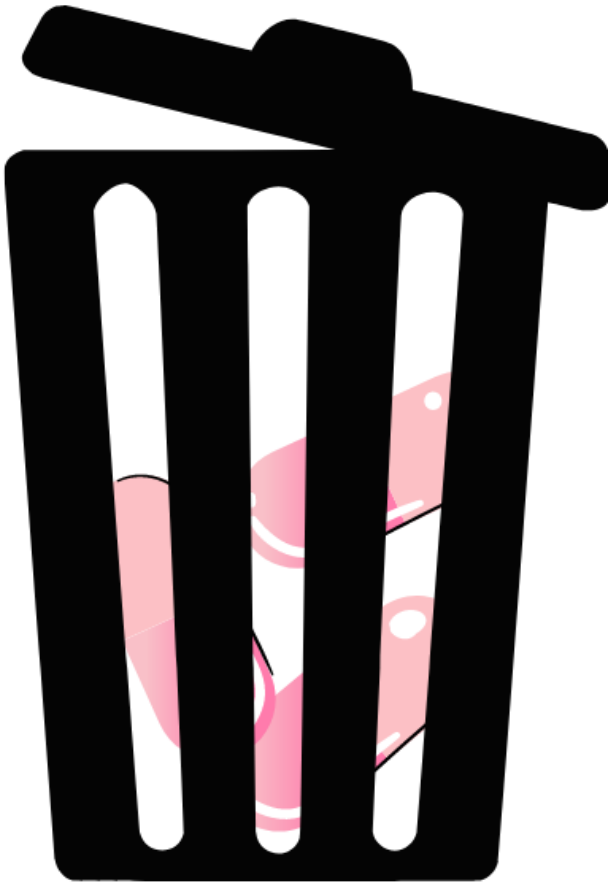
I sigh as I collapse onto the couch. Oh Anya, I hope she'll be safe with my friend. I probably won't see her again, in this month, or maybe even this year. A message from her will, hopefully, arrive soon.

I walk to the medicine cabinet, almost lethargic, with the muscles in my face aching from smiling so much. I take out the white pill box and consider my decision. Should I be doing this? Am I being responsible?

I give a tiny smile as a clear voice, Anya's voice, speaks in my mind, "You're doing the right thing. Go ahead, Mum."

I carry the box into the kitchen, and hesitate yet again.

Nope, I decide. Still going to do it. "Okay, here goes nothing!" I say, and drop the box into the dustbin. It has always sickened me. "Buh-bye!" I whisper. "See you never."

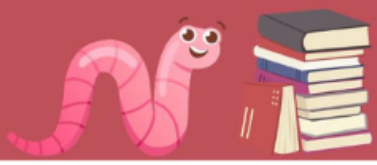


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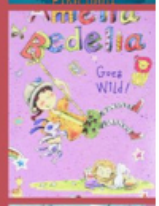


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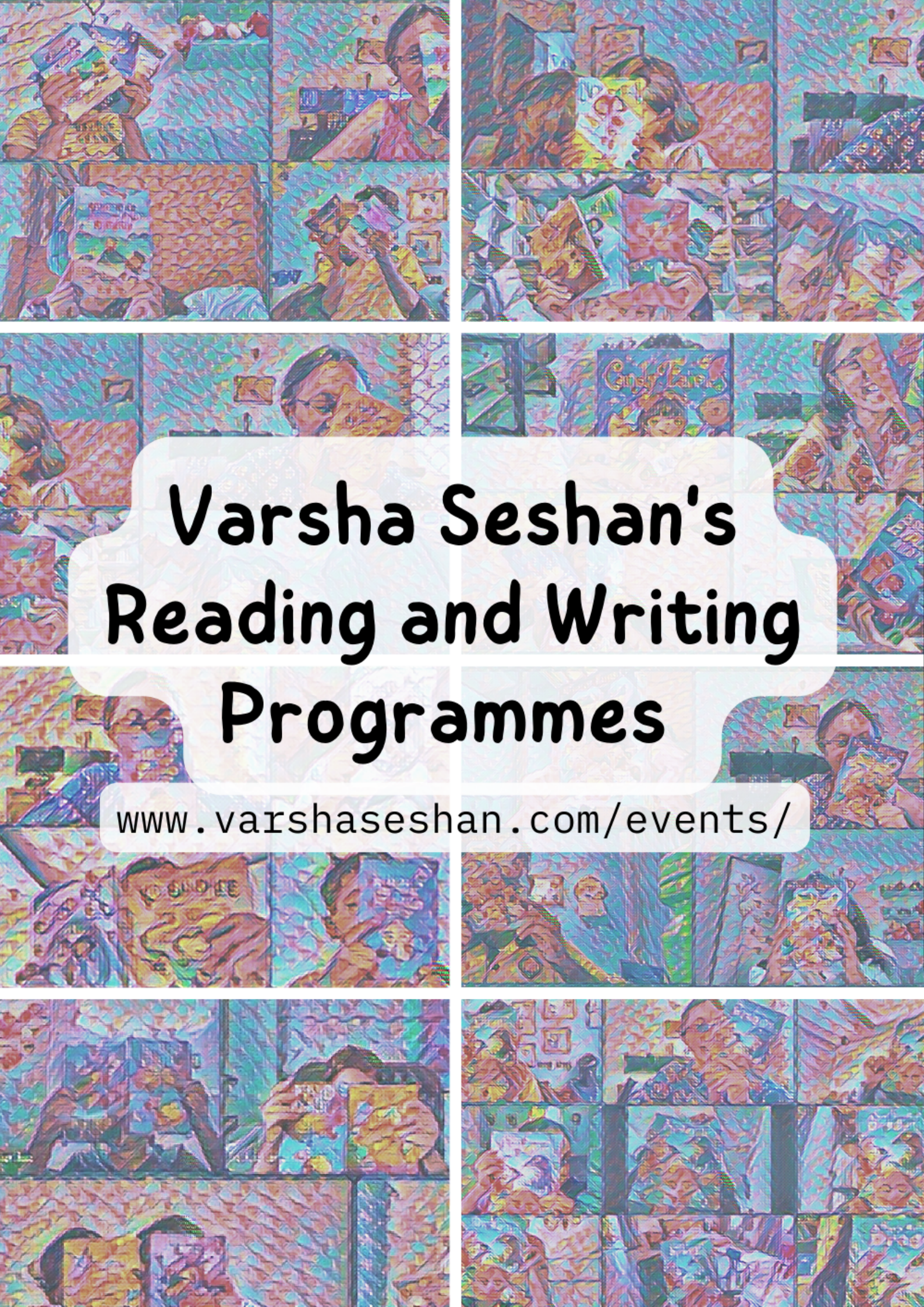




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