

VARSHA SESHAH'S ONLINE CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAMME

WORDS

ISSUE 8 | JANUARY 2026

Poetry | Nonfiction | Stories



All by writers aged 9-15

Meet the Writers

My name is **Aarav Khandelia**
I've been to Finland and Kenya and even Virginia
Beaches and mountains, those I adore
I love new places, and I like to explore

my parents named me **aarya**,
i really despise papayas,
but i'll say yes to bell peppers,
did you know that i've lived eleven septembers?

Hi, I'm **Enya Roshan**.
I talk in fast-forward, but work in slow-motion.
I love to read and I love to eat.
So, you can always lure me with a book or a treat.

Nice to meet you, my name is **Maya**
If reading is dying out among the young, I could be considered its messiah
I couldn't stop writing even if I tried
And if somebody insults my favourite book, trust me, I won't let it slide.

What kind of poetry is this?

Clerihews are humorous 4-line poems that have an AABB rhyme scheme. The first line of the poem must end with a person's name, so it is a fun way to introduce yourself! Interestingly, the clerihew is that rare rhyming poem that doesn't follow a specific meter. In fact, irregular meter and forced rhyme are used deliberately to add humour!

I am **Meher**

You know the capital of India, I was born there
I love netball, singing, drawing and painting
If I ever bumped into Frida Kahlo, I would be fainting

I'm **Rishik**,

An aspiring psychic,
I tried to use the force,
But I only made chai, without the force, of course.

Ronikaa Vijan,

To whom books, writing and music are religion,
Her hair is always up in a messy bun,
For her, lighting a candle and reading for four hours straight is fun.

Hello there, greetings, my name is **Shlok**

If it's boring, don't be surprised if I tell a dad joke

My hobbies include reading, writing and playing table tennis
Please be my friend, I promise I won't be a menace!

You can call me **Sunandini Sen**

I've joined this workshop once again
Reading Greek tragedies is quite exciting
This girl can't go a day without writing.

The name's **Zaheer**,

I don't know what I am going to do with my career.
I'm as nimble as a fox,
I think outside the box!



VARSHA SESHAN

**AUTHOR
CREATIVE WRITING TRAINER**

Hello!

Welcome to issue eight of our e-magazine! Flip through the pages to read poetry and stories, as well as (for the first time) audio guides. Humour is a big part of our writing programme, so I'm sure you'll find pieces here that make you laugh.

Once more, I had to deal with AI-generated material, but I have done my best to ensure that this issue comprises only pieces written by humans. Unfortunately, I am fairly certain, that they aren't entirely AI-free. From em-dashes to formatting, AI has certainly been used to edit some of these pieces. C'est la vie!

Happy reading, nonetheless!

POETRY

6-8

Clerihews

The clerihew was invented by Edmund Clerihew Bentley in 1905 when he was just 15 years old! Read a range of clerihews some about famous people and others about fictional characters.

9-13

Free Verse: A Gift from Nature

What if you could gift something abstract from the natural world to someone you love? What would you gift and why? And to whom would you choose to offer this beautiful gift?

14-16

Free Verse: after “The Pond” by Hugh Dunkerley

Someone has invaded your home! And no, they’re not a robber. But they do have a set of demands ...

17-19

Tanka

What could the word “play” refer to? Inspired by the theme of National Poetry Day (UK), we wrote tankas about music, sport, drama, and more!

Clerihews about real people



Barack Obama,
bet he doesn't own a llama.
he has dogs named Sunny and Bo,
after him was Trump, then a man named Joe.

Aarya Jain Baldawa



Sabrina Carpenter,
Couldn't have been younger,
When she got under the spotlight,
Blonde hair, blue eyes, pop princess, that's right.

Ronikaa Vijan



LeBron James,
He played too many games,
He shot and scored,
Then he promptly got bored.

Rishik Halan

Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj
Separated his empire from the Deccan collage.
Guerrilla warfare was his super tool
to make the enemy look like a fool.

Enya Roshan Fraz



Gracie,
A ray of sunshine, like a daisy,
Even though sad girl music writing and bows are her thing,
A Swiftie by heart, now on the Eras Tour, with Taylor Swift she sings.

Ronikaa Vijn



The fans of J K Rowling
needed a lot of consoling.
First she sent Dumbledore to heaven
and then ended the story at book number seven.

Enya Roshan Fraz

The Jewish girl Anne Frank
rebelled against all the tanks
She wrote a dairy that told us her pain
Of war, and the families lost in vain

Aarav Khandelia



Clerihews about fictional characters

Avery,
A character oozing with bravery,
Mind working faster than a high speed cordless drill,
Who inherits forty six point two billion dollars, in a complicated will.

Ronikaa Vijan

Winnie the Pooh
Played with his crew
He loved eating honey
Which everyone found very funny

Young Grover Underwood
Did the very best he could.
He loved enchiladas and a good tin can
And he was Percy Jackson's biggest fan

Meher Kumar

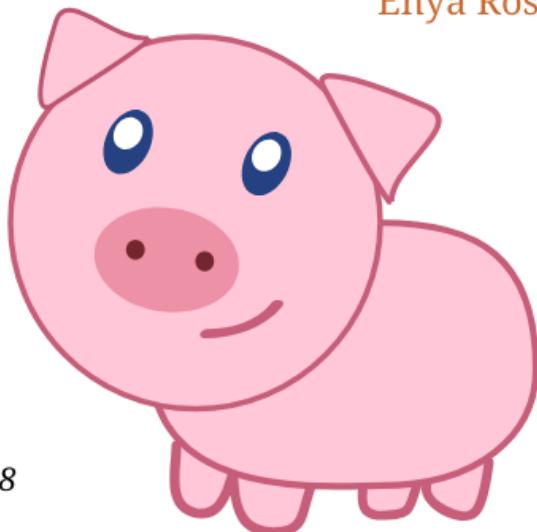
Shlok Balamurugan

Have you heard of Peppa Pig?
Just admit you have ... don't pretend to be too big.
She's someone who babies love to watch.
But even grown-ups think she's top notch.

His name is Peter Griffin,
He always eats his tiffin,
One day he got a coffin,
In which he slept quite often!

Zaheer Vakeel

Enya Roshan Fraz



Free Verse

A Gift from Nature

My friend, here is an autumn leaf for you.

I found it under a tree in the woods,
The others crunching under my boots.
I chose this one with eccentric edges,
And delightful hues of orange and red,
So it always tilts your lips towards the sun.

My friend, here are three dew drops for you,

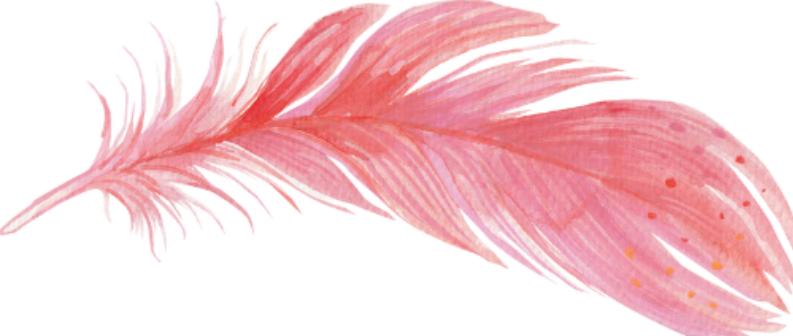
Slid off of a leaf at the crack of dawn,
Glinting as the sunlight kisses the dew,
So you will always have some morning calm with you.

Here, my friend, are the sounds of a forest for you,
The chirping of birds, the water flowing downstream, rustling of leaves,
All trapped in a jar,
So you will always have something to escape the hustle of the world.

Take these as my gifts:
Autumn leaf, dew drops, sounds of the forest,
For you, my friend, always

Ronikaa Vijan

All these nature poems came from an exercise I found online. Following a template, participants wrote a poem as a gift from the natural world to a loved one. You can find the original poem and prompt here - <https://www.educationnaturepark.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-09/KS3%20Writing%20the%20World%20Activity%20Guide.pdf>



My friend, here is an egg for you
It is smooth and soft, making you a promise of the future
So you will always remember
It's never too late to start over.

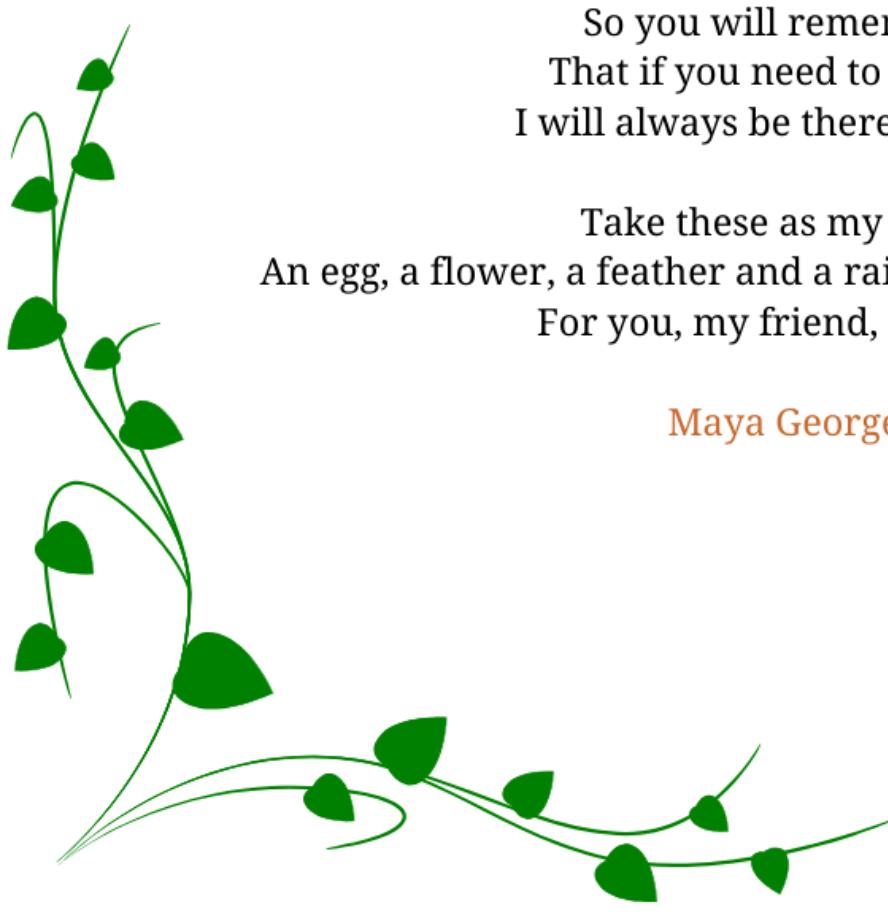
My friend, here is a flower for you,
It is bright and sparkling with morning dew
So you will always hold a piece of your vibrant personality
In your hands.

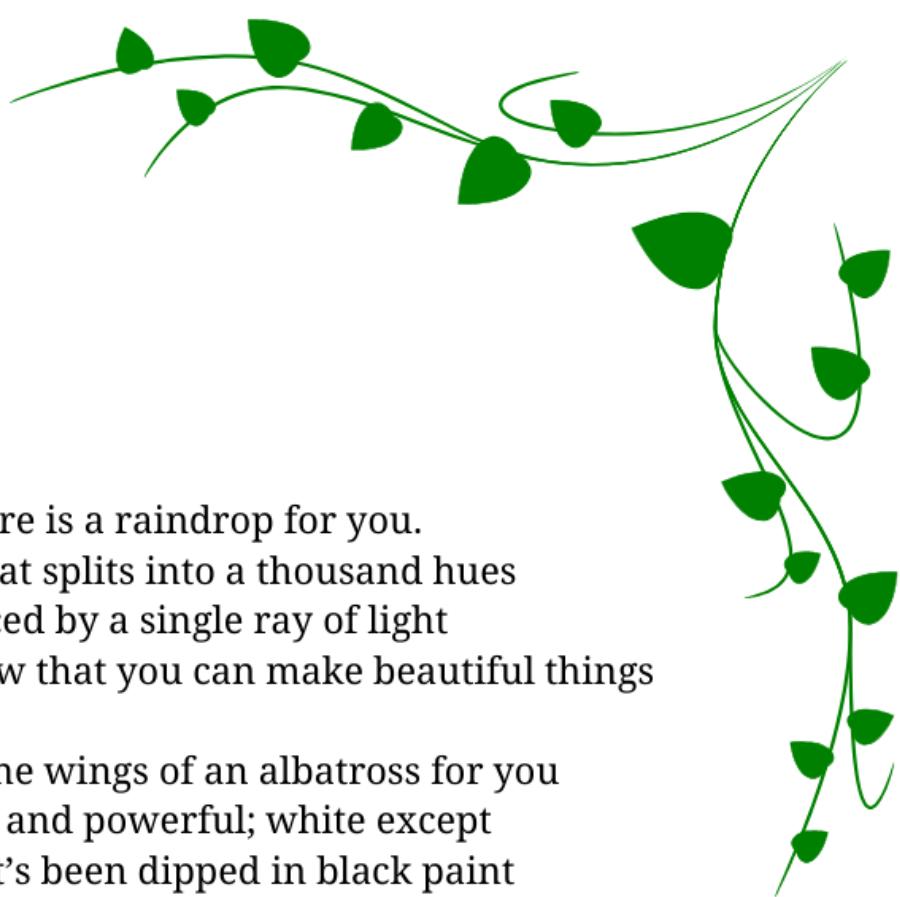
My friend, here is a raindrop, stopped in time
It is a reminder of time long spent
So you will always stay lost in the memories
Of our friendship that may have passed so many years ago.

My friend, here is a feather.
It escaped from a bird so many years ago,
So you will remember
That if you need to escape
I will always be there for you.

Take these as my gifts:
An egg, a flower, a feather and a raindrop stopped in time.
For you, my friend, always.

Maya George





Varsha, here is a raindrop for you.
It is a crystal that splits into a thousand hues
When pierced by a single ray of light
So you will always know that you can make beautiful things

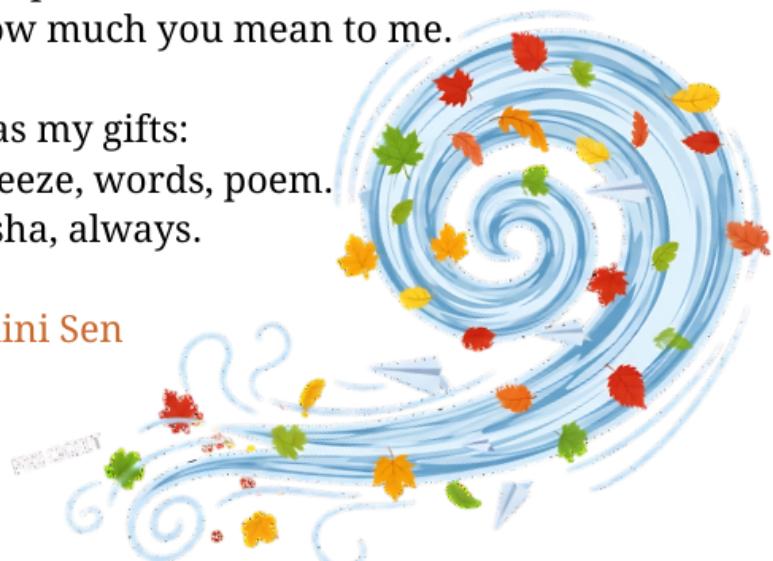
Varsha, here are the wings of an albatross for you
Sleek, smooth and powerful; white except
The edge, as if it's been dipped in black paint
So you will always be able to fly wherever you wish to

Here, Varsha, is a breeze for you
Charming and playful, it likes to stir things up
It'll wrap yourself around you
So you will have a friend with you wherever you go

Varsha, these are some words for you
Either adorned with emotion, or chains holding things together
All of them have been painted with truth
So you will never forget how much you mean to me.

Take these as my gifts:
Raindrop, wings, breeze, words, poem.
For you, Varsha, always.

Sunandini Sen



This one is special to me for obvious reasons!

Papa, here is the snowcapped peak of Everest for you,
So you will always remember the heights you've reached
and things you've achieved.

Papa, here is the city of Kolkata for you,
So you will never forget the experiences you and I have had there.

At the iconic Victoria Memorial,
whilst tourists were rushing to get a photo.

At Bura Baazar,
hearing all the vendors shouting for your attention,
and seeing the vibrant colours on display.

Here, Papa, here is the rocky face of a mountain for you,
Rugged, with barely any handholds,
So you will always remember that no challenge is impossible.

Take these as my gifts:
Kolkata, Everest's peak, the rocky face of a mountain, poem.
For you, Papa, always.

Rishik Halan



Papa, here is fluffy frigid snow for you
fresh from the vast meadows of Dayara Bugyal
Its cold, powdery form is what makes it so fun
So you will always remember those enjoyable times walking through the clouds

Papa, here is a puppy for you
Its pink tongue shall remind you that I love to prank you
That you are never safe from my tickling arms
So you will always have a laugh



Here, Papa, is Seattle for you
I know this was your home, so let it be again
So you will never let the old times run away

Take these as my gifts:
Snow, a puppy, Seattle and a poem,
For you, Papa, always

Aarav Khandelia

Mira, here is a bouquet of sweet lavender for you.
I gathered it in the summertime, from valleys painted in purple hues,
so that you will always have the beauty of the mountain summer at hand.

Mira, here is a pocketful of sand,
which shimmers like a billion stars,
so that you never forget the millions of sparkling, giggling moments we've shared.

Here, Mira, is a little shell for you.
It's the tiniest shell I've ever seen, yet perfect, just like you.

Take these as my gifts:
lavender, sand and a tiny shell,
for you Mira, always.

Enya Roshan Fraz



Free Verse

after “The Pond” by Hugh Dunkerley

This was a fun, playful exercise inspired by “Play”, the theme for National Poetry Day (UK) 2025. We read Hugh Dunkerley’s imaginative poem “The Pond” and then worked on a similar idea. What if something from nature (or the city) entered your house? What signs would you see? What would it tamper with? And how would it hold you to ransom?

Have fun reading these creative, playful poems!



In Which the Pine Tree Escaped

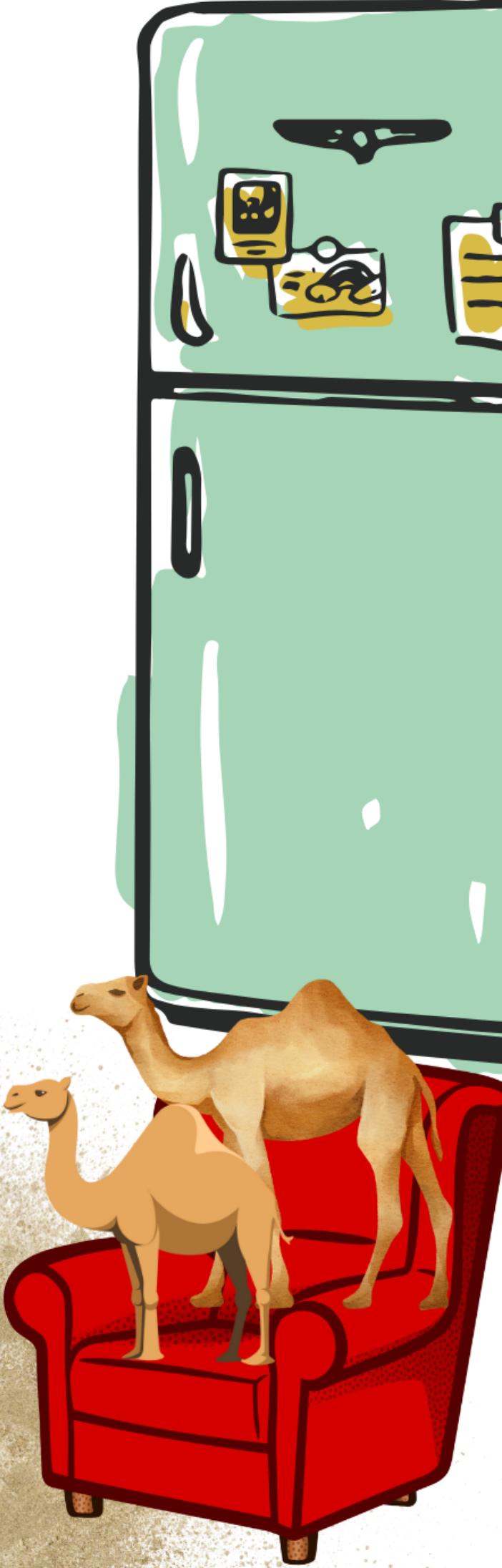
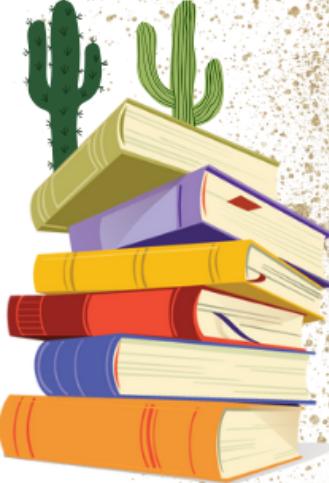
While we were gone today,
The pine tree, fed up
With being left outside
Broke in through the back door
It stomped around the house
Leaving moss here,
Spiders there,
And a little squirrel, clinging to the arm-chair
It must have been in the bath
The taps were thorny
And Dad’s wildlife books
Were all over the floor
Covered in pine needles
What’s more, the book I was meaning to read
Had been tampered with
And someone, or something,
Had flipped to the first chapter
It’s back in the great pine forest, now
But what’s more disturbing
Is the message we found
Scrawled on the fridge door
If you want to see your cats again ...
Then a list of demands
Including the book in question,
A blanket for the squirrel,
A box of sour candy
And the next book in the series.

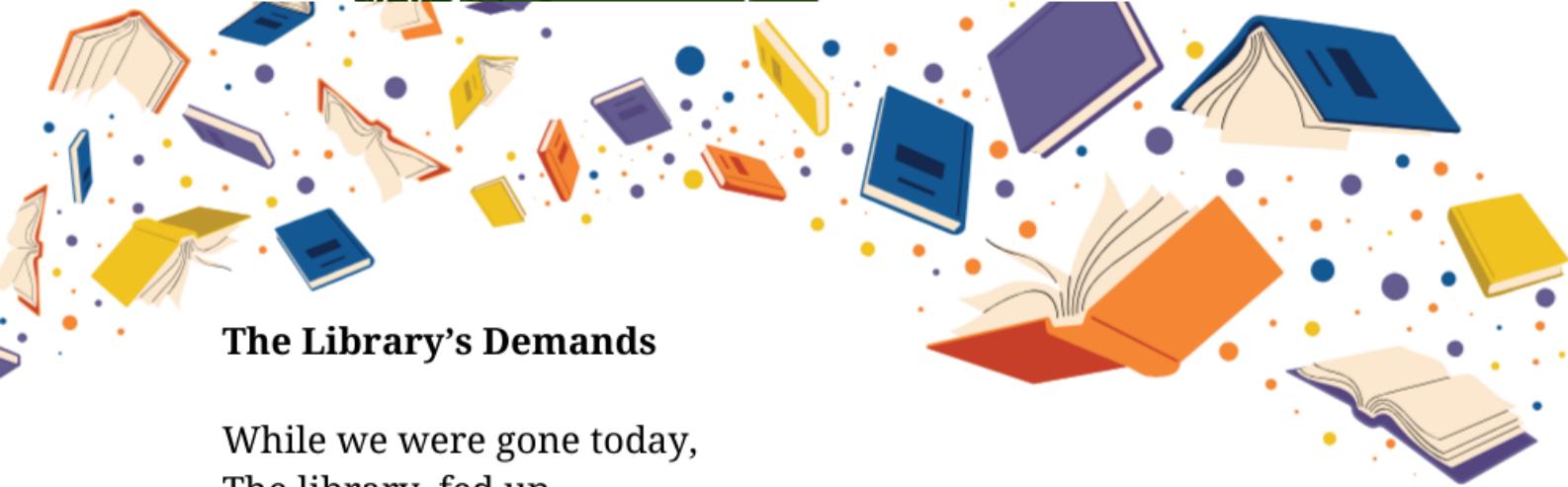
Maya George

The Desert that Came into the House

While we were gone today
the desert, fed up
with being left outside,
broke in through the back door.
It slid round the house,
leaving sand here,
dunes there,
and camels on the armchair.
It must have been in the bath—
the taps were clogged with sand—
and Dad's wildlife books
were all over the floor,
covered in cacti.
What's more, my Switch
had been tampered with
and someone, or something,
had finished Super Mario Odessey for me!
It's back in the wilderness now,
but what's more disturbing
is the message we found
scrawled on the fridge door:
If you want to see Papa again ...
then a list of demands
including more Switch time,
more time to play football,
more TV time,
and a lot more books to read.

Rishik Halan



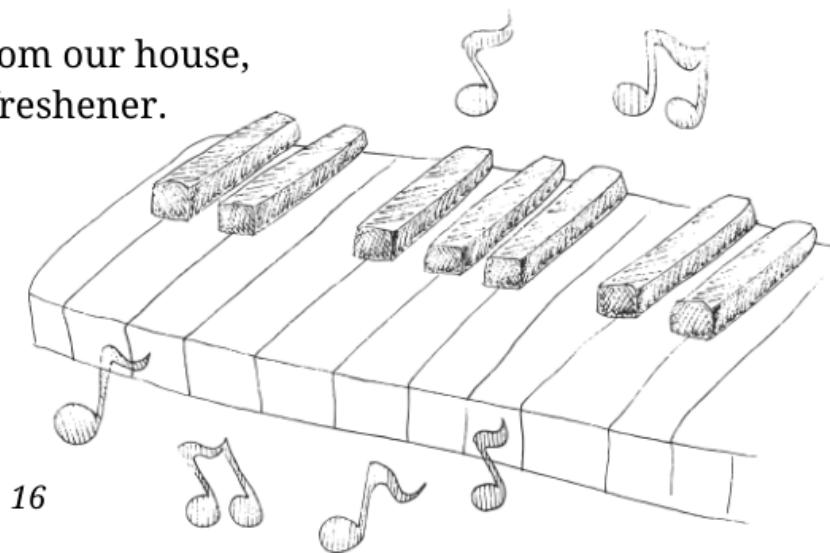


The Library's Demands

While we were gone today,
The library, fed up
With being left outside,
Broke in through the back door.
It shuffled round the house,
Leaving silence here,
Shelves there,
Tomes on the armchair.
It must have been in the bath—
The taps were dusty—
And Dad's wildlife books
were all over the floor,
Covered in manuscripts.
What's more, my piano
Had been tampered with
And someone, or something
Had played Waltz no. 2 by Dmitri Shostakovich on it.

It's back on the other side of the street now,
But what's more disturbing
Is the message we found
Scrawled on the fridge door.
If you want to see Pippi again ...
Then a list of demands
Including one thousand books,
As many shelves as it'd like,
The banning of Math books from our house,
And some lemon-scented air freshener.

Sunandini Sen



Tankas

based on the theme “Play”

She rips through the house
Her hands leaving messy prints
She's but a small child
With a kind of laugh which can
Only come from being young.

Maya George

Blocks and blonde Barbies,
Towering pink dollhouses,
Cute plushies with bows,
All taken away from me,
As soon as I turned thirteen.

Ronikaa Vijnan

I play sports and games,
Tag, basketball, badminton,
Thrilling, lively, fun,
Although playing tires me,
I am always up for it.

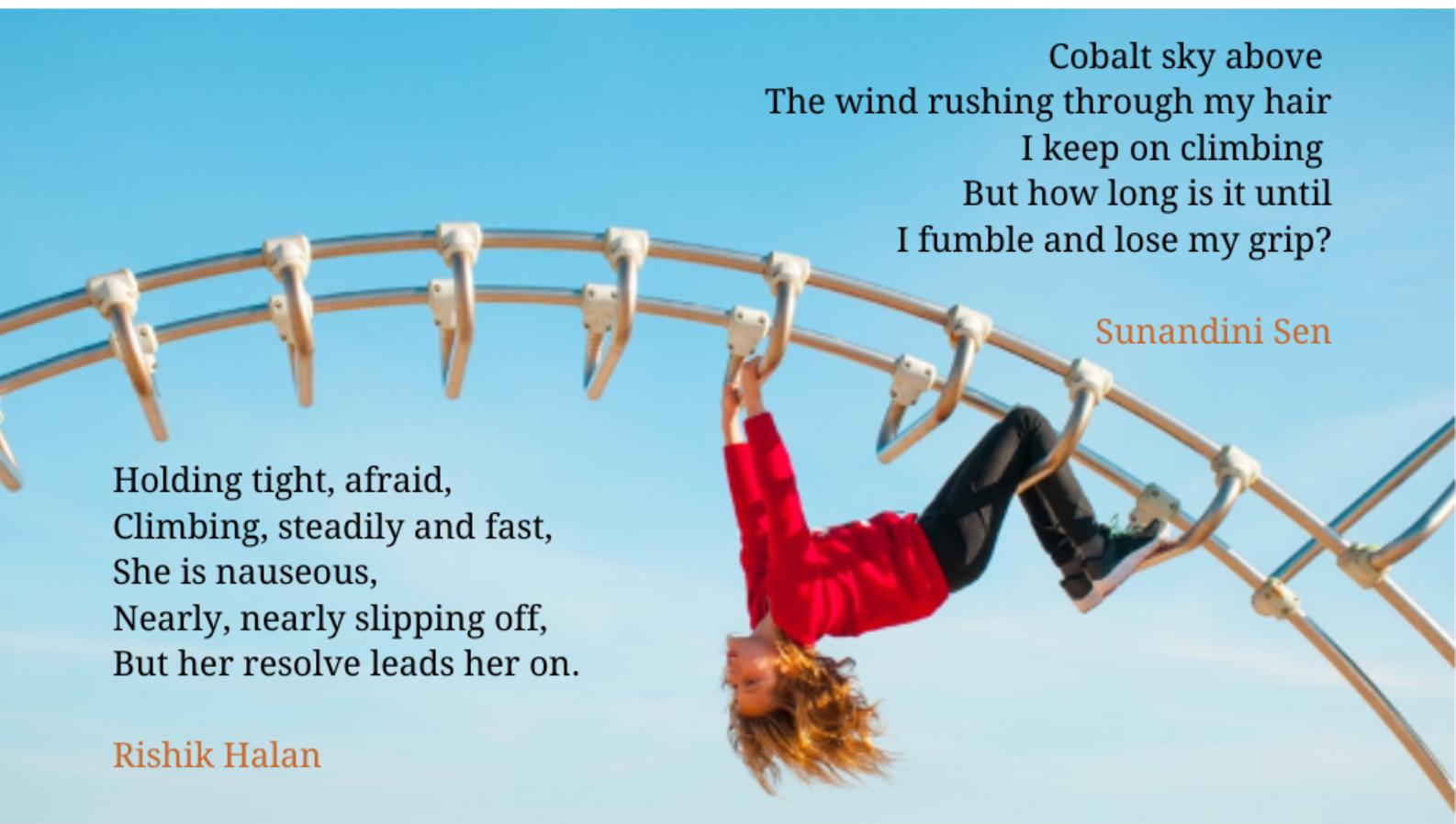
Rishik Halan

Jumping really loud
Water splashes; love that sound
Playing with my friends
Fun and games never will end
Why wait? Come now, play with me!

Meher Kumar

Cobalt sky above
The wind rushing through my hair
I keep on climbing
But how long is it until
I fumble and lose my grip?

Sunandini Sen



Holding tight, afraid,
Climbing, steadily and fast,
She is nauseous,
Nearly, nearly slipping off,
But her resolve leads her on.

Rishik Halan



Timidly she plays
Her flute enchants everyone
Music is alive
When she sets the music free
The music sets her free too

Music crescendos
Fingers gliding across keys,
Colours exploding,
I float amidst harmonies.
“Keep it down!” Dad snaps at me.

Enya Roshan Fraz

Sunandini Sen

A Day in the Life of a Sock Puppet

Eyes, nose, mouth, ears, hands
Glue, tape, scissors, ouch, that hurts
Ew, not on the hands
Don't kids know? Socks are for feet
We protect toes, not fingers

I used to be a
Plain old boring stinky sock
Just the way I like
Now I'm meant to talk and walk
This makes my owner happy

I play and I sweat
And life is fun but tiring
Jumping and running
Makes me want to cry with pain
Just a few more years, I say

Aarav Khandelia



Hamlet, retold by Hamlet in a casual manner

They call me Hamlet.
I was born to play a part
in this tragedy.
My uncle killed my father,
poured poison into his ear.



I acted crazy
to find out facts and truth.
There was a problem.
They thought I was in love.
In love with Ophelia.

My uncle worried,
his courtiers spied on me.
But I saw something:
proof that Uncle is guilty.
I went to confront my mum.

Killed a guy instead.
He wasn't my uncle, though.
I went to England,
they tried to execute me.
Surprisingly, I escaped.

My Ophelia
now knew I killed her father.
So, she drowned herself.
Her brother tried to kill me.
We fought at her funeral.

Poisoned swords and wine.
I stabbed him, then he stabbed me.
We apologised.
And then, I stabbed my uncle.
Finally, we all die. Yay.

Aarya Jain Baldawa





DELIGHTFULLY TRUE

A Workshop on Writing Creative Non-Fiction

with Mallika Ravikumar



Varsha Seshan's Online Creative Writing Programme
Guest Session #32

NONFICTION

22-32 Personal Narratives

Unexpected Joy - Maya George
(Not) Following Instructions - Shlok Balamurugan
A Forced Meal - Sunandini Sen
Fighting Fear - Aarav Khandelia
A New World - Enya Roshan Fraz
Push, Glide, Repeat ... - Meher Kumar

33-53 Audio Guides

The Khandelia Home - Aarav Khandelia
The Baldawa Home - Aarya Jain Baldawa
Zaheer's School - Zaheer Vakeel
Shlok's School - Shlok Balamurugan
A Clubhouse in an Ordinary Neighbourhood - Ronikaa Vijn
Ratindra Smriti - Sunandini Sen
Humayun's Tomb - Maya George

54-62 Humorous Listicles

My Observations About Being in the Ninth Grade - Zaheer Vakeel
Observations About Being in the Seventh Grade - Ronikaa Vijn
5 Things Parents Don't Understand About Us - Sunandini Sen
4 Things Parents Clearly Don't Understand About Having Kids - Maya George
5 Things Parents Don't Understand About Us - Shlok Balamurugan
3 Things Parents (Or All Adults) Just Don't Understand About Us - Aarya Jain Baldawa

Unexpected Joy

Maya George

I walked into the shelter with my parents, my hands jittery by my sides as I watched the unfamiliar, grey-shaded world around me, full of people rushing around, fur, and pets going absolutely crazy.

I did not expect this, no, when my parents had told me that we were going to go pick up the two kittens we had been informed we would get. The shelter lady had mentioned that they had been fostered before, therefore going to be skittish and worried about us. But I still had that stupid hope that we were going to be friends instantly. I couldn't wait to meet them, my eyes scanning the strange-looking shelter.

I could hear the soft yowls of a dog behind a glass door, making me feel more nervous than I should be. I had been preparing for this for nearly two weeks, I was ready. Right? As we waited in another clinic with the shelter lady, who was talking to my parents, happily describing her



dogs, a woman finally rushed in with a bag of cat food and two cats shoved into a carrier, one meowing frantically.

My breath caught as I looked at them, and they were so pretty, eyes amber, fur dusky brown with stripes and cream undertones. But there were two problems: they were both evidently terrified, pupils inflated so large that I could barely see their beautiful eyes, and they were so big.

“Uh,” my father said, looking as confused as I felt. “They ... Are you sure they’re kittens?”

The shelter lady nodded. “Just under a year!”

They did not look under a year.

But even so, we put them into the carriers that we bought for them, and then the vet fed them their necessary medication, and we were in the car. I watched my cats and felt an incredible happiness unfurl in my chest like the wings of bird. I knew I’d love them, despite the fact that they weren’t quite what I had expected.



(Not) Following Instructions

Shlok Balamurugan

With a shaky smile and trembling jaw, I looked down at the distance. All I could hear was the wind eerily whistling in my ear, and the instructor urging me to get done with it.

For him it was nothing much, but I was petrified. I was not able to even get a word out of my mouth.



“Rappelling will be easy,” they said. I let out a huge sigh and stared down at the ledge ahead of me. It was steep, very steep. The smell of my own sweat clogged my nose, as I tried to take a deep breath before the jump. My heart seemed as if it was going to explode from the fear. I couldn’t bear to look while taking the jump, so I closed my eyes and hoped for the best.

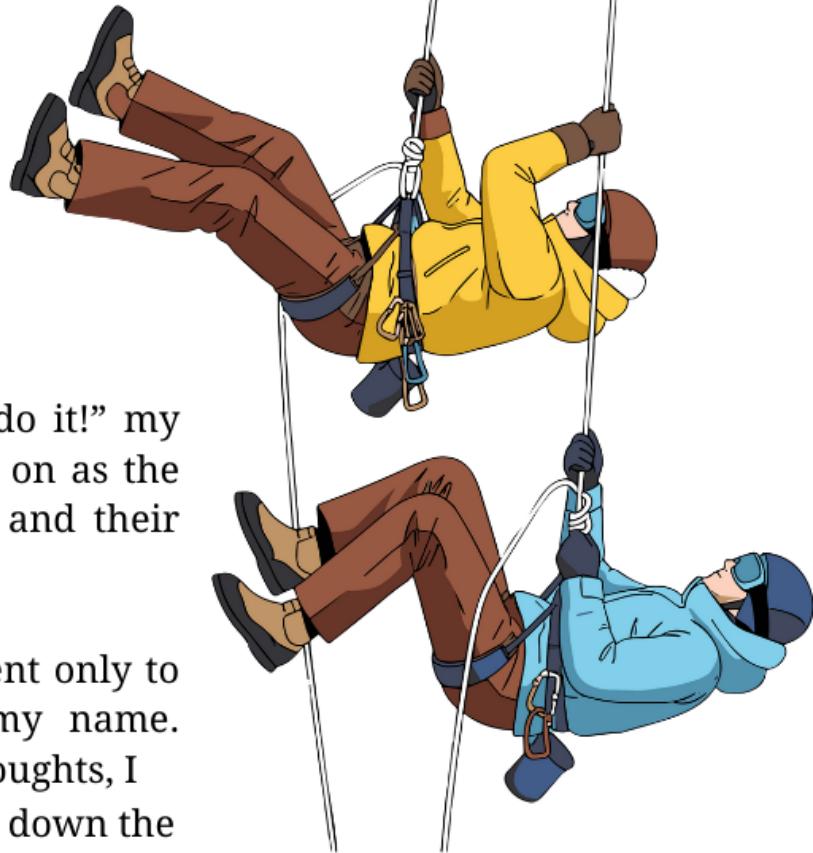
While descending the mountain, the instructors’ seemingly irrelevant instructions were apparently absolutely essential, as forgetfully, I hadn’t even buckled in any of my safety gear. Now, I was going down

with solely my bare body (well, I had clothes on, but I think you got the point). All the adults were screaming my name but I could only hear my own thoughts.

“Survive this, come on, you can do it!” my enthusiastic inside voice rambled on as the instructors panicked for my life, and their jobs.

I finally looked up from my descent only to find several adults screaming my name. Quickly phasing out of my own thoughts, I realised that I had already made it down the mountain. When I realised what I had actually done, I was paralysed in shock but that quickly turned into amusement. The adults’ faces, which were completely relieved at that moment, were now also confused at my reaction.

After fully understanding this incident, it quickly registered in my brain that I had overcome my own greatest fear. I smiled to myself, as all my friends swarmed me like curious paparazzi.





A Forced Meal

Sunandini Sen

“Why are you torturing me?” I groaned as my brother nearly dragged me across the floor of the mall. “Dude, I’m in Delhi for a few weeks! Can’t you just let me enjoy it in peace?”

Soham looked back at me and smiled cheekily. “Wait till you try it,” he said. “You’ll love it.”

I stuck out my tongue. Absolutely not. There was no way I’d like eating those things. Slimy, gross, yucky. They were my absolute nightmare. And plus, everybody said they were disgusting. After all, they all couldn’t be wrong, right?

And that’s not even mentioning the smell. I’d watched one of my friends devour them once in front of my eyes and I had nearly gagged at the smell. It was like ... rotten eggs, but ten times worse.

Once again, I pleaded with my brother for mercy. “Don’t do this bro, I swear, I’ll stop stealing your chocolates.”

He continued to ignore me and pushed me into the restaurant. I looked around and muttered a silent prayer. There were red lanterns hanging from the ceiling, with soft golden light illuminating the wooden tables.

This was definitely the calm before the storm.

I gave up with a sigh, resigned to my fate as I sat down. Soham was forever trying new stuff and this time he just had to drag me along. I grimaced. There was no way I’d be able to suffer through this meal.

He just rolled his eyes and continued to tell the waiter our order as he glanced over the menu.

Meanwhile, the waiter smiled and asked me, “First time?” I glared at him. He only smiled wider and went back to noting down our order.

The food arrived a while later. I nearly retched. Yup, it stank to high heaven.

“I’m going to stick the chopsticks into your eyes,” I snapped at him.

Soham laughed.

“See, you do it like this,” he explained. “You dip it into the soya sauce first, then you put some radish here, like this. And then, you put only a little bit of wasabi on top,” he continued, expertly handling his chopsticks.

I rolled my eyes but still continued to watch, a little bit entranced. It was almost magical, seeing him assemble it all so perfectly. He picked it up. “Here, eat it,” he said, grinning.

My mouth immediately twisted into an expression of disgust. “No, no, absolutely not,” I cried. “Do you want me to die?” I gestured wildly with my arms.

He ignored my protests and shoved it into my open mouth.

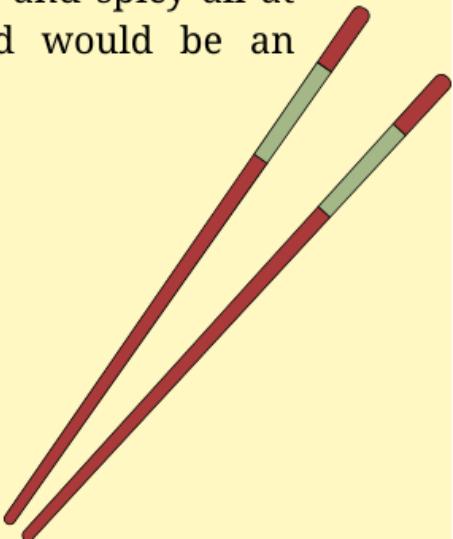
I gaped at him. One second passed. Then another.

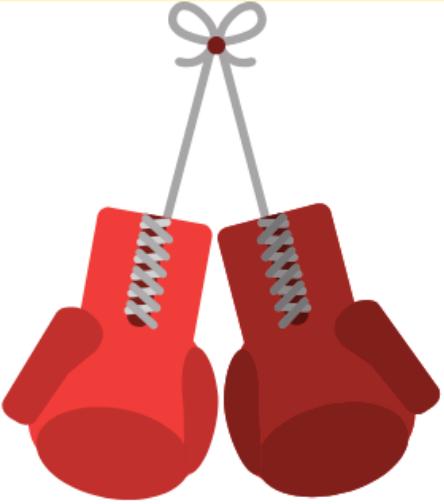
I chewed slowly.

The flavours exploded inside my mouth. Sweet, salty and spicy all at once. My eyes went wide. To say I was shocked would be an understatement.

Soham only chuckled as he leaned back in his seat.

“I knew you’d like sushi.”





Fighting Fear

Aarav Khandelia

THUMP, THUMP, THUMP.

My heart was beating as fast as a cheetah on a treadmill. My eyes were watching, but my brain was panicking.

DISHUM!

One boy, about fifteen years old or so, punched the pad with a thundering blow.

“This is what I will be in four years?” I asked her fearfully.

“Yes, this class will make you stronger,” my mom looked at me confidently, but I was not convinced.

After watching people punch and kick and hearing

DISHUM BANG THUD

for five minutes straight, it was finally time for my class to start. I walked nervously to the area. My breaths could be heard all the way in Europe.

The teacher called me over. “Hello, what is your name?”

I shook with fear as I softly replied, “Aarav, sir.”

“Hello Aarav, do you know what kickboxing is exactly?” my teacher asked me kindly.

“No, sir, but my mom told me it would make me stronger,” I hastily replied.

“No worries, that’s what I’m here for,” he told me. All those worries about my teacher—*would he like me? am I good enough?*—had vanished away after those six words. Now only one worry remained. This worry made my hair wilt like a dying flower, my mind panic as if a bear was chasing me. There were four kids in my first class: a tall tenth grader and three eighth graders. I felt small against these big and tall kids. *They won’t understand me; I have no place in this class*, my mind told me urgently. Now I couldn’t do anything about it; I had to complete class.

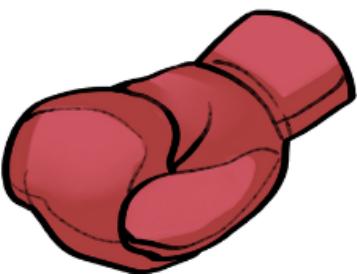
The teacher took me to the side and started showing me the two most basic punches. I was 100% focused. I knew if I wanted to fit in, I needed to be good. I left the world outside and concentrated only on the teacher’s demonstration. Soon, I had figured out the first two punches.

The teacher asked me to come and do the punching routine with everybody. This was the part I dreaded. I stepped up and started punching the bags wildly. Incredibly, they didn’t laugh at me; instead, they started helping me out. I certainly wasn’t expecting them to be kind to me, let alone help me. I was frozen in disbelief for a second, then I came back to my senses as they helped me.

They corrected my posture and my stance. “Thank you,” I managed to squeak out. Throughout the rest of the class, I was relaxed and having a great time.

Then one of the eighth graders came up to me. My face became pale with fear. “Relax, bro, I only came to tell you how well you did!” He smiled at me.

I blushed hard and ran away. I decided that I loved this class. Now for five months, I have been kicking and punching, and I am loving every second of it.



A New World

Enya Roshan Fraz

I was seven when I got my first book with no pictures. I felt very grown up and proudly told everyone how many pages there were in it. Then I grabbed a guava, picked a comfortable spot on the couch and opened the book. It was definitely not what I was expecting. It was like a sea of words ... with letters tumbling after each other like wave on wave on wave. Hesitantly, I dipped my toes into this ocean of words. The first sentence read, "Where's Papa going with that axe?"

I finished reading one paragraph and shouted out, "Mum! I have completed one whole chapter!" My brother had told me about chapters and my seven-year-old self didn't know the difference between chapters and paragraphs.

As I read, I realised how much noise could be made in a house of four. The pressure cooker was whistling, music was playing (probably by my brother), my parents seemed to be chattering like a couple of magpies and I could even hear the guard downstairs watching some noisy show. It was all very irritating, and I felt as though my head would explode, though, really, this was the usual amount of noise.

After about three pages, I felt like this book was never going to end. I wanted to pick up one of my old picture books and forget about this new book. "Mum, can I stop reading this book, please?" I begged. It was almost as though the noise had doubled since I got my new book.

But my mother said, "Listen, I know you feel as though you will never finish this book but one day you will have to read many big books and also the best adventures are in them. Trust me, you will finish this book and will begin to enjoy it soon."



I pushed myself to read on and before I knew it I was lost in a world which showed me pictures and scenes that made me want to read more and more and more ... As if I was in a different place, inside a magical bubble that had blocked off the outside and all its sounds.

This was true magic. Not the kind of magic that stories tell you about but the magic of the book itself, enchanting me as I read.

“Enya! It’s time for dinner!” called Mum. And pop! The bubble was gone and the world entered back. But I was still caught up in *Charlotte’s Web*. I begged for a few minutes more. Which my mom granted with a big smile.

As I went to bed that night, I knew that a world full of adventure was awaiting me—a world where words could paint pictures, create marvellous worlds and bring any character to life.



Push, Glide, Repeat ...

Meher Kumar

My foot quivered over the pavement; my legs trembled. A shiver fell down my spine, whispering threats of disaster. I took a deep breath and inched forward but it felt like I smashed down a volcano or something. What's more ... my brother glided by me like a pro Olympian level skater. Every cell in my body screamed, "Get us out of this torture!"

Piercing through the mayhem, a sharp voice cheered, "You got this, Champ! Chin up and move on."

And that's exactly what I did.

Push, push, glide ... repeat. Soon I was off!

Eventually I caught up with my brother and we rollerbladed all the way home, although it was three blocks away.

To this day I treasure this moment deep inside my heart. It reminds me I that can do anything so long as I believe in myself. The important thing is to stay determined and show resilience.



Audio Guide

The Khandelia Home

Aarav Khandelia

Namaste, good evening, and hello, visitors! My name is Kid Khandelia, and I'll be your guide for this tour. Let's begin.



Stop 1: The Door and the First Step Inside

First things first, look at that brown and beige door right in the middle of the wall. Give it a gentle push, and you have officially entered the house.

Take a moment to listen to the kettle boiling. Take a deep breath and smell the freshly baked cake. Now, let's head to the kitchen!



Stop 2: The Kitchen

Great! Take a left into the room with the shiny beige tiles. Go on in and take a look around. You'll see drawers, cupboards, mixers, and all the things grown-ups say are essential for cooking.

This is our kitchen! The Khandelias eat from here every day. Make sure to come back after the tour to try the red sauce pasta. It's the best! Don't miss it.

When you're ready to move on, tap the next stop.



Stop 3: The Living Room

Walk straight down the hall and then turn left again. There you have it! Sofas, plants, and a big dining table. Go ahead and sit on one of the sofas. Isn't it super squishy and comfy?

This is where all the Khandelias sit, talk, laugh, and sometimes argue about who finished the last cookie.

When you're ready, tap the next stop.



Stop 4: The Kid's Study Room

Okay, now walk back into the hall and take a right. Watch out, there's a glass door here! Be careful not to bump your nose. Push it open and go in.

Look at that wall! Calvin and Hobbes! And there's a desk with books and weird little things all over it—like a Virat Kohli bobblehead nodding like it agrees with everything you say.

Take your time to look around. This is the study room of the smallest Khandelia. He reads here, laughs here, and even looks for clues here. (These clues are regarding getting presents, or noticing some favourite toys going missing). Please don't break anything ... he's tiny, but he gets VERY dramatic.

When you're ready to move on, tap the next stop.



Stop 5: The Parents' Bedroom

Come on out of the study and follow the corridor straight ahead on your right. There's another brown and beige door. Turn the handle and step inside.

Oooh, look! A huge bed and a giant TV facing it. The bed has all sorts of pillows—ones for sitting, ones for sleeping, and ones nobody is allowed to touch but somehow everyone does. Go ahead and jump a little on the bed. It's okay. I won't tell.

This is the parents' room.



When you're ready, tap the next stop.



Stop 6: The Kid's Bedroom

Now head out the same way you came in and go to the next brown and beige door. Open it up.

Whoa! Look at those colours! Pink shelves, green shelves, blue shelves, and a brown wooden floor. Kinda wild, right?

This super colourful place belongs to the little guy. Don't mess up his bed—he's a very picky sleeper.

Check out the basket of soft toys! There are big ones, tiny ones, green ones, pink ones—whales, pumpkins, everything! He sleeps with them every night. And see that frog dangling from the shelf, holding binoculars? That's his favourite thing in the whole room.

When you're ready, tap the final stop.



Exit

And that's the whole tour! Head back out the way you came, down the hall, and through the front door.

Don't forget—before you go home, you have to taste the red sauce pasta waiting in the kitchen. It's basically the law.

Thanks for visiting!



Audio Guide

The Baldawa Home

Aarya Jain Baldawa

Hello, I'm Aarya and I'm going to be your tour guide for the day.

 I am going to be taking you around the Baldawa household today. Let's begin at the front door of the house. Made of a material I don't really know and painted like wood, the door looks rather pretty. I encourage you to run your fingers along the paint. Isn't it soft? As you can see, the door is decorated with a sign of the finest metal, engraved with the numbers '4603', and a garland of dried marigold flowers hanging from the top of the door frame. We must assume that the owner's taste in design is exquisite.

 I encourage you to now walk down the hallway where we find a carpet. This carpet is made of the finest, softest cotton. Bend down and touch it. It feels like a cloud would. Perched on the carpet, you will find a four legged, multi-coloured animal. This animal is not rare, or hunted, but it is the apex predator in this household. Be mindful while walking around it, as when it feels threatened, it will bare its teeth at you.





Please make way for the predator, or walk around him. Be careful, as direct contact could spark confusion in the eyes of the creature. Ahead of the predator and to the left is an eating and cooking hall. The hall has three tall chairs with a wood finish. Next to the chairs stands a smooth tabletop, with a tray atop it. On the tray stands an assortment of medicines and vitamins. I request you not to eat or touch anything as some can be injurious to your taste buds, see exhibit A (avla juice).



As we reach the end of the tour, I encourage you to stop at the souvenir shop at the front door. They offer car keys, chapsticks and Alpenliebe if you are interested. I hope you enjoyed your tour and have a great rest of your day. Please drop the audio guides at the front door on your way out.

Audio Guide

Zaheer's School

Zaheer Vakeel

(Please reach the gate before playing this guide.)

Right now, you are standing in front of my school gate. It might look like a completely normal school at first, but once you get to know the people and the campus, you may discover some interesting quirks. For now, go straight ahead and you'll encounter the tuck shop.



buzzer sound

Stop 1: The Tuck Shop

If you're carrying regular cash, today is not your day; you won't get any of the items on the menu. This shop mostly accepts prepaid student cards. To buy anything, you'll need to refill the card's balance at the designated counter and then swipe it at the machine.



Once you've looked around, turn left and keep walking until you see a big building on your left-hand side. Enter it. This is the hallway where all the classrooms are located.

Walk straight to the end of the hall and enter the room directly in front of you. This is the computer lab.

A fun fact about this place: it's where teachers usually prepare digital material for their classes, so the computers are always neatly organised and ready to use.



buzzer sound

Stop 2: The Computer Lab

If you've come for your computer period, you can use the assigned workstation to work on your projects or practise your lessons. During free periods, students often use this lab to explore educational software or quietly relax while the computer teacher supervises the room.

Once you're done, take a 180° turn and enter the nearest classroom. That's my classroom.

Here, subjects like history, geography, English literature, and Hindi are taught. The teachers are all unique in their own ways—each with their own style of teaching and personality.

The geography teacher, for example, is known for her lively energy and memorable explanations. Some say she gets so absorbed in her subject that she occasionally forgets what she was about to say, which always makes the class chuckle.

The classroom itself follows a typical layout: benches in rows, a cupboard for books, and a teacher's desk at the front. After taking a look around, move forward and turn right. You'll arrive at the headmaster's office.



buzzer sound

Stop 3: The Headmaster's Office

This room contains a table, a chair, and shelves filled with trophies and medals the school has won over the years. The headmaster is known for his strict yet fair nature, and many students find his presence both disciplined and motivating.

The room can get a bit warm on sunny days, but conversations here are usually straightforward and focused on helping students improve.

Once you're done here, you may exit the building and continue exploring the rest of the school or enjoy the rest of your day.

Audio Guide

Shlokh's School

Shlokh Balamurugan



The Gates of Misery

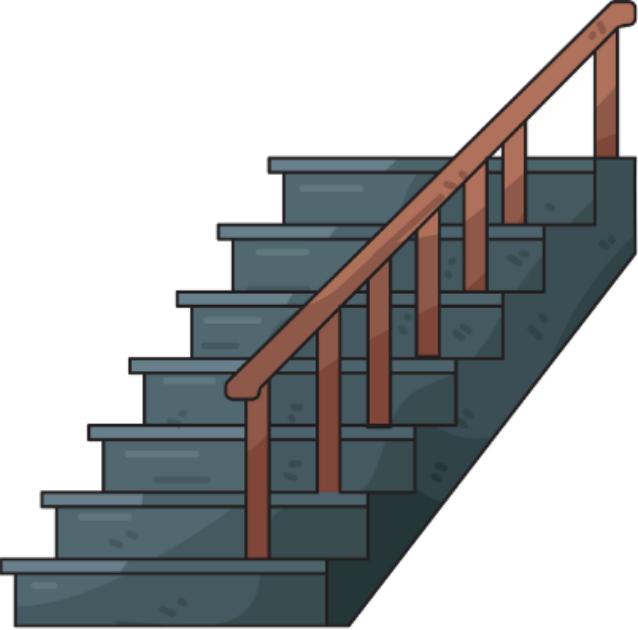
You have arrived at the place where all joy and hope dies, the school gate. Do you see a boy walking with his head down? A girl bawling her eyes out uncontrollably? Don't worry it's all normal here. Pay attention to the right side of the entrance. You will spot a short man in a black uniform waiting for you. Rumour has it he has been standing there for twenty-one years. When you walk away from the man, look behind as the automated gates ominously close behind you. On your left will be a large auditorium with tinted glass windows and 24/7 air conditioning. This auditorium is called the Teejuleela Hall after its recent name change from Savla Hall.

Keep walking as I tell you about the history of this place. The hall on your left has been around from the beginning of the school's history, and it has been refurbished multiple times during its existence. Right ahead is the grand sports ground. Sports like football, cricket and several athletic games happen here. It is an iconic and brilliant venue for many events as well, hosting the Annual Fair, the Sports Day along with various minor events and announcements. Continue to walk ahead and be careful to avoid running into the rapid kindergarteners, who are usually spotted running at top speeds. We will continue from the next segment which is the ...



The Staircase of Doom

As you are walk towards the staircase, look to your left and observe the students of the school walking up the stairs that have been described by various people as 'continuing for eternity.' Years' worth of sweat and determination has been witnessed on these stairs by those who have survived the wretched torture of climbing them. Rumours say that many have mysteriously disappeared while walking up these stairs. Worry not, as you are allowed to take the lift.



Many only dream about what you are about to do for most of their schooling lives, as even those who are injured are forced to use the stairs. Be cautious of the woman sitting in the chair inside the lift. Most probably, she will ask you about your entire family lineage, or she will stare into your soul until you reach your destination which is the ...



Centre Of Jubilation

You have arrived at the lunchroom. Stop in front of the big brown door. This is the place where all the students eat their lunch after a long tiring day of listening to the monotonous voices of the unenthusiastic teachers. Voices filled with pure joy and scintillation can be heard here screaming with all their energy. If you look to your left you will see the man that most spend their day thinking about—The Lunch Man.

With a smile on his tired yet comforting face you can see him patiently serving everybody who didn't bring food from home. If you approach him you will surely be filled with happiness at his witty quips and energetic way of speaking. On the right is the table where all the cool kids sit. For your own sake, I would recommend not approaching them under any circumstances. They will torment you and make fun of you for absolutely any reason.

You have reached the end of this tour. Hopefully you will join us again sometime!

Audio Guide



A Clubhouse in an Ordinary Neighbourhood

Ronikaa Vijan

(Make sure you are at the entry before you proceed.)

 Hello and welcome, listeners, whoever you may be, to this audio guide of the ...

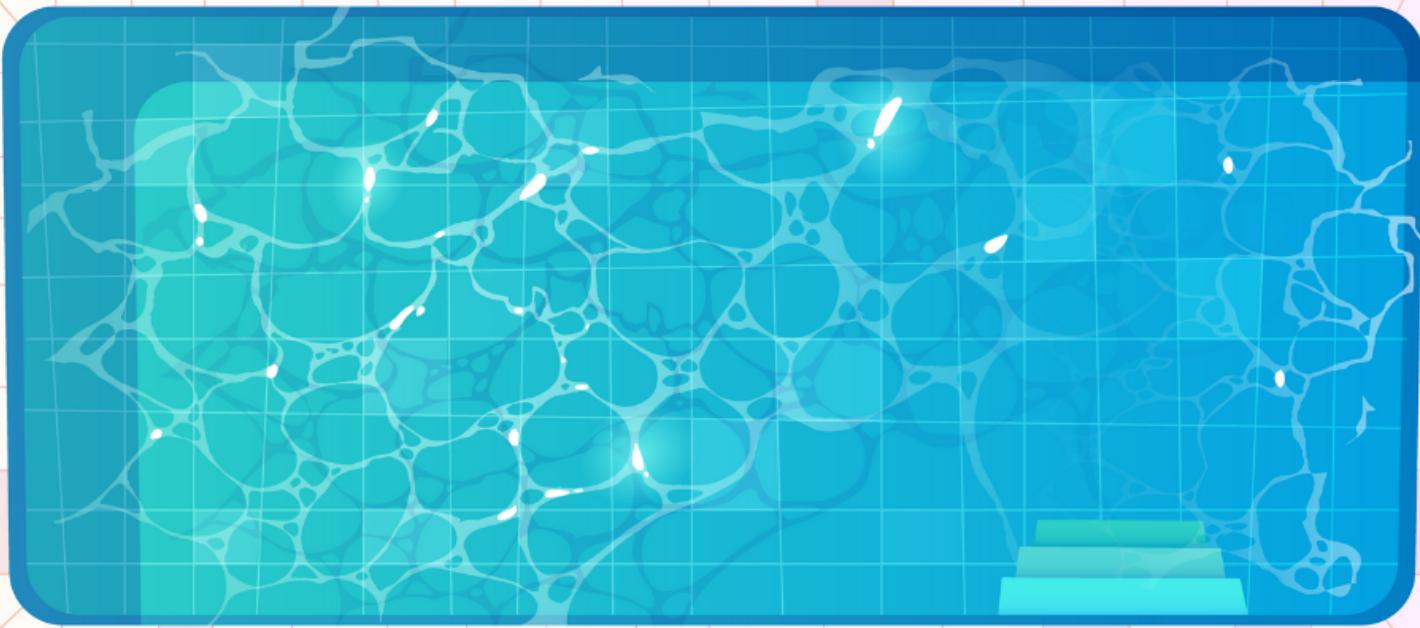
DRUMROLL

CLUBHOUSE IN AN ORDINARY NEIGHBOURHOOD! IT HAS A ONE-OF-A-KIND (nope, it's just an ordinary one) POOL, TWO BANQUET HALLS, A BADMINTON COURT, LAWN TENNIS, CLASSES OF THINGS OF ALL SORTS, LIKE YOGA, KARATE, AND LET'S NOT FORGET ... A BABY POOL!

SOUND OF HAIR SWISHING

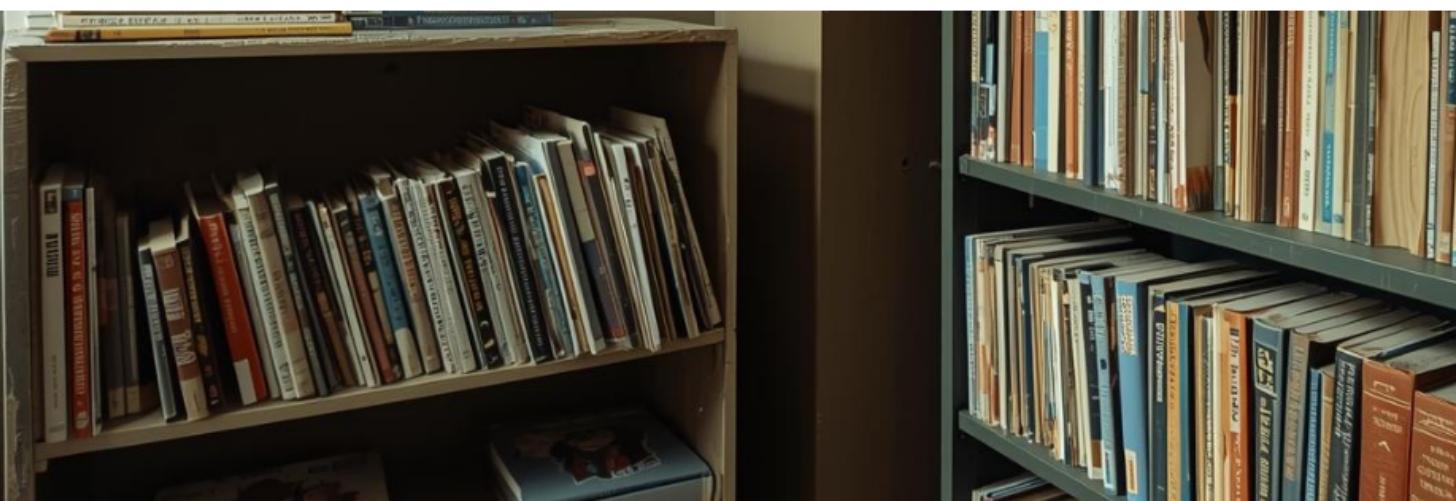
I know, I know, you're probably so jealous right now. But still, be grateful you get to tour this *supercalifragilisticexpialidocious* place.

Now, as you walk inside, to the right-hand side corner, a receptionist will be seated, watching *Anupama* on full volume on their phone. Or YouTube shorts. Ignore them and walk past.



🎧 Our first stop is the pool, just a few steps from the reception. Smell the beautiful chlorine, adore the gorgeously old blue tiles and now take a step back. Take a deep breath, and RUN! AND JUMP IN! IGNORE WHETHER YOU'RE WEARING GUCCI OR AMAZON! Take your time, enjoy the water and step out, dripping wet! If you're lucky to be doing this tour on a sunny afternoon, you're good. Otherwise, you better mop the place before you leave!

🎧 After the pool, our second stop is the library! You can walk straight down the hallway, and enter through the last door. The small door to your right is the library. Kick it open (if you wanna feel like you're in a spy movie, of course) or knock; I don't really care. Once in a blue moon (if you have AWESOME luck), you may see a librarian. The light switch is to your left, by the way. You will be greeted with a wide array of books in this 6x8 sq ft library. Take one step; to your right are some nonfiction books, some used colouring books and a comic or two. To your left, the make-shift shelf will hold some Enid Blytons, some more kids' books, etc. Sit, relax a bit if you feel like.



LOUNGE JAZZ MUSIC PLAYS FOR 2.5 SECONDS



NOW LET'S GET UP AND MOVE TO OUR SECOND LAST STOP! THE SPORTS AREA!

HIGH TEMPO BACKGROUND MUSIC

The sports area, where tons of kids come and play but the walls hold secrets. SHHHHH!

Nothing much really, hang around if you like.



Let's walk back out to the pool and the reception to go upstairs! Take the stairs up to the fitness studio. There are some weights and yoga mats and ... all that, so if you're a fitness freak, this is basically heaven, but the snacks are under the table! Grab a couple and head downstairs. Take these as goodies!

Head down and wave goodbye to the receptionist, walk out the door, going home with pleasant memories.

GOODBYE!



Audio Guide

Ratindra Smriti

Sunandini Sen

Welcome to Ratindra Smriti. Or should I say, bala aso ni, just to set the mood for today? By the way, that means 'how're you doing?' in Sylheti, which is a language you'll hear very often in this part of Shillong.

I don't think I've properly introduced myself yet. I'm Sunandini, bookworm, foodie and your guide for today. Let me run you through some guidelines. If you want to skip ahead to the next portion anytime during the audio guide, tap the 'next' button in the left corner of the screen. And of course, remember to be respectful to anyone you meet during the journey.

If you're listening to this, you're already here in Shillong, the heart of Meghalaya, the Scotland of the East and the Rock Capital of India. Take a good look around you. You're currently standing in the Upper Jail Road locality in municipal ward number 124.

Start walking down this road. Remember to be careful of the steep slope and don't forget to take note of the shops around you. There are plenty of hidden gems here. Soon enough, you should be noticing a path veering left. Once you take this left, you should be able to see our destination right in front. As I said before, tap the 'next' button when you get there.





As you come to a stop in front of the metal gates, take a moment to look down. What do you see? That stone staircase is probably older than I am. You'll see that the gates are unlocked, so start making your way down the stairs. Watch your step there. My mother once tumbled down this staircase and ended up with a broken collarbone. Not a pretty sight, definitely.

I'll give you two minutes to reach the bottom, where our journey actually starts. This is Ratindra Smriti, built by Rasendranath Bhattacharjee, father of Rishi Kumar Bhattacharjee, aka my maternal grandfather. So, in a way, I'm taking you on a tour of my own ancestral home.

When you see Ratindra Smriti coming into view, tap 'next'.





🎧 Why is it called so, you may ask? Great question. Ratindra Smriti was actually named after Ratindra Nath, the son of my great-grandfather who built this place. As we come to our first stop, the entrance of this house, let me give you a little bit of a history lesson.

The construction for this house began in 1916 and was completed around 1925-1930, if my memory serves me right.

Originally a resident of Sylhet, which is in present-day Bangladesh, the late Rasendranath came to Shillong in 1908. He built this house for his wife and twelve children, and Ratindra Nath was his eldest and most talented son. He was an illustrious scholar who studied at the Presidency College and even won a gold medal for completing his English Honours. Unfortunately, he passed away prematurely at the age of twenty-six.

Coming back to the house, you'll see that the entire thing is made out of wood. It has seven rooms, an outhouse and a small garden in the front. As you climb the steps leading to the doorway, take a moment to sit down in a cane chair placed in front. This area serves as a sort of 'balcony'. Imagine sitting here, soaking in the early morning sunshine during the winter months, a cup of steaming tea in hand ... I'm getting chills just thinking about it!

Anyway, let's move on to our next stop.



Make sure to enter the house through the doorway on your left side, which will take you straight to the huge dining room. This room has a lot of history. And I mean A LOT.

Walk around, explore. Take a book from that shelf in the corner and flip through its yellowed pages. Jump on a floorboard (just not too hard!) and hear the creaking sound it makes. One interesting fact about this house is that it's built entirely on stilts. This is because Meghalaya, being a seismically active region, is especially prone to earthquakes. You're literally in a house that stands on sticks.

At one end of the dining room, you'll notice a huge table. Run your hands across its cool sea-green surface. Once upon a time, Netaji himself stood on this table to give a speech. No, I'm not joking, I promise.

The story goes somewhat like this. One time, Subhash Chandra Bose, yes, Netaji himself was giving a speech here in Shillong, in the field just opposite to this house! Unbelievable, right? The famed freedom fighter had to speak to a huge crowd and needed to be visible to the thousands who had come to hear him speak. So, a couple of men came here and took this table to the field.



Finally, we come to our third and last stop. As you exit the dining room through the side door on your left, you'll emerge into the courtyard. Tap the 'next' button when you're ready to go ahead.

 This is a small open space located in the heart of this house. Right in the centre, you'll see a small bathtub of sorts, made of stone and filled with water. This is traditionally called a 'choubachha' in Sylheti, and is used for bathing and washing purposes. It's not as full of history as our previous stop, but it's something interesting which you don't often see in houses these days.

You can take another left as our journey comes to an end. You're back at the entrance of the house, where we started. If you want, there are so many more interesting nooks and crannies to explore inside Ratindra Smriti. You can go beyond the living room to enter the main bedroom, and from there, you'll emerge in a small attic-like room, which used to belong to Ratindra Nath himself. You can even go outside and click some pictures of the stunning magnolia tree. Remember to tap the 'next' button after you're done!

 Let's climb the staircase, as we leave Ratindra Smriti behind us, at least, for now. Feel free to walk through the Upper Jail Road locality if you fancy a nice, long stroll. Next time you come to Shillong, remember to visit this enchanting house once again. I hope you enjoyed exploring Ratindra Smriti with me!



Audio Guide

Humayun's Tomb

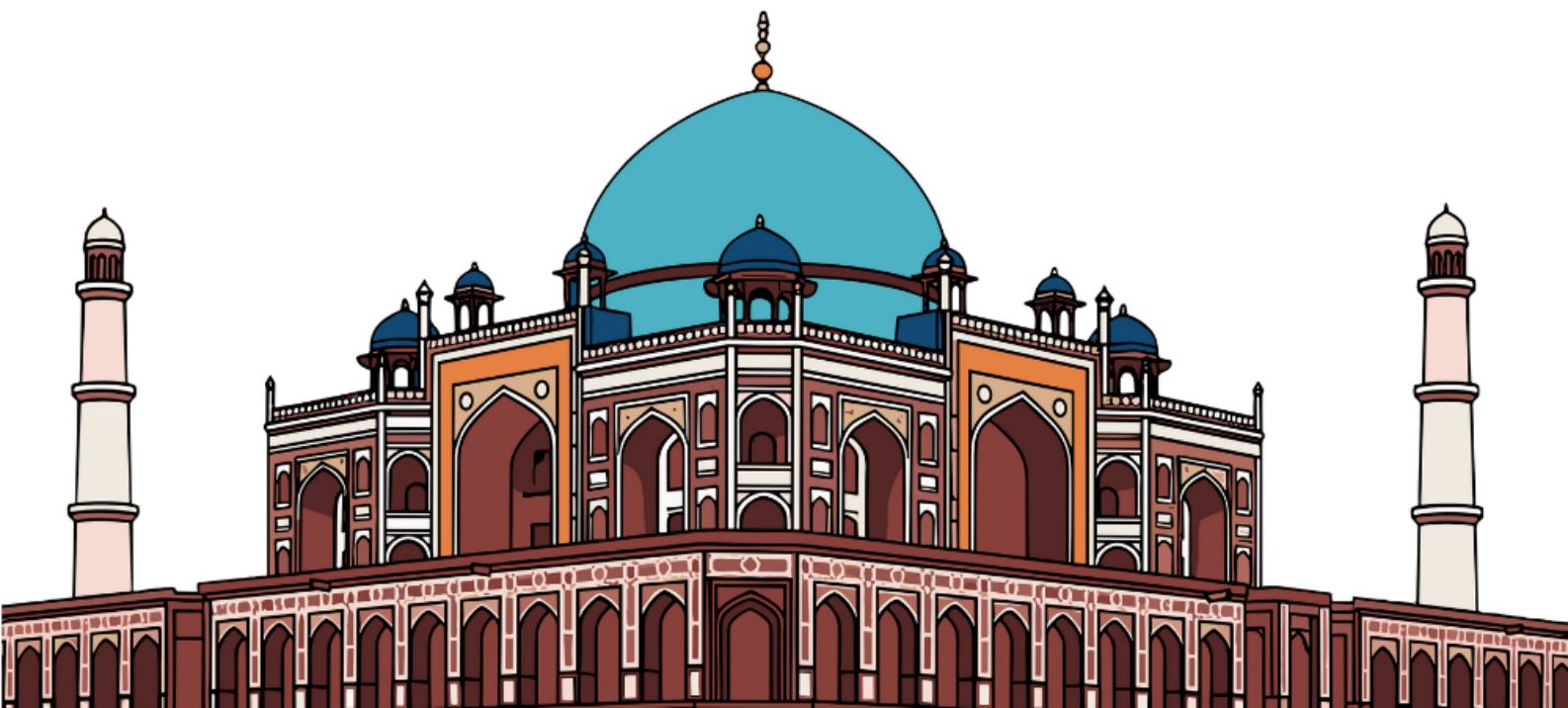
Maya George

(Start this when you're at the entrance of the tomb.)



Hello, and welcome to my favourite place in all of Delhi, Humayun's tomb (I'm a history nerd, if you can't tell by now). Please start walking down the long, long, long pathway as we begin to talk about Humayun's tomb. Tap your pause button whenever you want to stop, look around or click photos, and when you restart it, I will move straight on to the next stop. A buzzer sound will alert you that this is one of my stops, and you can take your time exploring it for yourself too!

Now, the question arises, who was Humayun? Humayun was a Mughal emperor who died in the strangest way possible. I don't find people talking about Humayun because his son Akbar is the more famous one. Humayun was the second Mughal emperor. He ruled for maybe twenty-ish years, but he got exiled from his kingdom once by a really interesting Afghan general called Sher Shah Suri, regained his kingdom after Suri's death and came right back, regaining his capital like a pro, just to fall from the stairs of his library.



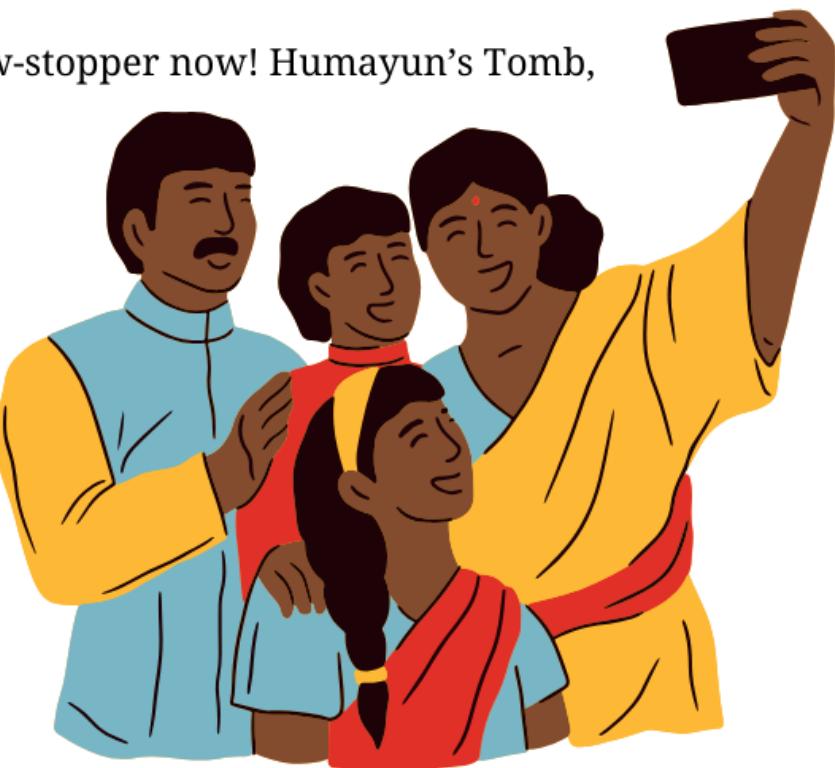
Now, here is an important and historical part of Humayun's tomb! A gateway. But not just any gateway, no, there is a mini museum hidden in this gateway! If you look around, you'll see people roaming around in rooms beside you, so let's take a look at the exhibits, shall we? They're mostly Mughal-era things that were found in the tomb. There's no real description of the museum that I can talk about.



buzzer sound

Let's get to the actual show-stopper now! Humayun's Tomb, our very own Taj Mahal (not really). Walk straight ahead, and you'll find this amazing water-fountain thing with people constantly posing for photos on it. Now, ignore the questionable poses (I once actually saw someone fall off into the water), and let's walk past it. Keep your eyes on this glorious monument. Around the monument

are some fields and secondary places, as you can see. Climb right up the steps and let's get talking about Humayun's Tomb!



Humayun's Tomb, like I mentioned earlier, was built in honour of Humayun, the second Mughal Emperor. This tomb was actually built by his wife, Bega Begum, or Haji Begum who felt that the emperor had to be honoured at all costs. Now, this placement is actually very interesting, because when it was first built, Humayun's tomb was surrounded by some very important things, historically speaking. We had the Grand Trunk Road, which if you didn't know was India's first highway, built by Sher Shah Suri which goes from Kabul (Afghanistan) to Dhaka (Bangladesh). We had the river Yamuna flowing behind it, and Nizamuddin Auliyah's (a very popular Sufi saint) dargah to the west.



buzzer sound

Another important thing about Humayun's tomb is that there are as many as 150 graves! The Mughals must have thought that it would be a pain to erect another tomb for every Tom, Dick, and Harry, and Humayun shared his final resting place with not just his wife but 148 others. Every cousin, his wives, and a few great-grandsons too are currently disintegrating (or has already disintegrated) under your feet. What a pleasant thought.

I hope that you're up the stairs by now, because I want to show you one of the most important parts of Humayun's Tomb—his grave. Head right till you reach a large doorway, and enter. Step into a network of tunnels and make your way to the centre, which is pretty easy because all the roads lead to the centre.

And here you have it! Humayun's grave. Walk around, have some fun. Please respect that you're actually in an entire building built for a person who died, so be careful not to be rude to Humayun. I'm sure you've heard enough about him, so I'll give you a minute to explore by yourself!





buzzer sound

And, we're back! Make your way away from Humayun's tomb, and head to the area where we first started out, near the gateway, because I want to show you one of my favourite things about Humayun's Tomb which barely anybody notices! Pause the audio guide if you want to take your time, enjoying the walk back to the entrance.



buzzer sound

As soon as you exit the tomb, you'll see a gate, which you should head through. Welcome to Afsarwala's Tomb! This beautiful little side effect of Humayun's tomb is one of my favourite places, and though you can't actually enter the tomb, it's still amazingly beautiful to stroll through the garden that accompanies it.

This is the end of the audio guide, and I hope you had fun exploring Humayun's tomb with me!



My Observations About Being in the Ninth Grade

Zaheer Vakeel

Much to talk about here.

- 1. Teenage:** It is the WORST age; neither do you get the benefits of being an adult, nor do you get the benefits of being a child. I don't know about your parents, but mine switch between "You're too small for that!" and "You're too big for that!".

3. Boring shopping trips: I am grateful for them because nothing gets more boring than a bungalow in which you are used to and bored with everything around you. Anyway, for me, it is Mom who takes me to them and the whole time she is running here and there, to and fro, hither and thither, trying to find the best dupatta or shawl for any future event to which she will not go because she has yet to pay the host a precise amount of ₹6.70 that she borrowed from her all the way back in 2001 over which she and the host will have had some heated argument. My brain just goes: *Please stand by, we're experiencing technical difficulties*, all while playing the Spanish Flea on loop during those excruciating trips.

4. School: This place is an atrocity and should be condemned to destruction via demolition ball. I don't actually learn anything here, just cut the time until the difficult exam season, during which I suffer and suffer and, in the end, get a vacation of precisely a Sunday, a Monday and a Tuesday, and that's it! School is the biggest joke mankind has ever laughed at. Seriously, it gives you nothing in return for the fees you paid. It is the textbook definition of a dead investment. I do not learn anything from my so-called "teachers". YouTube is my teacher, Gemini clears all my doubts, and I do not even need the help they offer. They say I should be proud of the place in which I am, but I do not think so, because what really is there to be proud of?



Observations About Being in the Seventh Grade

Ronikaa Vijan

Seventh grade. The year people claim to be their favourite.

sighs dramatically

Here are some observations as a tortured human in the seventh grade:

1. The teachers: They are unpredictable, unprepared homo sapiens, and the well-known cause of hatred for schooling by practically my entire grade. Sorry, my entire school.

They teach alright. I don't worry about that; after all, what's ChatGPT for? Nine years in the world of education and I have successfully mastered the skill of pretending to pay attention while just being in the secret gardens of my mind. But my question is why, WHY are they so stubborn? Like, more stubborn than my four-year-old sister in a toy store when she really wants something (as in crying-and-screaming-at-the-top-of-her-lungs "want", folks). They'll randomly wake up at five in the morning to email us about important stuff that is coming for an exam THAT VERY DAY and proceed to blame US when we get bad marks. And half of the time, it's we who keep correcting THEM. As Taylor Swift very wisely said (lyric from the song *The Life of a Showgirl*, very horribly edited by ME!) "You don't know the life of a tortured student, and you're never ever gonna."

A moment of silence for that excellent tweak of the lyric



2. The drama: I have a love-hate relationship with this. Do I keep some friends because they always have the juiciest gossip? Yes, I do. But in my defence, I'm a writer. This is what inspires the drama in my stories. Sometimes, people will come up to you with the most elated faces, and there is a part of you hoping for good gossip when it's about fifth graders. Having paper ball fights in class. Then some people will come up with the most casual expression and drop a BOMB.

“Hey, did you hear seven people got suspended?”

3. Nicknames: In my grade, an exceptional batch filled with various specimens, people are referred to, never by their name, but by random nicknames that were made by THAT ONE HISTORY TEACHER that left the school like, three years ago. A NICKNAME STICKS. I'm known as:

- a) that book girl
- b) Chashmish (the one with glasses, as if they've never seen people with glasses) or
- c) Ballerina for those who KNOW. It involves a very dumb fourth grade chapter, my seventh grade performance and some very idle people.

4. Memories: Last but not the least, however much I may hate a school year, some memories, like laughing for no reason for fifteen minutes straight with people you never imagined you'd be friends with, I will continue to cherish forever.

5 Things Parents Don't Understand About Us

Sunandini Sen

As a homo sapiens currently in my teens, there have always been a few things that my parents have never understood about me.

Whether you're in China, Croatia or Chile, if you are a teenager, you will definitely experience the universal feeling of confusion when your parents say something completely out of pocket* about you.

Well, let's dive in, I guess.

1. Gen Z Language: If you have parents, you must've heard the phrase "You all don't even speak properly" or "You just use Gen Z lingo" or some other variation of the same. Firstly, the "lingo" they're talking about includes words like 'alpha', 'skibidi', etc. And this is actually not even Gen Z, but Gen Alpha language. Sure, we use a few words here and there, but it's mostly used in texting. Nobody, and I mean, nobody actually speaks like that in real life. If you hear someone saying "Hey, skibidi brainrot fanum tax rizzler", either they're trying to be hilarious or they've escaped from a mental asylum.

***Varsha's Note:** For Gen Z, "out of pocket" primarily means acting in an inappropriate, unexpected, or unacceptable way, rather than the traditional meanings of having lost money or using one's own money. It is used to describe someone behaving erratically, unhinged, or out of character. This note is particularly ironic in light of point 1 of this listicle.



2. **“Are you sleeping?”:** I swear to god, this is not just a “teenager” problem”, but a universal one. Imagine you’re peacefully sleeping after a long day, and suddenly, someone comes into your room and asks in an apparently concerned voice, “Are you asleep?” (For me, it’s usually my mom. And this happens nearly every other day). No, even though I’m in my room in complete darkness, drooling all over my pillow and snoring, who knows, I could secretly be making a sandwich!
3. **Temper Tantrums:** Whenever I get angry, my parents always say the same thing. “Oh, it’s just a typical teenage tantrum.” Excuse me? FYI, it’s not a “teenage tantrum”. How dare you dismiss my concern for your usage of polythene? Cute otters are dying because of you! How would you feel if you got angry and I dismissed it as an “adult tantrum”? Learn to acknowledge our feelings, seriously.
4. **‘bOyS’:** I have better things to do in life. Why do my parents always assume that the only interesting topic me and my friends have to talk about is “love” or “boyfriends”? Is it illegal for me to actually have an intellectual conversation with my friends about the benefits of Lay’s over Kurkure? No? I didn’t think so. And by the way, it’s way more fun to gossip about who slapped a teacher yesterday, who got suspended, etc. etc.
5. **“I hate you”:** All of us love our parents (obviously). And, sometimes, I get angry and argue with my mom or dad. Whenever I say, “I hate you”, both my parents start getting really upset. What they don’t get is that it’s just an exaggeration. Like, when you say, “It’s so hot, I could die”, you don’t actually mean that it’s so hot that you’ll literally melt into a puddle like a kulfi. Seriously, Mom, Dad, I love you. I often say things I don’t mean, but this is the one thing which I will always mean when I say it.

4 Things Parents Clearly Don't Understand About Having Kids

Maya George



1. If you buy clothes for us, they're definitely not going to be worn. Your taste in clothing is from the last century, people, and those clothes are not going to look the same on us as they did on you. There's something horribly cringeworthy about a parent randomly brandishing an ancient piece of clothing from 1984 at you and claiming that it's 'cute' and that your 'generation doesn't know style'. Whatever.
2. In the entirety of my school years, there will be approximately 200 test papers I have hidden from you guys, and all I'm going to do in college is pray that you haven't ransacked my desk.
3. There is no possible way that I will think my baby photos are cute. No. Also, stop oversharing about me as a baby! I don't want to know if I ate my toes when I was two!
4. Ours is going to be a very love-hate relationship, on occasion with us literally screaming at each other.

5 Things Parents Don't Understand About Us

Shlok Balamurugan

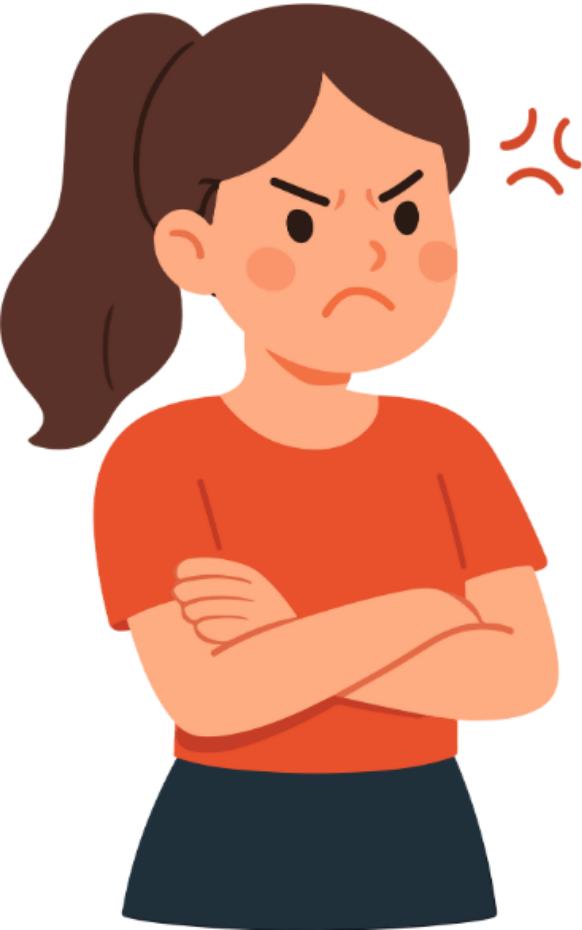
1. When I am playing video games, it is my version of taking a “5-minute powernap”. Would you like me interrupting your well deserved nap? I didn’t think so ...
2. If I said I am done eating there is no possible scenario in which I accept your “One last bite!”. Unfortunately that piece of food is forcefully shoved down my throat whether I like it or not ...
3. If I am not spending every waking minute studying during exam time, it doesn’t mean I am slacking off. Maybe I am trying to exist without my eyeballs fixated on the same words for hours.
4. No, I am very sorry, but I am not going to wear those musty, faded torn jeans and that red polo that has been passed on for about four generations because I, quite frankly, want to have a social life.
5. If I am completely free to do what I want, there is a one in a billion chance that I am going to casually clean the entire house for fun.



3 Things Parents (Or All Adults) Just Don't Understand About Us

Aarya Jain Baldawa

Firstly, no I cannot walk faster. Your legs are longer than mine and one step of yours is two of mine. You do not understand that my legs are short. Yes, I am just three or five inches shorter than you, but my legs are short. Unfortunately, my steps are small and that means I walk slower than you. I'm sorry for the inconveniences that this has caused you.



Secondly, we aren't always overreacting, feelings are different for you and me and we were raised differently (thank you for that). Overreacting isn't what it looks like in most cases, sometimes we just don't fully comprehend what you're trying to tell us.

Lastly, I am not hungry. I ate enough food. Your stomach is bigger than mine, and you have to eat more food to feel full, whereas I do not. That is the truth. I have already pushed my stomach to its limits trying to finish the food on my plate, I do not wish to endure that horror again.

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Pretty

Sunandini Sen

“Happy birthday, sweetie.”

I yawn and get out of bed, rubbing my eyes.

“Thanks, Mummy,” I say, as my mother wraps me into a tight hug. “So, where’s my gift?”

My mother grins playfully. “Straight to the point. Alright then, I have a very special gift for you this year. Close your eyes.”

I obey her command and shut my eyes. I slowly squeeze one of them open, just a tiny bit as I see her turn around to get something behind her.

“Hey, no peeking!”

“Alright,” I grumble reluctantly and close my eyes once more.

After what seems like forever, she presses a box into my hands. I open my eyes to look at the gift in my hands. Covered in pink wrapping paper, there’s a huge satin bow on the front. It’s not too big but not too small either. What could it be? A Lego set? A new palette for painting? I rip the cardboard, almost ferociously. Mummy watches me, sitting on the bed, a warm smile on her lips. “Careful there.”

At the end, I am left clutching a doll in my hands. “She’s so beautiful,” I whisper to myself.

Silky golden hair, blue eyes and pale skin, she’s dressed in a gorgeous turquoise gown. I twirl her around on my bedside table. Her skirt, embroidered with sparkly gems, almost appears to glow in the sunlight from the window.

“This is the best gift ever!” I squeal, as I grip my mother in a fierce hug.

She chuckles at my excitement and leaves me to acquaint myself with my new toy.

I nearly jump up and down. I finally have a new doll! And such a pretty one, too! Suddenly, I grow pensive. I have to think of the most important thing. After all, she must have a name. I run through options in my head. “Mina?” I try, looking at the doll. “Rose? Isabella?”

She sits on my bed, her skirt arranged neatly about her. Her face is adorned with a smile, as if she’s saying, ‘Those names are alright, but what about something else?’

“Yes, you’re right,” I mumble.

Then it strikes me. She’s so beautiful; she should have a long and proper name. Something princessy. Aha! Victoria. That’s what I’ll call her.

I hug Victoria close to my chest.

“You and I are going to be best friends, I just know it!”



The years pass.

For the first few months, Victoria sits on my bed. I sleep with her bony frame clutched close to my chest. It’s uncomfortable, but I can’t bear to spend a moment without my new best friend. Soon enough, she’s moved to a position of honour in my dollhouse. I proudly present her to my classmates when I take her for a ‘Show and Tell’ at my school.

“She’s the most beautiful doll in the whole wide world,” I declare. The minute I turn my back, I hear snickering and giggling.

“If only she was as pretty as that doll.”



“Yeah, I don’t think she deserves to have such a nice doll. Not when she looks like THAT.”

More giggles follow. I swallow my tears and force a smile, as I shuffle away.

That night, I hold Victoria close to me, sniffling quietly.

“Will you still love me, even though I’m not pretty?” I whisper into the darkness.

I imagine Victoria’s voice, sweet as honey, responding, “Of course, you silly girl. We’re best friends, remember?”



Two years later, Victoria ends up sitting on my shelf, squeezed in between my books and magazines. Her dress is faded, but the skirt still sparkles when it catches the sunlight. Her hair isn’t as silky as it used to be, but her smile? Still the same warm grin I used to be familiar with.

I throw out all my other toys. I’m older now. Grown-up. Mature. I don’t need such useless things anymore. But Victoria? She stays.

Finally, she ends up in a corner of my dressing table. I may not have much use for her anymore, but I can’t bear to throw her away. She was my best friend, after all.

Every single morning, the first thing I see when I wake up and turn to my bedside table is Victoria. She stares back at me, grinning, as always. The

second thing I look at is pictures of models and influencers on Instagram.

Scrolling on my phone is almost like an addiction, at this point. I can't help but gaze in wonder at the women on the screen, telling their followers about what makeup to use, what skincare helps you get the smoothest skin.

They're so beautiful. So confident. So perfect.

Sometimes, I wish I could be like them too.



“Hey, stupid!” Somebody throws a pencil at my head from the back of the class.

I sigh and pluck it out of my hair and let it clatter to the floor. This is normal for me now, but that only makes it feel worse.

“Ew, look at her, it smells like she hasn't bathed for a week!”

Cruel laughter follows.

“Oh, shut up. Can you not be rude for once?” I snap back at them.

“Well, can you not be so disgusting and fat for once?”

It's one of those ‘popular kids’. Perfect hair, perfect nails, perfect face.

Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry.

But the silent tears slide down my cheeks anyway. Why do I care so much about what these horrible people think? Why do they enjoy making me feel like I'm nothing?

Back home, I look at myself in the mirror.



Plain black hair. Brown eyes. A tall, lanky frame. A not-so-thin waist. I touch my face. Am I as ugly as they say?

My gaze wanders to Victoria. Golden hair, pale arms, rosy cheeks.

“Yeah, I’m obviously prettier than you,” I hear her voice.

It’s just in my head, I tell myself. But for some reason, what she’s saying seems like the truth.

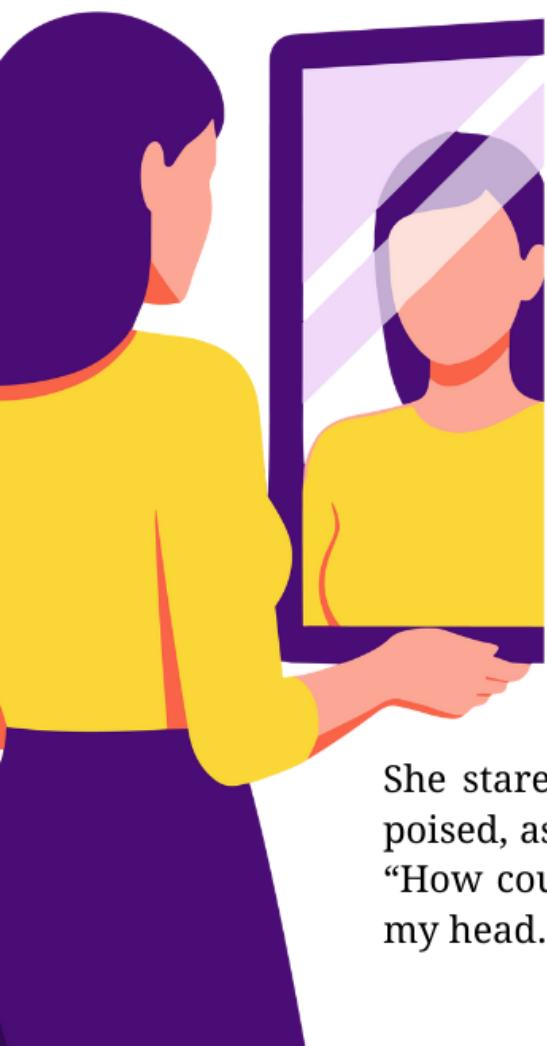
“Just look at yourself, you’re so ugly.”

At that moment, I make my decision.

They’re right. I’m ugly. But I will make myself change. I have to be pretty to be loved.



I stand in front of the mirror.



“Just look at yourself. Still worthless,” Victoria’s voice whispers into my ear. Instead of the usual honey-like tone, it’s now coated in the sweetest poison.

“Shut up,” I whisper, my voice shaky.

It’s not real. It’s not real.

I twist and turn, trying to find at least one angle from which my body looks good. Tears fill my eyes. Why can’t I be perfect?

She stares back at me, sitting beside the mirror, perfectly poised, as always. Her smiling face looks like a cruel smirk. “How could anyone ever love you?” her nagging voice fills my head.

I look at the girl in the mirror.

The excessive dieting has made her arms thin and stick-like. Her ribs, they're almost poking through her shirt. She looks like a skeleton. Her hair hangs in dry, black clumps. Her face is covered in a pale, white shade of foundation. I look closely at the grey bags under her eyes. Her lips twist into a grotesque smile, crimson on a pale face.

I glance at Victoria.

“I look just like you now.”

Then why do I still feel empty inside? Hollow. Like there's nothing there. I tap my chest. Is my heart still beating? Am I still ... me?

It's her. It's she who has made me like this today.

It's all her fault.

I heave, my breath coming in short, quick gasps. I clench and unclench my fists, trying to make that tight feeling inside my chest go away.

Suddenly, I grab Victoria by the neck and viciously fling her across the room.

Hitting the wall, she lands on the floor with a satisfying thwack. Her head breaks off the neck and rolls over on the floor, coming to rest beside the foot of my bed. I gasp, my voice cracking as tears gather at the corner of my eyes.

“Oh, no, I’m—I’m so sorry.” I sit down, gathering Victoria’s body in my arms. What have I done?

I feel as if I have committed a crime. Victoria stays silent. I absently stroke her hair, strands of silken sunlight between my fingers.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “But I had to do this. You understand, right? Right?”



Ankal Uncle's Stationery Disaster

Aarya Jain Baldawa

Yash and Mahi walked through the twisted, busy, and loud alleyways that they called home. Yash sighed, “I can't believe we have school so soon. Diwali break just ended.”

“I can't believe you lost all of your pens already, Yash. Mummi is so disappointed in you,” Mahi countered. “Avani said she'll meet us at Misha Aunty's stationery shop, right?”

“Ya, I think so.”

As the two of them neared the shop, Mahi stopped abruptly.

“Misha Stationery Shop—Under New Superior Management, Stationery Chief Ankal Uncle,” she read.

Yash sighed.

“Yash, Mahi! Sorry I'm late. What happened?” Avani said, running up to Yash. Panting, she looked up and read the sign. Her smile immediately dropped. “Not again.”*

*Read about the children's first encounter with Ankal Uncle, in “Ankal Uncle's Disaster”, published in issue 7 of WORDS.



“Bacche log? Come fast, I have a five-star stationery experience ready!” Ankal Uncle screamed. He patted his stomach and ushered the children inside the shop.

Mahi opened her mouth to protest, “Uncle, it’s fine, we don’t want the experi—”

Ankal Uncle interrupted her, “Firstly, how rude of you to call me by my first name, and secondly, of course you don’t *want* an experience, you *need* the experience. Come with me.”

“First, I will show you the pens.”

Mahi breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank god. That’s exactly what we need.”

Yash grinned as he picked up a ten pack of blue ballpoint pens. He turned it around and immediately, his smile dropped. He placed it back into the display, confusion in his eyes.

He looked at Mahi, whispering, “Didi, the price has been cancelled out. It now says five hundred rupees, I only carried hundred.”

“Five hundred rupees? No way.” Mahi looked at the pens and her eyes widened.

In the background, Avani and Ankal Uncle were having an interesting discussion about colours of scissors.

“Arre, I’m telling you, the green ones work the best,” Uncle said.

Avani countered, “No—the red ones are best!”

“Let me prove it to you,” Uncle stated. He grabbed a pair of scissors and started cutting the air furiously.

“UNCLE, I BELIEVE YOU, PLEASE PUT THE SCISSORS DOWN!” Avani shrieked. Her warning didn’t come in time though, as Uncle’s red scissors snipped off the end of one of her braids.

Avani screamed, and Ankal Uncle’s face turned red with shame. Avani ran out of the shop, mumbling a quick bye to Yash and Mahi. As she looked back, her hair was uneven, and her face wet with tears.

Yash and Mahi stared at Ankal Uncle, who was looking down at the dark brown hair and red ribbon on the floor.

“Why would you do that, Uncle?” Mahi asked.

“What’s wrong with you, Uncle?” Yash questioned.

Ankal Uncle looked up, then down again. He suddenly spoke, his voice clear and loud. “I’ll give you a discount on the pack of blue pens if you don’t tell anyone.”



Pig in My Room

Aarav Khandelia

My face was sweaty. I had just finished cleaning my room. I had just finished my exams as well. I wiped the sweat off my forehead as my body relaxed with relief. I had finally finished my work. Suddenly, I heard an oink. A loud, obnoxious oink. Into my room came a pig. A fat, stinky, dirty, pale pink, snoozy-looking pig at that.

“No, I just cleaned my room!” I yelled in pain. But, quite obviously, Mr Pig couldn’t understand me. He started trampling all over my room. He ripped the bedsheet, pooped on the carpet, and did many more dirty, disgusting things. “For what joy?” I yelled at the pig. It answered with an offensive snort.

My mind shook. I felt like I was about to cry. All that tiring, hard work was being ruined right in front of me. “How will I ever focus on my work if my room looks like a pigsty?” I shouted. Suddenly, the pig jerked its head toward the door and snorted again, louder this time. I stared at him, anger boiling. Why would I follow the thing that just destroyed everything I worked for? Was I actually about to follow a pig around my own house? The pig snorted impatiently, as if daring me to argue. For some reason, I didn’t want to upset it. After a long moment, I followed. Out in the hallway, my steps slowed. This is ridiculous, I thought. I should go back. But before I could turn around, the pig snorted sharply and jerked its head towards my baby brother’s room. As soon as I stepped inside, something shifted.

“Ba-ba-ba,” came a soft sound. Where the pig had been lay my baby brother, on his back, arms waving, face lit up with a toothless grin. He kicked his feet and let out another happy babble, completely unaware of pigsties or exams or ruined bedsheets. I sat down beside him on the floor. He grabbed my finger with surprising strength and laughed, a bubbly, squeaky sound that made my chest loosen. I laughed too. My room was still a mess. But who cared anymore? It could wait.

A Confrontation

Maya George

If you knew most of the school, spending your lunch break sitting alone in a classroom with only your tiffin was ... well, a concerning place to be. But here I was, sweeping up the last of my lunch with a fork and eyeing the classroom door. As I shut my lunchbox with a clang, I looked once again at the slightly-open door. I had a choice: either sit here through lunch break, or go out to face humanity.

Before I could make my choice, the classroom door creaked open slowly. Apparently humanity wanted to face me. Instead of a pitying classmate or a berating teacher, my eyes met with a familiar face.

“Hi,” Razia said, her hand trailing the doorframe, a wooden smile on her face. “How are you?” My hand remained frozen by the lunchbox as she glided into my classroom and sat on the seat in front of me. Her eyes flitted to the floor as she said, “Your mouth is open. Shut it.”

“If those are your opening remarks, what a pleasant conversation this is going to be,” I said dryly, but Razia’s eyes were dark.

“Considering you don’t have your usual crowd around you, I’m guessing your incredible plan has backfired.”



My ... incredible plan? Oh. Right. Yes. My incredible plan, from middle school. Five years ago. Who would still remember something like that?

“Well, there’s been a blip in the plan,” I said, looking away. “Just a little one.”

“Your definition of a blip is when your entire friend group completely abandons you, and your quest for popularity goes down the drain?”

Razia’s lip curled and I realised that she was ... disgusted with me. It was like a sharp blow to my chest, imaginary pain tearing through my lungs. It was unprecedented, and I hated it.

“Maybe don’t phrase it like that.” I inhaled, and met Razia’s deep brown eyes. “I’m sorry for what I did. I am, actually.”

“I don’t want to hear it.” She straightened, and proceeded to get up. “You literally told me that you didn’t want to talk to me just because the popular girls didn’t really like me. It’s ... rude at best, cruel at worst. I believe it’s just straight up awful.”

“So ... why have you come here?” I asked.

“Partly to gloat.” She sent a gleaming smile in my direction. “Partly to hope that you’ve learnt your lesson with making friends that will never stay and abandoning friends that will. I’ll be off now.” Shooting another smile at me before gliding out of the door, Razia left the room.



The Feather

Zaheer Vakeel

Year 2016

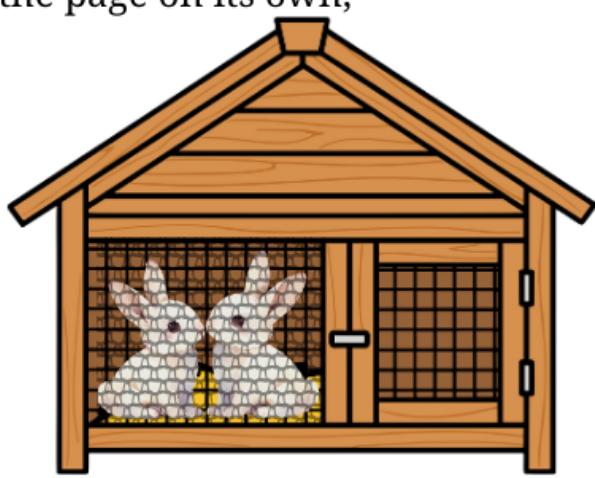
It was just another unremarkable Saturday morning, and I was up and about in the garden, sword in hand, on standby for predators since my rabbits had just given birth. At that moment, I saw an owl that had somehow managed to break into the cage made for the rabbits and abducted two innocent baby rabbits with its claws. I swiftly raised my sword from its sheath and charged at the owl. Because it was slowed down due to the abductions, I managed to strike a blow against it, which inevitably ended its life. I, being the person I was, ended up plucking one of its feathers out as a souvenir and kept it in a cloth, then threw it in the storeroom, to be seen again another day. The rabbits were saved that day.

Year 2026



Ten years later, I am rummaging through the storeroom in search of heirlooms when I find that same cloth, buried under layers of dust. I unwrap it and gasp. The feather, which I remember clearly as white, has transformed into a deep red. Two ideas strike me: fashion it into a Mughal-era cap, or dip it in ink and write like Shakespeare?

I choose the latter. As soon as the tip touches the paper, something inexplicable happens. The feather glides across the page on its own, answering questions hidden deep in my heart. It writes: How to profile teachers like criminals to manipulate them. How to extort lunch boxes successfully. How to remain unscathed by reprimands and make the teacher look like the one at fault. How to



look sharp in a class where you understand nothing.

The quill scripts the answers in a perfect Mystery Quest font. Shocked, I tape the notebook shut and label it **CLASSIFIED** just as my mother enters. In a panic, I shove it into my school backpack.

The Next Day

During the second period, I realise I've made a grave mistake: I brought the book to school. My friend spots it. "Neat book you have there," he says, his voice deep and villainous. Before I can react, he snatches it and bolts to a vacant desk. I stand up to retrieve it, but the teacher catches me. "Sit down!" she commands. Defeated, I comply.

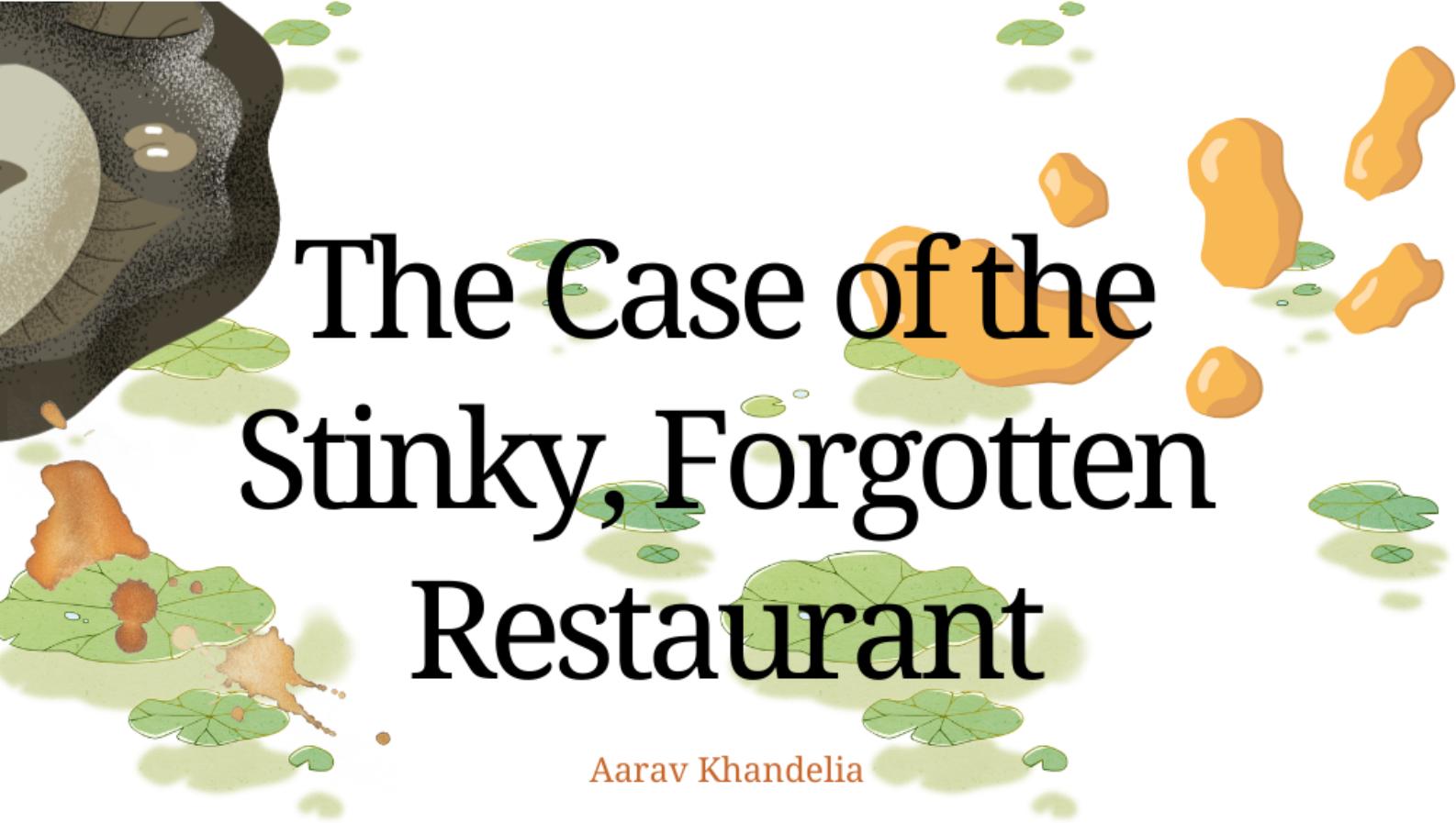
My friend opens the book. His eyes widen in horror as he realises the dangerous nature of the contents. He immediately hands it to the teacher.

"Well, what have we got here?" she asks, examining the cover. "A notebook labelled **CLASSIFIED**?" She opens it and proceeds to read the manipulation tactics aloud to the entire class. After a long pause, she looks at me. "Well, that's pretty impressive," she smirks. "But now that I know, your tactics are outdated."

The class starts hooting, branding me with the nickname "Mastermind". I let them hoot. I let the teacher think she has defeated me. As I pack my bag at the end of the day, I feel a strange calmness. She has taken the creation, but not the creator.

The red feather is still in the storeroom, and I am just getting started.





The Case of the Stinky, Forgotten Restaurant

Aarav Khandelia

The abandoned kitchen was filled with a pungent odour that made Filo hesitate at the doorway. It had been sealed for years after a fire, but the restaurant was reopening soon, and Mr Ranolf wanted every room inspected and cleaned. Moonlight spilled across the marble floor, revealing overturned pans and counters crusted with something that might once have been food.

“I can’t believe Mr Ranolf asked me to clean this mess,” Filo muttered. He was panicking. If the kitchen wasn’t spotless by morning, he’d be blamed for delaying the reopening and he couldn’t afford to lose this job. The scrape of his mop echoed through the silence—*cleeee*—and the smell seemed to grow worse with every step.

Then he found it. Beneath a long-forgotten sink table lay a huge wheel of Camembert, swollen and crawling with mould. It pulsed faintly, as if breathing.

Fighting back a gag, Filo grabbed it with both hands and hurled it into the bin. As it landed, he saw a flash of red shoot upward, splattering the inside of the lid. Filo stared at the bin, heart pounding, but nothing else happened. The lid slammed shut on its own, and almost immediately the stench began to fade. Shaken and confused, Filo finished cleaning as fast as he could. By dawn, the kitchen was spotless.

Later that day, Mr Ranolf inspected the room, his sharp eyes scanning every corner. At last, he nodded in approval.

"You did well," the chef said quietly. Then he paused. "Tell me something, Filo."

Filo's stomach tightened.

"Did the cheese bleed when you touched it?"

Filo froze. "Y—yes."

Mr Ranolf closed his eyes for a moment. "I was afraid of that." Then he opened them again. "There's an old legend. They say that in abandoned kitchens—stinky, dark, and forgotten—there lies a special cheese. Not ordinary cheese. Vampire cheese."

Filo's knees felt weak.

"I sealed that kitchen years ago," Mr. Ranolf continued. "Garlic keeps it controlled. But if it's disturbed ..." He trailed off. "It feeds on humans. Devours them completely. Leaves nothing behind but a finger."

"I—I threw it in a bin," Filo whispered. "A big yellow one."

Mr Ranolf let out a shaky breath. "Good. That means we still have time."

Together, they returned to the kitchen carrying cloves, bulbs, and strings of garlic. Mr Ranolf opened the bin just a crack, and a low hiss echoed from inside. Working carefully, they covered the cheese until it stopped moving, then lifted it between them. Without speaking, they carried it to the incinerator. As they threw it in, the cheese let out one final, piercing scream before the flames consumed it. Mr Ranolf wiped his brow. "You're very lucky, Filo," he said. "And ... you might want to avoid cheese for a while."

Filo nodded, too shaken to reply.



Plush Bunny Shows Off

Enya Roshan Fraz

There was once a girl named Molly D'Lima. She was cheerful and lively, and had loads of friends and many toys.

“Mom! I’m going to carry Plush Bunny with me, alright?!” she shouted out to her mother. Molly had been invited to a pool party and all the children had been allowed to carry one toy each.

Now, Plush Bunny was brand new, big, plushy and very stylish, with well tailored clothes and a change of outfits as well. He had come from a big and fancy store and he looked down on all of Molly’s older toys with disdain. In fact, he had quite rudely called them a grubby, unstylish bunch on the very day he had arrived in Molly’s room.

When he heard that he had been chosen for the trip, he became even more unbearable and proud. This made the other toys feel quite sad and low. After all, Molly had chosen him over them.

Radley Rubber Band was especially heartbroken. Radley was Molly’s oldest toy. Radley was just a rubber band decorated with beads and sequins and two googly eyes. Molly’s dad had made him for her when she was only four.

Also, Molly had always been kind and loving to all her toys and had never picked a favourite before.

But ever since Plush Bunny had moved in, things had changed.



That night, Molly brushed Plush Bunny's fur with her soft hairbrush. Then, she placed him on the windowsill and said, "Ok, Plush Bunny! You look good and smell good! Perfect for tomorrow! Perhaps I could ask Mum to lend you a pair of sunglasses for the beach." She wished all the toys goodnight and went out, shutting the door behind her.

"So you're going tomorrow, huh?" said Dotty Deer, rather coolly.

"And all alone too, huh?" said Megan Mammoth, in a sickly sweet voice.

"That's interesting."

"Well yes," said Plush Bunny, not seeing through the coolness, and feeling rather grand about all the attention he was getting. "Yes. I'm quite flattered that Molly chose me of all. It really is an honour. It's probably because I've spent time in the grandest toy store in town and know so much," he said with a pompous bow.

Radley listened to this with mixed feelings. At first he wanted to laugh. But then he thought of Plush Bunny's boastful ways and felt he needed to be taught a lesson. "Plush Bunny, do you by any chance know what you're supposed to do at a pool?" he asked.

"Of course," replied Plush Bunny, "I'm not some uncool, old-fashioned grandpa. I could see the hotel pool from the shop window."

"Oh, someone once told me that you have to have a shower before entering the pool," said Radley. "Are you sure you can do that?" he asked in a concerned tone.

By now, the rest of the dolls had caught on to Radley's trick.

"Well obviously, I know! Huh, let me show you how!" said Plush very snootily.

And with that, silly Plush Bunny leaped into the fishbowl, scaring Sparkle the goldfish, who nearly jumped out in fright.



He had been in for about a minute when he started feeling very cold and decided to come out of the fishbowl.

And what a surprise! Water had seeped through the small stitches and poor Plush Bunny was soaked! He didn't know what to do! He tried swimming, but his hand soaked the water and couldn't hoist him up. He even tried pulling himself out, but water in his body made it too hard to manage. He was completely stuck! He closed his eyes in despair.

Suddenly he felt a gentle tug on his ears and something was lifting him up. Plush Bunny thought it was a miracle. He opened his eyes and there stood Radley, Dotty, Megan and many other smaller dolls pushing and pulling with all their might. Slowly, after a lot of squeezing and shoving, he popped out of the bowl. He wrung the water out of his ears and back into the bowl where Sparkle darted about in relief.

Plush Bunny looked at all the dolls. He felt ashamed of himself but it was difficult to apologise. "I'm sorry. I really shouldn't have tried to show off, or said such mean things to all of you. I'm very, very sorry and very grateful for your help."

Plush Bunny knew that he looked ridiculous, all wet and squished up, and he couldn't bear to look at them any longer. "Can you ever forgive me?"

"You're forgiven."

Plush Bunny looked up. It was Radley Rubber Band.

"Yes. You deserve a second chance," said Pamela Porcupine.

"Yeah."

"Everybody does."

"We'll be your friends!"

"Good! You are lucky to have such good friends, Plush Bunny," said Radley Rubber Band.

"Yes, I am," replied Plush Bunny. "I really, really am!"



The Bear and the Weird Pen

Aarav Khandelia

There was this bear named Crunch, and he wasn't scary at all—he was more like a giant fuzzy potato. One day he found a glowing pen lying in the middle of the forest. It was just sitting there like, "Hey, pick me up, I'm totally not cursed or anything."

Crunch picked it up.

When he tried drawing a circle in the dirt, the circle popped into a real blueberry pie. Crunch screamed, then ate it, because who wouldn't eat free pie?

After that he drew a tree, which instantly sprouted out of the ground and smacked him in the face with a branch like it was saying hello. Crunch decided this was the coolest thing ever.





But then he got a “hilarious” idea. He drew a vacuum cleaner with big monster teeth. The second it came to life, it started zooming around the forest sucking up everything—leaves, rocks, a squirrel’s hat (don’t ask), and it almost sucked up Crunch’s tiny, fluffy tail.

“NOPE NOPE NOPE!” Crunch yelled while running in circles.

Crunch screamed as the monster vacuum zoomed after him, sucking up everything in sight. He spotted the magic pen on the ground, grabbed it, and scribbled the first thing he could think of—a giant muddy puddle.

Instantly, a massive swampy pit appeared right in front of the vacuum cleaner. It didn’t even slow down—it zoomed straight into the mud, sank with a pathetic gurgle, and got completely clogged.

It sputtered once. Twice. Then died with a sad little blorp.

Crunch wiped his forehead. “Nope. I’m done.”

He tossed the pen into a bush and walked away before it could cause any more chaos.

Little did he know that a few moments later, a passing raccoon would trip over the very same pen and unleash its fury ...

The Golden Feather

Maya George

I walked down the pavement, avoiding cracks that I had learned to avoid when I moved to the colony nearly six years ago. I was on my way to get stationery, as I did nearly every week because I was freaking amazing at losing pens, but this time the streets were considerably emptier, people huddled in jackets as they went about their daily errands and chores in the Delhi autumn, which was just a silly excuse for winter. Leaves did fall, but they were brown and dead and honestly just sad.

I squeezed my short frame between a crowd of old women walking down the street, likely part of some kind of walking group, and nearly got squashed before I managed to get into a small street where the only good stationery shop in my colony was located.



It, unfortunately, was practically a huge nest for birds, too. There were many trees in that area, and the number of mynahs in one tree was usually twenty or more. Now, multiply twenty with eight trees on just the lane to the stationery shop and back, and you get ... too many mynahs.

The squawks and screeches were unbearable, which was the main reason why none of my family members would accompany me on this trek down to the shop. That too, it was four in the afternoon, the golden period when it's not too hot and not too cold. AKA, mynah concert time.

I clapped my hands over my ears and walked down the road, trying to get to the stationery shop when my eyes caught sight of a golden feather. I saw a bird, perched higher on the tree than most of the

mynahs, more beautiful than most of the mynahs too. It had glorious, long feathers, golden as the sun, and dark eyes that pierced your soul. As I stopped to admire the bird, so different from our colony's multiple mynahs, it took off and dropped a golden feather on my head.

Suddenly, there was a flash and I lost my vision for a split second before I regained my bearings.

I walked on down the street, the mynah chorus dulling as I wondered what was going on. Was I sick, or something? I'd better get that checked by a doctor.

As I entered the stationery shop, I waved hello to Aunty, who had worked here since before I arrived. A short woman with silvery hair that curled and frizzed around her head like a lion's mane and eyes that were sharp enough to cut those silly little boys who came in here sometimes and knocked over her displays, Auntie was generally a perennial figure in my daily life.

Today, though, there was something extremely different. It was a cloud of dark grey smoke and some green smoke intertwined with it, a colour of swamps and muck.

"Hi, Aunty," I said, trying to understand where the smoke was coming from. It was not like I could smell it, and it was not stinging my eyes.

My first thought was that there was a fire coming from behind Aunty, but then I realised that the smoke was coming from her. I was clearly sick today, with all the blackouts and the imaginary smoke. As I came closer to buy my pens and leave and get my mind checked, I realised that



Aunty's eyes were marred with dark circles like bruises and she was constantly sniffing.

"Hi, beta," she said, smiling despite her obvious tiredness. "What would you like?"

I asked for my normal brand of pens, and then asked carefully, "Are you okay, Aunty?"

She turned around and said, "I have a cold and I'm really tired nowadays, but I'm okay."

Suddenly, the smoke made more sense. I mean, it obviously didn't make sense, but grey and green were the colours I associated with sickness and tiredness, just off the top of my head.

Aunty handed me the pen, and I paid before walking home.

I took my time, because suddenly everything looked different. People were walking around, and I could see what they were feeling. Some were so sad, their blue was almost black. Others were green with envy, still others were surrounded by the bright white of happiness, an incandescent glow.





When I got home and took off my jacket, I realised that I could probably use this power to try and see what my classmates or parents were feeling. Maybe even my teachers! It would be the ultimate road to success. Cater to people's feelings and end up having good relationships with them. It would get me more friends, more popularity, maybe even better grades!

My mother came into view, her face in a scowl, asking, "There you are, back from the stationery shop. Again. What is wrong with you, losing so many pens?"

I expected to see a red fog surrounding her like the frustrated people on the street, but I saw nothing. I inhaled sharply with shock, and looked back at my jacket, which was hanging on a hook on the wall. I snatched it and began rummaging in every pocket, the lining, any hole that the feather could have fallen in. My mother watched me, mildly amused and highly annoyed.

"Along with wasting our money, now she's gone completely crazy," she said, walking off eventually.

Even though I tried literally everything, even sweeping outside our door as the neighbours watched curiously, and the whole house nearly five times, there was no sign of the elusive feather.

Of course, I was extremely disappointed but no good thing has ever lasted too long with me. Either way, I was going to just have to understand what people were feeling by their faces. For now.



The Mango Heist

Aarya Jain Baldawa

Avantika?" Daksh whispered, "Let's get some mangoes from Ankal Uncle's farm."

"Daksh?" Avantika groggily mumbled. "Are you mad? We will get into trouble."

"Even Kabir is coming, you should as well. Have you seen how ripe those mangoes are?"

Kabir, who was silently standing behind Daksh suddenly spoke, "Come on, Avantika. Those mangoes are as orange as a ... an orange."

"It's one thing Ankal Uncle does well," Daksh muttered.

Avantika rolled her eyes, and Kabir giggled.

"Fine. I'll come. At least take a basket or two," Avantika replied.

"We'll take five if you carry them all," Kabir joked.

Avantika silently laughed. "Deal."





The three of them made their way through the fence that separated the two houses, making no noise, except for Kabir stepping on a twig. When on Ankal Uncle's land, Avantika broke the silence.

“The mango trees are there. I'll go get the mangoes.”

Kabir interrupted her, “NO! I want to go.”

“Kabir, shush!” Avantika whisper-shouted.

The sun rose in the distance, and a loud yawn was heard.

“Did you hear that?” Daksh asked.

Avantika looked around in a hurry, “Run.”

Kabir picked up a basket and ran towards the fence, Daksh and Avantika following behind.

Once the three of them had cross the fence, Daksh turned to Avantika with a look of panic in his eyes.

“I left the basket with my name on it.”

Avantika glared at him. “GO GET IT!?”

Daksh ran back through the fence, hopping over rocks and twigs. As he jumped over a particularly large fence, his shoe came out and he tripped and fell face forward on to a small mango, pulp and juice dripping all over his face.

A short plump figure above him cleared their throat. Daksh looked up to see Ankal Uncle—actually just his stomach.

“Beta, why are you in my five star mango farm?” Ankal questioned.

Daksh blushed.

“Is this your basket?” Ankal asked.

Daksh looked down.

“Why are you here?” Ankal asked yet again.

Daksh stayed silent.

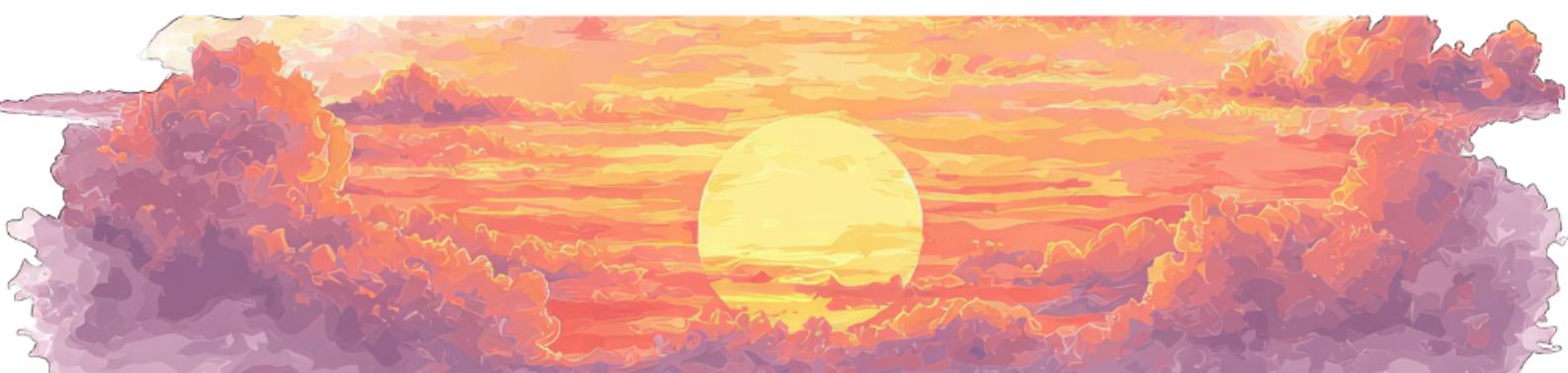
“If you came for my five star mangoes, I can’t blame you.”

Daksh looked up. “Really?”

“Yes. Take a few. I don’t mind, just tell me next time.”

Daksh grinned, and stood up abruptly, hugging Uncle’s stomach. “THANK YOU UNCLE!”

Daksh stood up and ran back to his house, determined to make it before his parents woke up. He entered his house and ran up the steps. Once in the safety of his and Kabir’s room, he grinned. At this moment, he knew this heist was worth it.

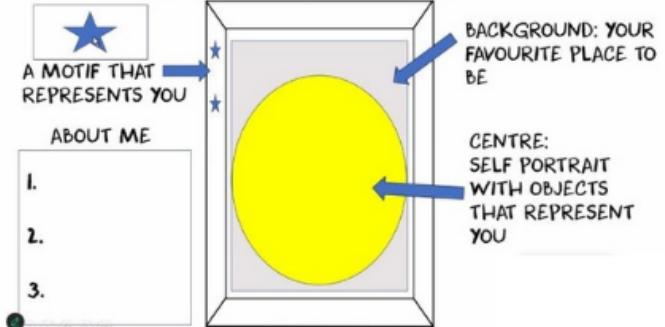


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