

VARSHA SESHAN'S ONLINE CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAMME

WORDS

ISSUE 9 | JULY 2026

Poetry | Drama | Stories



All by writers aged 9-14

Meet the Writers

Earth saver
Idea composter
Sugar monster
Zara

Nature Lover
Night Nerd
Story Weaver
Sinchana

creative brainstormer
doubtful overthinker
budding book-reader
shanaya

Book imaginer
Opinion shifter
Ball smasher
Rishik

Music admirer
Story wanderer
Ghungroo wearer
Ronikaa

Book devourer,
Chronicle crafter,
Music adorer,
Maya

Notebook storer
mess magnet
Tamarind robber
Kaveri

Page wanderer
Art creator
Song performer
Kabir Tayal

Book consumer
Art creator
Room messer
Kabir Srinivasan

Dream chaser
Page turner
Chaos creator
Kaashvi

hue chaser
football fanatic
melody connoisseur
haasya

Thought river
Wisdom flame
Dream harbour
Devika

Day dreamer
Giggle giver
Goal chaser
Bianca

Idea generator
Dragon master
Drum legend
Aymen

Tale turner
Dusk dancer
Surfside swimmer
Arudraa

Kenning Poetry

A kenning is a figurative compound word that takes the place of an ordinary noun. Two nouns are brought together to create a two-word phrase that symbolically or metaphorically refers to a noun. This time, the writers used three kennings to describe themselves!

Novel reader
Egg cooker
Injury magnet

Anaya

Shuttlecock smasher
Basketball dunker
Paint blotcher

Ameyaa

ice eater,
uno cheater,
phrase repeater,
aarya

Pizza gobbler
Word weaver
Music maker

Aarav

Mess maker
Stationery lover
Anti-nap advocate

Aadhya

Poetry pourer
Stump shatterer
Feminist trailblazer

Aabha

Hello!

Issue 9 of WORDS is here!

At the risk of repeating myself, I will say that I've struggled with AI use once more. While I have done my best to ensure that the writing I've included in this issue isn't AI-generated, I do suspect that some of it may have been AI-aided.

Having said that, the pieces that made it to this e-magazine are ones that I enjoyed reading. More importantly, they're pieces that the young writers edited and rewrote extensively, working consistently on the feedback they received. As always, I am astonished at how far they've come over the course of the programme!

Happy reading!



VARSHA SESHAN

AUTHOR
CREATIVE WRITING TRAINER

The Poetry Playground

A workshop with Yashasvi Vachhani



Silly sounds
Random rhymes
Numbskull Nawabs
... and fantastic fun!

A Poem from Guest Session #34 with Yashasvi Vachhani

Have you ever met the Kangarude?
All people mention is his mood.
When asked to smile, he'd just ask, "Why?"
When asked to laugh he'd give a big sigh.
Most people say he's very rude,
but the only thing to fix is his mood!

Sinchana Prasad

POETRY

6-11

Thirteen Ways of Looking at ...

What do we mean by the word “perspective”? How can we look at the same thing—perhaps something perfectly ordinary—in thirteen ways? Read poems about bamboo, the sun, an ant, an armadillo, a rainbow, an apple, thunder and havoc!

12-17

Rhyming Verse

We often find symbols in poetry. What can simple things symbolise? For instance, what does the colour red symbolise? What could a paper boat symbolise? We explored our ideas in rhyming verse.

18-22

Puzzle Poetry

Puzzles are fun! Can you decode all the poems and then—as a bonus—find out what the theme for our exercise on puzzle poetry was?



Thirteen Ways of Looking at ...

Bamboo

Among green hills, bamboo stands tall
In the whispering winds, bamboo nods.
A gentle breeze, the bamboo sways
The wind hits it with a *Whoosh Whoosh!*
The green heart of the forest
The scent of cut grass and damp earth, oh so fresh!
A thousand stems, one gentle voice
In moonlight, bamboo's silver glow
Empty yet strong like bamboo's heart
Bamboo's roots, earth's firm grip
As smooth as butter, top to bottom
looking like a giant beanstalk creeping up the sky
In simplicity, bamboo's beauty lies!

Arudraa Singh

Earlier this year, I attended a wonderful poetry workshop conducted by Rachel Piercey (look her up!). She introduced me to "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" by Wallace Stevens and spoke about how we can use the idea in class without even reading the poem. That's exactly what I did, and here are the results!

Bamboo

Panda haven
flexible contortionist
Rural pen
flapping leaves
rustle, rustle, rustle
tall tower
bird's apartment
Nesting material
cooked delight
jungle protector
Lush and verdant
forest inhabiter
warrior's staff

Kabir Srinivasan

An Apple

Worm home
As red as a rose
Tummy satisfier
Core like a forgotten skeleton
Food source
Crunch, crunch, crunch
Smooth and moist
It sits tall and proud
Hunger quencher
Firm bite
Affluent aroma
Raw richness
The stem stands over the apple, a sentinel, watching, guarding.

Rishik Halan

An Ant

Six-legged insects
Sweet hoarders
Human biters
Sometimes prey
Scurrying reds
Food spoilers
Itch itch
Shy creatures
Small soldiers
Team builders
Seed dispersers
Anthill residents
Muscular path makers

Ameyaa Nair

An Armadillo

Nature's professional excavator
Reluctant Olympic athlete
Skilled submariner
Living shield
Glow-in-the-dark wonder
Disease distributor
Speed breaker
Night in shining armour
Sequel to Ice Age 5
Too cute to crack
One of four
Bug grubber
Little leaper

Kabir Tayal



Bamboo

As old as time
Panda treat
Brown circled
The leaves whisper secret messages
Rustle rustle
Tropical guardian
Never gives up
Pickle wonder
Toothbrush maker
Smooth as glass
Green as grass
Seismic survivor
Chopstick creator

Anaya Chouksey

The Sun

Skin burner
Earth heater
Source of food
Centre of the universe
As old as time
Horizon painter
Star in the sky
Never gives up
As fierce as a lion
Ball of fire
Can't be approached
Shadow chaser
Day maker

Kaashvi Bhardwaj

The Sun

Super star!
A huge ball of gas.
Fire demon.
Vitamin-D creator.
Feel its flames burn your skin.
Sweat making machine.
The planets' PE coach, who made them run laps for over a billion years.
Look at it sit peacefully 15,00,00,000 kilometres away from you.
Devastating dehydration.
Rainbow former.
A tree's best friend.
The solar systems night light.
Earth's mother.

Zara Varun

Havoc

Havoc within myself, the first of thirteen ways.

the silence before thunder.

the river that forgets its banks,
a flood that teaches us loss.

laughter crackling alongside lightning.

a mask shattering into something brighter, sharper.

Havoc laced with lament,
a cry rising from its own delight.

a crow's wing cutting into the sun,
a fatal fracture.

fire's wild dance
devouring its own shadow.

the sea's sudden surge
pulling us into its hunger.

whispering through rumour's mouth,
faster than wind itself.

the storm's grin,
teeth bared against the crashing horizon.

the breaking of order.

the birth of fire.

a path veering away
simply because it wants to.

As havoc consumes us,
we become nothing but havoc itself.

Devika Aditya Singh

Thunder

Lightning's best friend
Zip, Zap, Zoom, a brilliant sound and light show for all
Terror spreader
Joy creator
Ground soaker
Eardrum burster
Chaos generator
Darkness creator
Monsoon bloomer
Unexpected arriver
Cymbal inspirer
Earth shaker
God's anger

Aarav Khandelia

The Sun

The sky's golden eye
A burning coin tossed into the valley of Zeus
The morning spark
A growing ember
The horizon's glow
The timekeeper ticking without sound
A crown of gold
The wandering warmth of life
A hush of light
The endless lamp
A fiery heart in the vast unknown
The god of day
A mighty ruler dressed in gold

Bianca Bisht

The Sun

Summer starter
Life giver
Heat inducer
Day lighter
Moon shiner
Goblet of fire
Hydrogen hogger
Heart of the solar system
Yellow star
Season maker
Vitamin D helper
Ice melter
Sizzle sizzle sizzle

Aadhya Javvaji

A Rainbow

A sky-scarf, worn loosely over the sun's shoulders
A laugh between the clouds, vibrant with joy
The strings of an instrument, rich with solar song and storm sound
A bridge only the golden rays use, dancing across the seven-hued surface
A sash tied across the clouds, rippling in the drizzle
An outfit rain and the light of day stitched for the sky
A set of stairs to the sun itself
A seven-shaded serpent, slithering through the sky
A glowing, stormy daydream
A sky-smile, looping between the rain and sunbeams
A skyline-hugging, colourful halo for the horizon
A bow of light and darkness, poised to shatter the dark clouds
Painted by the clouds with colours of the sun and the rain, a rainbow.

Maya George

A Rainbow

Seven unique shades mixed into one
An unreal beam between two clouds
A vibrant smile in the sky
A divine palette where each colour expresses a unique emotion
A colourful string which turns all frowns upside down
Screams of joy when it is in sight
A magnet attracting all the birds
A spectacle forming multiple crowds
A dazzling melody zooming through the air
A dash of light defeating all dark
Its acronym, ROYGBIV, tells us all its beautiful colors
A sky cutter
A glimmering spell

Aymen Hussaini

Rhyming Verse

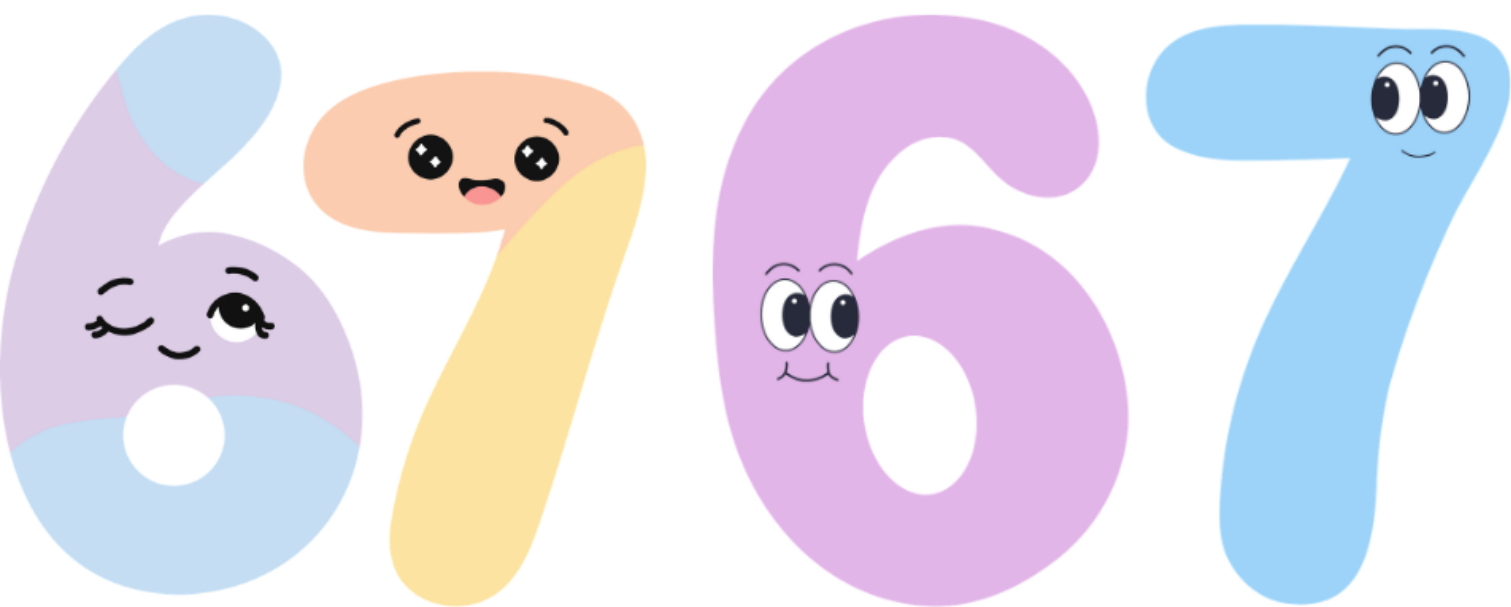
Six Seven

Six seven started as something small
a throwaway number that meant nothing at all
said once, then again, till it stuck in my head
now it loops like a line I half-wish I'd never said

Six seven follows wherever I go
in steps on the stairs in the pace that I slow
it fits into pauses; it slips into rhyme
a quiet odd rhythm that keeps marking time

Six seven lingers; it won't let me be
it hides in the pattern of things that I see
like a joke that kept growing, then lost what it meant
but still left a trace of where all of it went!

Devika Aditya Singh



6-7

A meme that started as a funny joke
“Six seven!” teenagers suddenly said
Nobody bothered, nobody cared
But now it corrupts them, stuck in their head

In class, online, and at home
Six seven is everywhere looking for me
When I walk around, as normal as can be
“SIIXXX SEEEVVVEEENNNN!” someone yells, like a jumpscaring bee

These people have never heard of twenty twenty five
These people have never heard of touching grass
Six seven stays glued to the inside of their brains
Six seven is all they think of in class

The great meme reset, thanks for nothing
Brainrot prevails, and it's worse than ever
Somebody stop this, somebody make a move
Or else six seven shall remain forever

SIXXX ONEEE

Aymen Hussaini



paper boat

i used to fold pieces of paper into a paper boat,
i used to tenderly set it free and how it would float!
i used to be barefoot, folding paper boats with a friend.
but all good things seem to end.
now, i turn my homework into paper boats with care,
i place it on the water, and watch it drift somewhere
and even though it floats far beyond my view,
it leaves memories of a child i once knew.

Aarya Jain Baldawa

The Paper Boat

A splash in the water as the boat drops down,
Unsteady and flailing, it threatens to drown,
Then slowly but surely, it starts straightening out,
For the watchers nearby, a seed of hope sprouts,
Steadily, the creases on the paper refine,
Every single one of them aligned
To push the boat forward to its destiny,
The best version of itself it could ever be.
Suddenly, ripples begin to churn,
The eager onlookers point to the stern,
Dragged down into the depths of the fathomless pool,
The boat disappears into the gushing water cool.
Silence reigns as those watching patiently wait,
Before yelling, "Oh no, school! We're going to be late!"

Kabir Tayal





Clouds

Clouds drift above me in beautiful blue
they stretch into shapes that feel almost true
a bird, then a mountain, then something unclear
they change as I watch, and then disappear

They gather in layers in soft silver light
and move with the hush of the slow coming night
I follow their edges, they thin and they part
like thoughts I keep losing before they can start.

Devika Aditya Singh

The Sun

I rise in gold, with laughter in my light,
Painting the world in warmth, all glowing bright.
I dance across the skies, a glow you can't ignore,
A little chaos, yet you always want more.
Set apart from the stars, I shine with joy and art,
While Poseidon's waves reflect my glowing heart.
I warm your days and make heavy moments glow,
A star so bright, I chase away the snow.

Kaashvi Bhardwaj

The Mirror

When I look in the mirror, I can't help but see
Another new face they've plastered on me,
A red carpet, heels and a smile too wide
Once they've clicked a picture, I'm pushed to the side
The cameras, the flash, the lipstick, the grin
All I can hear are their words, "She should get more slim."
A mirror is supposed to show what nobody can hide,
Why then, when I look in it, all I see are their lies?

Maya George

Red

Red is a colour that never hides
it feels like fire bold and bright
not calm and soft like pink or blue
it lights you up with its scary hue

It shows your anger through the façade
it shows the confidence in your heart
It shows the fight, anger and rage
All present in your mind's cage

Red is the one that symbolises power
Like the thorns present on a rose flower
it is in the choices that you make
red is every strong decision you take



Bianca Bisht

Red

Running fast
a party that lasts
shining bright though splattered with mud

death at night
words that bite
clean white floors with puddles of blood

bold and strong
marks something wrong
the best, happiest, longest dance

intimidating and proud
sudden and loud
red can be anything if you give it a chance

Kaveri Kongovi Anand



Blue



Blue
cooling, calm
a soothing balm
clearing your head of any worries

sipping iced lemonade when the sun burns
drawing for hours after a tough day
curling up around a book from September to May
this is what blue means to me

Red

Red is controversial,
As you can see,
With many meanings,
For you and me.

blue
A wave of calm
a soothing balm
everything will be all right

Red might be for blood,
Splattered and gory,
Ruins of a battlefield,
Where one man gained glory.

Kabir Srinivasan

Red might be for anger,
Frustration and rage,
They overwhelm your body,
Putting you in a cage.

Red could be for danger,
Stay cautious and alert,
Stop signs and fire trucks,
They prevent getting hurt.

Red is controversial,
As you can see,
With many meanings,
For you and me.

Rishik Halan



Puzzle Poetry

hi
Reader
i bet you can't
guess the secret word
... i'll let you try anyway ...
but it looms Over you like a gigantic tree
don't Cry, i'm sure you will
figure it out! it's not a Kraken or
the burj khalifa but great
guesses. It's not an Enderman
(from minecraft). good job though.
you have shown perseverance and resilience.
i might give you the answer in T - 10 (note to reader: don't trust me)

t-9	t-8	t-7
t-6	t-5	t-4
t-3	t-2	t-1

Rishik Halan

My clues for you are:
It's white
Like that dirty pot of paint—
Kudos to you for cleaning it up!
Yes, you caught me ... I'm going off topic

Why don't I tell you the last clue
About my thing in space?
You see, you just need to look closer—to the start of it all!

Anaya Chouksey

Answers
Rocket (Rishik Halan)
Milky Way (Anaya Chouksey)

Five letters long is my name,
The first is first in pudding and plane.

With five moons, I orbit the sun.
The second's second in blowgun.

I used to be ninth in line,
The third's in cup and quinine.

Terminated from my group in 2006,
The fourth comes twice in betwixt.

I was named by an 11-year-old girl,
The last matches the shape of a pearl.

WHO AM I?

Ronikaa Vijan

i am made of dust, hydrogen, helium, and bright gas.
in some cases, more than a hundred suns is my mass.

i come in all colours, chemicals, shapes, and frames,
for destroying whole solar systems, i'll take the blame.

i 'babysit' something one nonillion times your size.
i watch thousands of them with my one pair of eyes.

ultraviolet radiation is one of my biggest fears,
and, last, to find me travel six hundred fifty light years.

who am i?

Aarya Jain Baldawa

The call of a slithering snake
The first of the prey
The pinnacle of aztec
The ocean, where waves cascade
Number 5? The end of 5!
The answer is _____ !

Kabir Srinivasan

I sparkle, shimmer and shine
All the days and nights are mine
I'm hotter than a hot air balloon
I'm the only reason you can see the moon
Around me all the planets align
I'll say it again, I sparkle, shimmer and shine

You'll never guess what I am!

Arudraa Singh

Lop off the head of the first clue, 'sate'
In the true fashion of Henry the Eighth,
Steal the third letter of the second clue, 'gape',
Don't worry, you'll get away without a scrape.
For our final clue, think of a winning hand's best card
Put it with your solved clues, it's not that hard!
Finally, a bonus, think of stars and sky
And the great expanse where satellites fly.

Maya George

Answers
Space (Kabir Srinivasan)
Sun (Arudraa Singh)
Space (Maya George)

In PSECA, I roam, I shine
I make the NUIEVESR look so fine
Born in RIFE, I live a billion years
When DEZAG at, I rid everyone of tears
I am the light to every LGAYAX
I am the centre; LAPENTS revolve around me
When a VLODE one is gone, I appear
My RIPSIT, my meaning, can never disappear
What am I?

Aarav Khandelia

Out in the dark, the EISURNEV goes on,
Full of stars that brightly glow.

I see a faraway ALYGAX spin,
Planets and moons twirling within.

A brave TSRATUONA floats alone,
Watching the NOOM and stars that shine.

Some NALPETS are big, some are small,
They drift in space and never fall.

Clouds of EABNUL glow and gleam,
Like a dream within a dream.

The force called GTRIAVY pulls them tight,
Keeping planets in their flight.

Far away in an ITENRAACLITICG place,
We wonder if life shows its face.

Haasya K

Connect the stars,
 And you'll go far,
 Follow the clues,
 The rocket's launched, boom!
 The first five are numbers,
 Backwards in a row,
 You'll say them,
 While counting down for a show.
 The next are eight letters,
 Easy enough?
 Get ready, 'cause things
 Will start to get tough.
 The first is in big, bang and in bee,
 The second is the first when you say, 'Leave!'
 The third and fourth are the centre of quasar,
 The fifth ends a comet, haven't you come far?
 The last littlest word has the most might,
 Say it and you will be ready for flight!
 The first letter you find in soon, moon and orbit,
 The next two end liftoff, now this is the fun bit.
 The third word completed, ready to connect?
 Let's pay our rockets some special respect.
 Have you found it out? Or skipped the top?
 Together, they form:

_____!

Aabha Sardesai

Shining the brightest in the sky,
 In the Dog Days of Summer I burn like the sun.
 Red or blue-white: who truly was right?
 In the winter I chase the hunter's desire,
 Underneath the canine constellation,
 Sparkling like a sapphire under a veil of darkness.

Kabir Tayal

Theme: Space!

Sirius (Kabir Tayal)

5, 4, 3, 2, 1, BLAST OFF! (Aabha Sardesai)

Answers

DRAMA

24-33

Dramatic Monologues

Dramatic monologues are fun to write and fun to read! As we wrote these, we paid attention to the fact that in a dramatic monologue, something has to shift halfway through. How does our perception of the character or situation change from the beginning to the end of each of these monologues?

34

The Magic Pinecone

Maya George

39

The Museum

Rishik Halan

42

Kevin's Faulty Footwear

Kabir Tayal

46

The Theft of the Golden Plate

Aymen Hussaini

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The Magical Remote

Rishik Halan

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Theft in a Museum

Anaya Chouksey

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The Magical Remote

Aymen Hussaini

64

The Magical Bookcase

Kabir Srinivasan

68

The Jewel

Maya George



Dramatic Monologues

First Day of School, First Day of Misery

Aadhya Javvaji

Mom, I don't want to go to school, it's so boring. We have Maths, English and Science. If you ask me, it's like prison with teachers. No, don't say it's going to be fun this year. You say this every year and it always turns out worse than the last, and the torture doesn't end there. There's homework! Like, what's the point going home, if we are just going to learn there too?! And of course, the new way of tricking us into doing homework—"productive screen time". What's the point of screen time if you just waste it all on online math courses?

No, I'm not falling for it, it's just homework wrapped in fancy paper. And we don't even do it ourselves; we just use AI.



Oops, no mom! I didn't use AI for homework! Maybe a little ... okay, fine, I did use it. I'm sorry, but what am I supposed to do? Maths is so hard! I hate it!

Really? You are going to cancel your online math subscription!? Oh my god, this is the best day of my life!

Oh ... to get me a tutor who can help me with maths? Noooo please, at least get someone who can actually help me! No, not my school Math teacher, please, anyone else, please she's so boring, oh, this is the worst day of my life!

Accused

Anaya Chouksey

I didn't do it, I swear I didn't do it. I'm innocent; it's her! Please don't arrest me, Mr Inspector. You can check the camera too! It shows me at the coffee shop and I promise it's not edited, you can ask them to check it if you like, but I didn't do it! I have proof, please. NOOOOOO! Don't take me, please no!

Please, my parents are waiting for me, they're taking me to the Bahamas. Wait, what! You're here to pick me up for the trip to the Bahamas? You're not an inspector who's going to arrest me for robbing that bank, kidnapping the manager, and hiding him in my trunk? Woohoo!

I Hate My Life

Bianca Bisht

First day of school, first day of misery. (*groans*) Ugh! This day sucks already. I mean, explain to me how summer went by so fast, like geez ... Plus, now we're going to tenth grade, and my life is just going to be a bigger pain. I mean, it's already a pain, but this one is going to be like a tenth class level pain. Plus, all the kids in my grade this year are dorks, which means that the only thing I will have to do is study?? (*panicked*) Oh no, I can't do this, I can't do this, I don't want to do this, please don't make me do this!! Help me, save me from this hellhole before the monster demon in the form of a principal shows up, or else I will dieeeee ...

Come on, the only thing that can save me now is lunch, and I wonder what we have for lunch today? Ooooh, there's pizza! Wowzie! My life sucks a little less now, so now the pain is slightly bearable, but I would love if there were chocolate chip cookies. Not for me, you know, for the pain ... hehe ...



Can We Leave?

Arudraa Singh

(sobs) First day of school, first day of misery. I hate this school, I hate this place. All the teachers, the environment too. This place makes us so miserable, don't you agree?

(not letting other child talk) Of course, of course. You do, but what I hate the most about this PRISON is sir headmaster! I've heard that he has been kind to only one kid, ONE KID! The teacher's pet. I mean (whispering) he always shouts at his own wife! (shudders) That kid's name was something like Sean or something like that.

Oh no! The headmaster is sitting on his chair and watching us ... That's kinda odd, he's smiling!? Huh?

Hey, I forgot to ask you ... What's your name? I think I have seen you before but I am not sure. (pauses for the other child to speak)



WHAT!? YOUR NAME IS SEAN?
OHHHHH NOOOOO ...
(whimpers) Well s-since I h-have
t-t-t-to finish my e-e-e-e-essay, I'll
just (principal approaches) ...
yeahhhh byeeeeeeeeee! (runs
away)

Burdened

Aabha Sardesai

I didn't do it.

I didn't do it, I swear. My life has been haunted by the ghosts of my past, but I'm done—I've said I've not done it, and I haven't. My burdens are endless, my soul is weary, and my life's dreams thus far are all unaccomplished.

All because—because what?

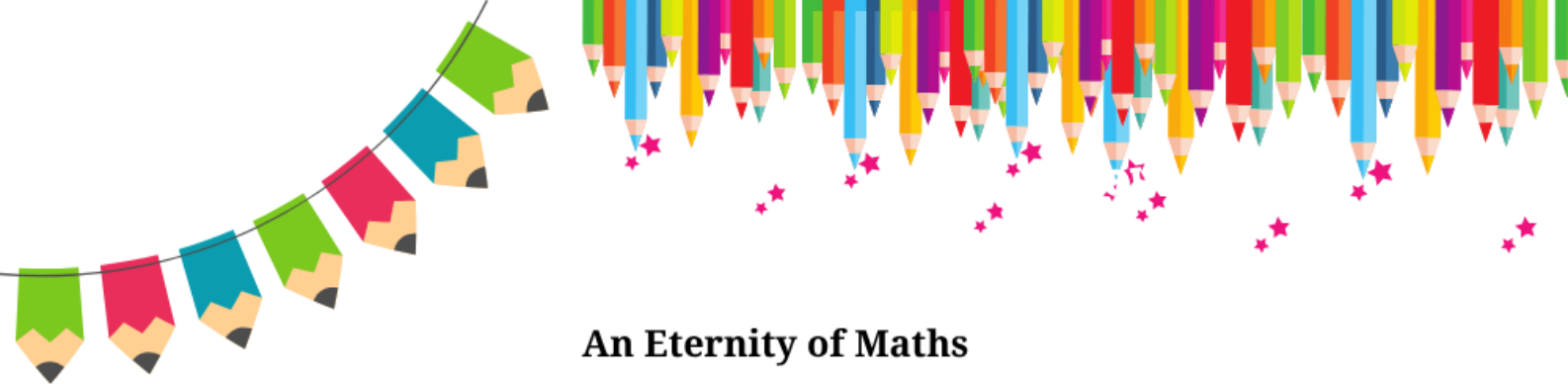
This burden that eats me, corrodes me every single day. Constant, unending, relentless. A weight that sits at the base of my neck, in the judgemental eyes of the people, and so I stand in front of you today, declaring with the weight of my whole existence that I have not done it.

Why would I do it? Why should I do it? It does not benefit me in any way. It is of no use to me. It is something that would only take up my time and energy and my life would have to revolve around it, and so, let me tell you one last and final time: I didn't do it.

I didn't do my homework.

Ha.





An Eternity of Maths

Sinchana Prasad

First day of school, first day of misery ... yep, that's what it's like. Except the first day alone isn't misery, the whole ten years you're in school are misery.

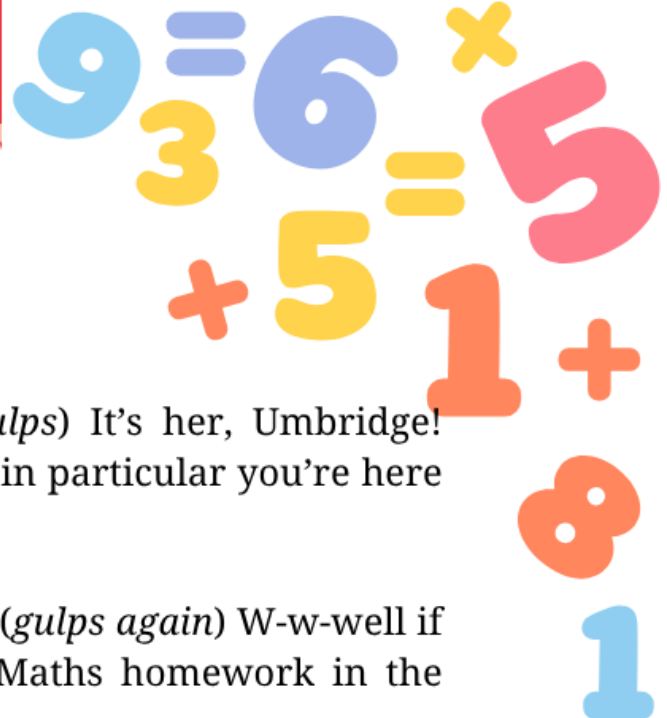
Well, maybe not the whole ten years, you know, like maybe you had that one time the Maths teacher didn't give you homework? Or that one time they gave you a free PE?

You're lucky you met me in the lunch break in the hot sun, I know, weird right? 'Cause I'm gonna teach you what to do and what not to do, where to go and where not to go, and whom to ask for a free PE and whom not to ask for a free PE.

Anyway, (*clears throat*) what's your name, kid? Jeff, you say? Okay, okay. Hmm ... still in third grade, no letters in Maths for you yet. So, who's your Maths teacher, Jeff? Ha! Umbridge! She's a devil, isn't she? Doesn't teach properly in class and then expects us to finish the whole syllabus for homework.

The thing I would recommend to you if you're ever feeling bored in her class is to ask for a washroom break. I've done it a couple of times myself. (*chuckles*) Works like a charm. So, Jeff, what you **SHOULDN'T** do in Umbridge's class is to ask her not to give you homework; she might blow up for that (*chuckles again*).

And you should always make up an excuse not to go to her staffroom with her, cuz she'll start lecturing you about your life choices and stuff like that, real bore if you ask me. I feel bad for you, you know, you've got Umbridge. Out of all the Maths teachers in the world, you got Umbridge.



Wait, who's that coming towards us? (*gulps*) It's her, Umbridge! Good morning, Miss Umbridge ... anything in particular you're here for?

What?! Here to see your nephew Jeff, is it? (*gulps again*) W-w-well if you don't mind, I think I left my um ... Maths homework in the library and I'll be off to get it! Goodbye!

MPT

Shanaya Kudva

First day of school, first day of misery. We have Mass Physical Training. What even happens in MPT? (*mimics PE teacher*) 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... 4 ... 5 ... We have to raise our hands and repeat exercises continuously.

You kindergarten kids are very lucky. No MPT for you. My hands and legs hurt a lot. The PE teacher doesn't do anything other than beat the drum, shout and blow the whistle. We have MPT in the first period! Ugh! All we do is keep our hands stiff and march to the drum. The PE teacher says that he will let us off five minutes early if we are good, but he doesn't let us off early even if we are good. Aahh! Torture in the morning!

Well, we reached and we have to go and face MPT. We aren't very lucky.

Wait! It is raining! No MPT at all! YESS!! No MPT! What a stroke of luck!





Escape

Ronikaa Vijan

So, I'm leaving.

I mean, what's the point? I come here and WASTE EIGHT HOURS OF MY DAY trying to understand stuff that's never going to be useful to me. And then I have to go home and STUDY MORE! And you try and try to get the best marks, to make your family PROUD, but then someone else gets more and you get asked, "Why didn't you get their marks?"

I want to be creative, I want to create art, I want to travel, I want to wake up and not constantly be overwhelmed by the amount of information I have to memorise. And in ALL OF THIS ... (*chokes on tears*) YOU NEVER GET TAUGHT HOW HARD IT IS OUT THERE IN THE REAL WORLD! You never get taught how to be strong, how to face people, how to cope with all these overwhelming feelings that swallow you and make you feel worthless. All you're taught is that you need to be in this category of a "GOOD PERSON". And how do you become one? You shut your mouth, study, get good grades and do as the ADULTS SAY.

And then suddenly, all you think about is what others think of you. The only thing that validates you is good marks and rare praises from other people.

But then, everything starts to get too hard, and you try to stay good, and you try to be "good" like you were when you were ten or eleven, but it just keeps getting harder, and you start shaking when you hear the word "school" and now you can't keep up and now you're BAD. You start getting anxiety attacks, and you cry in the school bathroom at lunch when no one will hear you. When you say that the only thing that brings you joy is poetry, they laugh at you. They call you stupid. They say that you'll never make a name for yourself. Now your life is ruined. Now ... you're nothing. You're worthless. Nobody cares about you. All they care about is the kids with the shiny marks who walk around being nice and always smiling. Who have their whole life sorted out.



And then when the bad kid, ME, walks into the principal's office, telling her that I have been invited to London to learn poetry from the finest poets in the world for three years, the same poets whose poetry she praises at every assembly, and the same student she's called "undisciplined, lazy, distracted", for the past ten years, you see embarrassment mixed with ego on her face. And she musters the courage to push her ego to the side and asks you for an autograph of those poets.

And when you smile and reply, "Oh, but I'm worthless, aren't I? I'll never make it out into the world", you see her flushed face. You see her look away. You see a hint of regret. (*swallows and takes a deep breath*)

Then, it all feels worth it.

I Don't Believe You

Kaveri Kongovi Anand

I don't believe you. Don't tell me I have no reason not to believe you. No, I've not forgotten about that day five years ago when you broke the pinky promise you made. You said you'd give back the pencil in a minute but did you? (*doesn't let other person reply*) No, you didn't! I counted and it was one minute and twenty-two seconds. You lied to me! So I don't believe you. You're obviously the one who stole my hairband and you probably already threw it into the ocean! (*other person says something*) Why would you take it? For revenge. Last to last year I drew a line on your favourite drawing and you wanted revenge so you took my hairband and burnt it and then threw the ashes into my fish tank! You thought that I wouldn't notice but I did. I see everything and now all because of you my fish are probably eating the ashes of my hairband. (*sneezes and hairband falls off their face*) Oh ... my hairband was on my head the whole time. Anyway, I'll still be watching you. Verrrrry carefully. Who knows what evil things you're up to?



Trapped

Rishik Halan

I'm sure this is because of the curse. You and me both being stuck in this weird and spooky town with no way to get out is definitely not a coincidence. You got cursed as well? What did you do to anger the witch? What's your name? Don't wanna tell me? I'll find out soon enough ... The quiet sort are bound to slip up sooner or later ...

How long have you been here? I've been here for two or three months. Have you tried getting out? It's impossible! The roads just lead back here! It's getting dark, so we should leave, get to the house, 'cause the monsters are coming. They look like ordinary human beings.

Wait ... are you one? No? Okay ...*(turns towards audience and walks forward but then stops and looks at the audience. Their eyes dart around with that, "They're behind me aren't they?" Slowly turning around they shout ...)*

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

I'm sure this is because of the curse. You and me both being stuck in this weird and spooky town with no way to get out is definitely not a coincidence. You got cursed as well? What did you do to anger the witch? What's your name? Don't wanna tell me? I'll find out soon enough ... The quiet sort are bound to slip up sooner or later ...

How long have you been here? I've been here for two or three months. Have you tried getting out? It's impossible! The roads just lead back here! It's getting dark, so we should leave, get to the house, 'cause the monsters are coming. They look like ordinary human beings.

Wait ... are you one? No? Okay ... (turns towards audience and walks forward but then stops and looks at the audience. Their eyes dart around with that, "They're behind me aren't they?" Slowly turning around they shout ...)

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!



SCHOOL

A Dark World

Aymen Hussaini

First day of school, first day of misery. What? Don't give me that look! I am not overreacting. Be honest, you hate school, too. Everyone does. It's a torture device for all of us!

Well, would you look at that? It's time for ten months of doom. Again. It genuinely feels like summer went by faster than a cheetah running for food. Have you guys ever had that feeling when summer only feels like it lasts about two weeks, when it's actually supposed to last two months? Well that's what I go through EVERY YEAR! Now, here I am getting up at 6:30 am, just to spend eight precious hours of my day learning the most useless nonsense ever. There is no way I'm actually gonna use algebra, literary devices, or stupid Rutherford's gold foil experiment in the outside world, and even if I am, just PLEASE let me be homeschooled. In seventh grade, you cannot, and I mean you (*stomps*) CANNOT go one day without getting into a fight, or getting "shipped" with another girl.

How do these people have enough braincells to ragebait me, but not to pass school? I swear these monkeys being civilized is a myth. (*stomps with force*) I've had it! If only I could get my revenge on those monkeys! Yes, yes! That's it! The problem is, I can't do it alone. I'm an ant against lions! I must form a group. An alliance. A rebellion.

Perfect! My alliance will be called "The Rebellion". Now all I need are members and weapons, to ambush them. Once and for all, I am going to show them. I'm gonna return the favor and make them taste their own medicine.

Wait. What do you say about joining The Rebellion? I mean, you guys probably have bullies who you want to get revenge on, too! We should team up!

Shoot, but for now, I'm late for class. Until next time!

The Magic Pinecone

Maya George

CAST

MINI: young girl, a bit short for her age, about 12 or 13

MINI'S MOTHER: a middle-aged woman

SARA: a girl, long hair and tall for her age, 17 or 18

AMAR: a boy, 17 or 18

SCENE 1

MINI's hotel room. It is organised and yet completely messy, knick-knacks flooding every corner and MINI sitting at her desk. She has a bag overflowing with pinecones sitting before her, and she's sifting through them. MINI'S MOTHER comes in.

MINI'S MOTHER Have you decided which ones to keep and which to throw? No way I am letting you lug all of these back to Delhi.

MINI Just a few more minutes, Ma. I'm trying to pick the perfect ones to display. I don't want any broken ones or anything.

MINI'S MOTHER *(while backing out of the room)* Kids these days. So obsessed with how everything looks.

(MINI picks out one pinecone, which is almost suspiciously perfect. It has no broken pieces, is curved in a perfectly gorgeous manner and sets it on the desk. As she does so, the pinecone rolls a bit, and teeters at the edge of the desk. She does not notice.)

MINI Maybe I should have been more selective about this when I was picking these up from the hillside. Some of them are really bad.



(MINI picks one up and drops it immediately, pressing her fingers together and screwing up her face in disgust.)

MINI Oh god, that one was sticky? Why was it sticky?!

(Beside her, the pinecone drops.)

MINI Oh! Oh no.

(MINI bends to pick up the pinecone. As she is picking it up, one of the hardened seed-coverings breaks. She sighs.)

MINI Now I can't keep this one, either—

(There is a bright flash of light and then, a BLACKOUT)

SCENE 2

A hillside. Branches stretching towards the sky, pinecones fat and heavy on them. MINI is lying down centre stage but abruptly gets up, pressing the back of her hand to her head.

MINI Where ... What?

(MINI stands and looks around briefly. She begins walking. As she walks, AMAR and SARA enter. They walk slowly towards down stage right.)

MINI Hey! Hi! Please, I need to get back. Can someone take me back?

(AMAR and SARA continue walking without paying attention to her.)

MINI HI! HELLO? CAN YOU HEAR ME?

(MINI storms in front of them, and waves a hand in their faces. No reaction. AMAR bumps into her.)



AMAR Ouch!

SARA Are you okay?

AMAR Ah. Yes, I'm fine.

SARA Are you sure? I don't want you getting hurt.

AMAR Sara, I don't want you worrying about me, okay? It makes me feel weird about it.

SARA It shouldn't make you feel weird. I mean, it's your reality. This is your last walk in the woods.

MINI I seem to be invisible to them, or something. Maybe they can lead me back to the hotel?

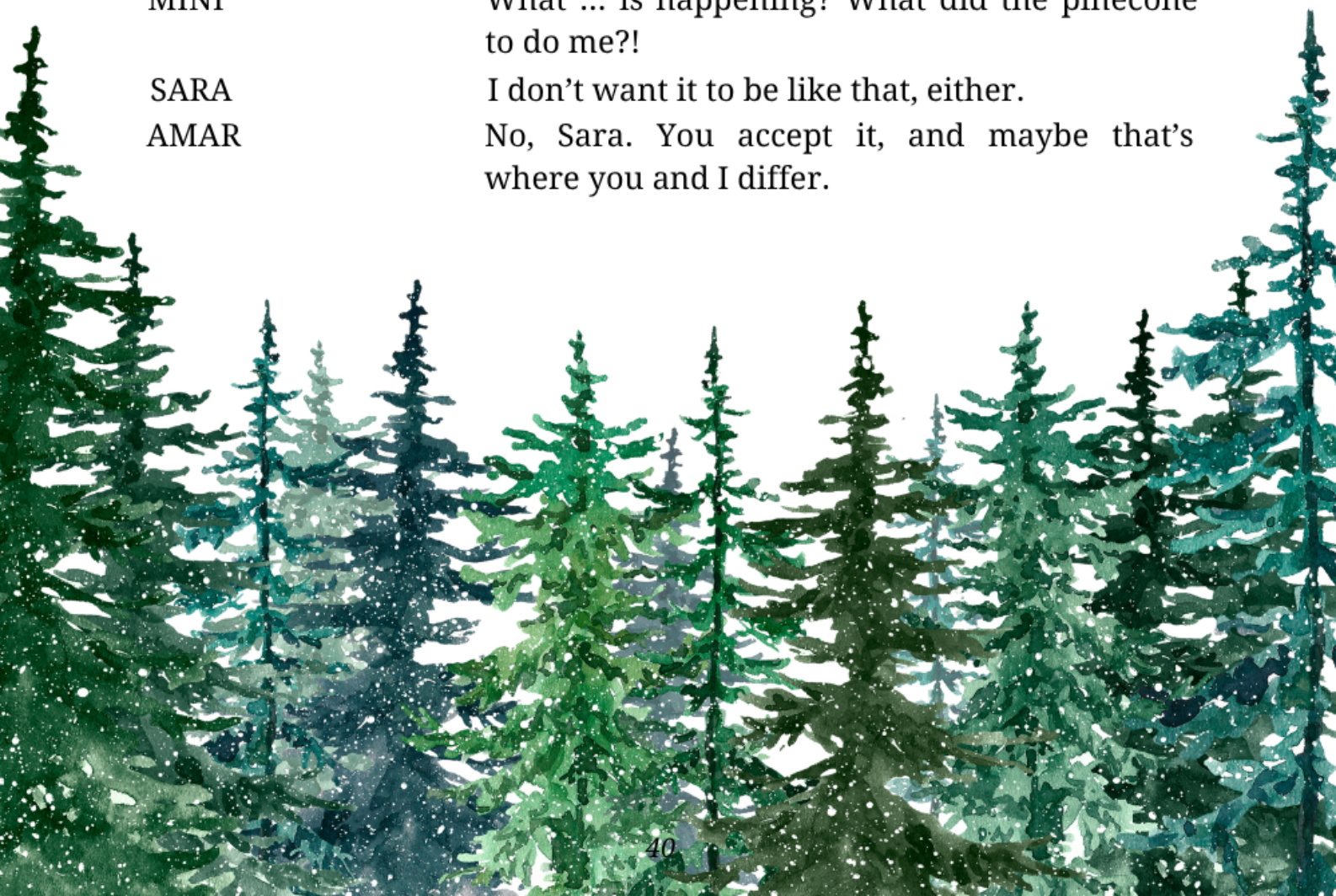
(MINI begins following AMAR and SARA as they walk amongst the trees, heads bent towards each other.)

AMAR I don't want it to feel like that, though. I really don't want it to be like that. I don't like this fatalism, the fact that the end of our friendship is just when this trail ends.

MINI What ... is happening? What did the pinecone to do me?!

SARA I don't want it to be like that, either.

AMAR No, Sara. You accept it, and maybe that's where you and I differ.



(SARA angrily stops, and AMAR skids to a halt as well. MINI stops too.)

SARA I don't think you understand, Amar. This is quite literally the last time we see each other. I don't want this to be a fight.

(AMAR pauses, hands tucked inside his jacket pocket. He looks down, and then back up SARA.)

AMAR Can I be totally honest, Sara?

SARA Of course. What else are best friends for?

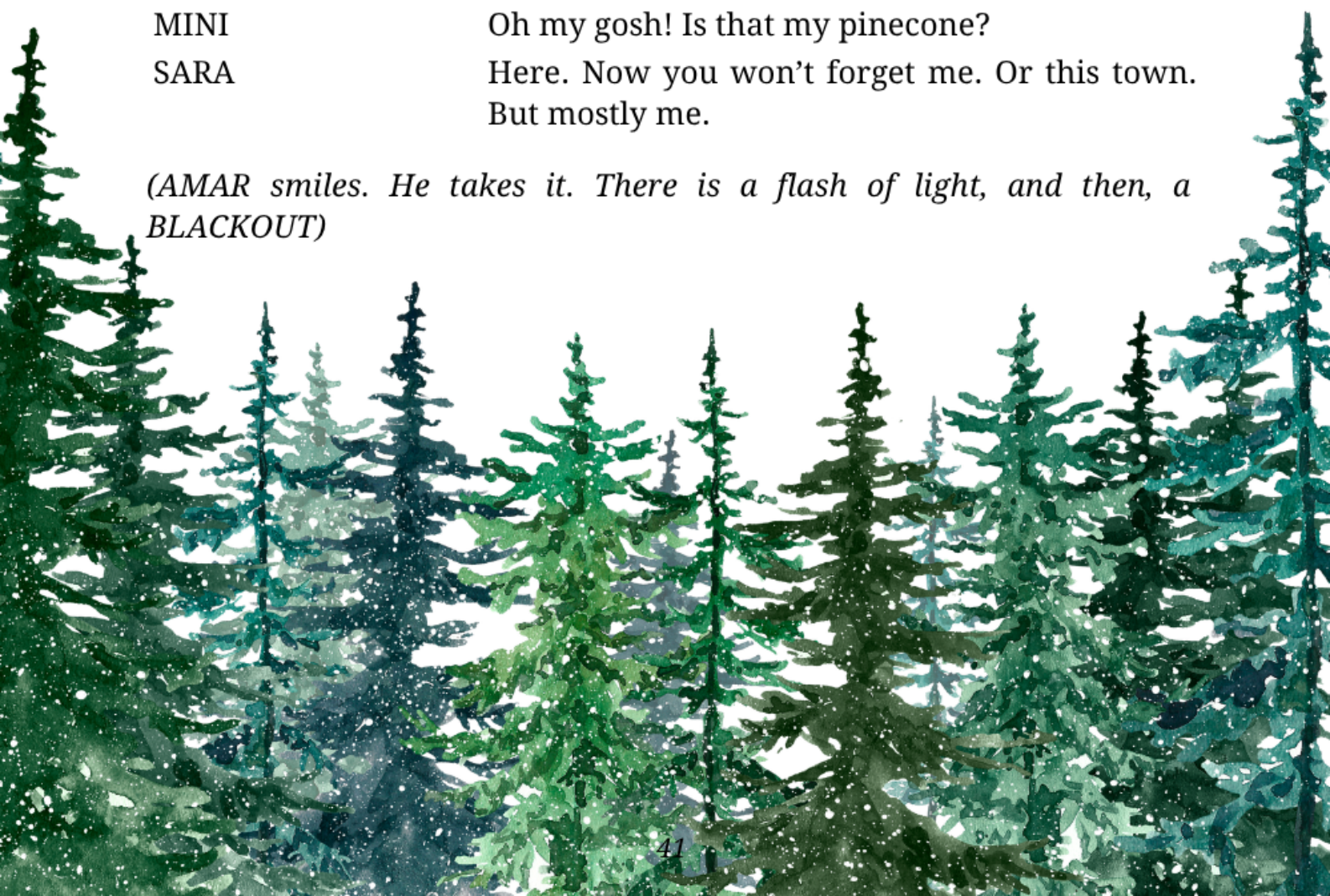
AMAR I'm afraid I'll forget you. And this town. But mostly you.

(There is a short pause. SARA's eyes widen, and then she pauses. She goes towards MINI and suddenly MINI thinks that she is going to see her. But SARA moves past her and picks up a pinecone sitting on the ground near her. It is MINI's pinecone. SARA shoves it into AMAR's hands.)

MINI Oh my gosh! Is that my pinecone?

SARA Here. Now you won't forget me. Or this town. But mostly me.

(AMAR smiles. He takes it. There is a flash of light, and then, a BLACKOUT)





SCENE 3

The same as scene 1—MINI's hotel room.

MINI'S MOTHER MINI! Mini? Mini!

(MINI sits up, head pounding and pinecone clutched in her hand.)

MINI'S MOTHER What happened? Are you okay?

MINI I ... don't actually know. Can I lie down, Ma?

MINI'S MOTHER Of course. Immediately.

(MINI sets the pinecone down on the table, and presses a hand to her temples.)

MINI *(whispering)* Definitely not taking this one back to Delhi.

(CURTAIN)

The Museum

Rishik Halan

CAST

TOM: kid detective, school uniform, about 12

JOHN: part-time helper, casual clothes, early 20s

BOB: museum curator, in a suit, in his 50s

PETER: security guard

INSPECTOR: in uniform, in his late 20s

SCENE 1

TOM is working alone, standing in front of a Ming Vase, writing furiously. JOHN is working, hauling some boxes into the museum from stage right, huffing and panting. PETER in the background.

JOHN Stupid parents, stupid art, stupid diamond. If someone stole that diamond that would be the best day of my life.

(JOHN walks offstage. A few moments later, alarms start ringing.)

TOM Thank goodness I came here to do my homework, something exciting has finally happened!

PETER Do not take this lightly. We don't want anything to be stolen, especially not the Marina Diamond. Let's round up anyone who was in the museum.

(BLACKOUT)



SCENE 2

Everyone is standing behind an empty glass case. PETER is pacing in front of it.

PETER Tom, you are not a suspect because you were with me at the time of the robbery. Since the security measures were confidential, this could only have been an inside job.

TOM I heard John say if someone stole that diamond that would be the best day of his life. *(TOM looks pleased with himself)*

PETER Thanks, Tom! Now John, why did you do it?

JOHN I didn't—I didn't do it, I swear. I don't even know where it went! Think about it, why would I do it? This job is the only source of money for me and my family!

PETER You are our most likely suspect. I'm sorry.

TOM I'm gonna go search for evidence. *(TOM exits the room)*

PETER *(to TOM)* Be careful, I don't want anything to happen to you!

(BLACKOUT)





SCENE 3

A cluttered office. Papers strewn everywhere. Enter TOM. , He picks a sheet of paper up and reads it.

TOM Met Gala guest list. Bruce Wayne, Tony Stark, Clark Kent, Dr. Ock, blah, blah, blah.

(TOM is walking out when a piece of paper gets stuck to his shoe. He picks it up and reads it.)

TOM Hmm. What's this? Insurance ... blah blah blah ... 875 million USD! I need to show this to Peter!

(TOM runs out of the room. BLACKOUT)

SCENE 3

In front of the glass case. TOM runs back in. The suspects and PETER are still there as well as INSPECTOR.

TOM I figured out who did it! It was the curator! Since there wasn't enough money, the curator decided to get the insurance which is 875 million USD!

PETER AND
INSPECTOR How do you know?

TOM Look at this! *(TOM shows PETER and INSPECTOR the paper.)*

PETER Nice work Tom! I'm sorry, John.

BOB I'll never tell you where it is! Never!

(PETER looks through BOB's pockets.)

PETER Welp, found it! All's well that ends well!

INSPECTOR You should have hidden it somewhere in the museum. That would have been more fun.

BOB Yup, yup. How do you know that's not a fake? HAHAAHAHA!

(CURTAIN)



Kevin's Faulty Footwear

Kabir Tayal

CAST

KEVIN
MOM
TEACHER
RIGHT SHOE
LEFT SHOE
STUDENTS

SCENE 1

Lights turn on, KEVIN is getting ready for school.

KEVIN Ugh! I hate going to school in the morning!

MOM You know how many times you've already been late. Now pick up the pace! I have to go to work.

KEVIN (*grumbling*) Hey, where're my shoes?

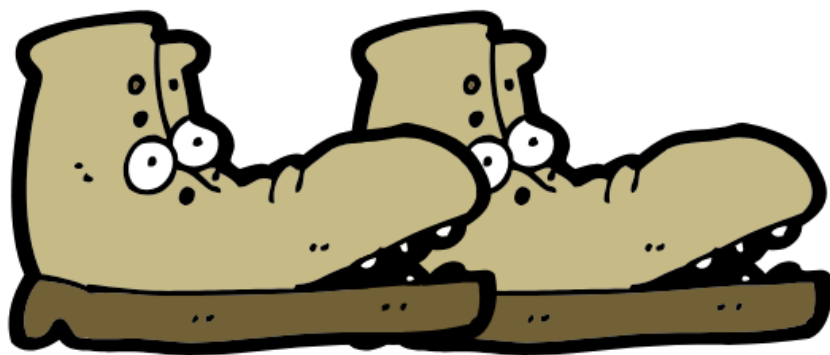
MOM Oh honey, I don't know. Just pick another pair, I'm running late.

KEVIN (*picking up a pair*) Hey, look at these! Strange, I've never seen them before.

MOM (*dryly*) I'll bet.

KEVIN (*putting on shoes*) See you later, Mom!

(BLACKOUT)



SCENE 2

Lights brighten, KEVIN sitting at desk.

TEACHER Class, today we will have our first POP QUIZ of the year!

(STUDENTS groan.)

KEVIN *(mumbling)* A pop quiz! I already have enough to worry about fitting into a new school—and now this?

(SHOES stir.)

RIGHT Maths is boring! Let's spice things up a little bit!

LEFT *(hushed)* Oh no, no, NO! You're going to get us kicked out, just like last time!

(RIGHT SHOE begins to stomp, LEFT SHOE joins in.)

RIGHT Five, six, seven, eight! Come on, Kevin, let's hear those metal studs clatter! This pop quiz is a snooze fest!

LEFT Shush! You're going to get us to the principal's office! I'm trying to cover up some stomping here!



RIGHT It's called art, Lefty. Now change, or I'm going to kick the desk in front of us!

KEVIN What's happening?!

TEACHER (*sharply*) Is there anything you'd like to share with us, Kevin?

KEVIN Miss, I don't know what's happening! It's almost like my shoes are acting by themselves!

(Stifled laughter from STUDENTS.)

TEACHER Well then, would your shoes like to come up to the board and solve this problem for me?

KEVIN Um ... okay ...

(Gets up and falls down immediately)

TEACHER Kevin! What's happened to you today? You'll be getting extra detention after school for this!

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE 3

KEVIN's home.

MOM Hi, honey! How was your day?

KEVIN Oh, it was just the worst! It was almost like my shoes were acting by themselves, and I made a ...

MOM Yes, I know—a fool of yourself. The teacher sent me an email.

(KEVIN gulps.)

MOM Come to think of it, I've never seen these shoes before, Kevin.

KEVIN What was I telling you, Mom?

MOM It's probably for the best if we throw these away.

(MOM picks up shoes and throws them out. BLACKOUT)



SCENE 4

Outside KEVIN's house. Lights brighten slightly.

LEFT Now look at what you've done! You've got us thrown out again—on the doorstep in the middle of the night!

RIGHT Oh! Like we don't all know whose fault this is.

LEFT ME?! You're the one that got us sent to detention in the first place!

RIGHT It's not my fault you tripped over our own laces!

KEVIN (*loudly*) Who's there?

(SHOES freeze.)

KEVIN Huh. Maybe it's just the wind.

(CURTAIN)



The Theft of the Golden Plate

Aymen Hussaini

CAST

JAKE

MAX

HAROLD

RYAN

SAM: a security guard

SCENE

A museum. The lights turn off in the exhibit. A cracking sound is heard, followed by the door shutting. Alarms ring all over the museum.

JAKE W-w-w-what's happening?! Why are the doors shut?!

MAX No, no, no, no! I'm too young to die! This can't be!

HAROLD The alarms are so loud!

RYAN This is so scary!

(Alarms continue ringing. Lights turn on some time later and the alarm stops ringing. The Golden Plate is missing.)

JAKE Wow, that sure was fast! Wonder what happened.

MAX W-wait, why is the case of the Golden Plate broken and—?

HAROLD WHERE IS THE GOLDEN PLATE?!

RYAN Someone stole it!



JAKE Well, then it's up to us to figure out who stole it!

MAX Uh, Jake? Sorry to burst your bubble, but there IS nobody here, except for the four of us!

JAKE Oh, yeah. Shoot.

HAROLD What if one of us took it?

RYAN Ok, so one of us TWELVE-YEAR-OLDS took it! What a reasonable conclusion!

HAROLD Maybe! It's a better conclusion than, say, an invisible man who can walk through doors took it!

JAKE Ok, guys, it's no use fighting. We need to figure this out (*stomps*) ourselves.

(JAKE, MAX, HAROLD, and RYAN are all gathered around the broken glass that originally protected the Golden Plate. JAKE has a notepad and pen with him from his bag.)

MAX Hmm ... who could it be? Jake, Harold, or Ryan?

HAROLD Hey, hey, hey! You can't just accuse us like that! How do we know it wasn't you?!

MAX *(emptying his pockets to reveal two safety pins, one coin and a wrapped up piece of gum)* All the information you need.

JAKE I was in the corner of the room seeing the cool knight armour. Ryan saw me! There is no way I could run twenty meters to the opposite side of the room, where the Golden Plate was, in, like, three seconds.

HAROLD Then who is the thief?! Oh my god, this is so difficult! We should've never used up all our pocket money combined just to get locked in a museum!

RYAN Harold, what's your side of the story? Why are you acting so stressed? It's suspicious.

HAROLD I was in the bathroom! Do you think I could've come out and taken the Golden Plate in such little time?

RYAN Yeah, true point. I'm the weakest one here. There is no way I could break the glass, even with a weapon.

JAKE *(sighing)* Well, guys, I don't think we're gonna find out who thief was. He probably left as soon as he took the plate.

MAX,
HAROLD, Agreed.
RYAN

(Doors open, SAM enters the stage)

SAM Alright, you four. Please make your way out of the museum. It's closing time.



JAKE Hey, hey, hey, sir! Don't you see the Golden Plate missing?! Also, aren't there still thirty minutes left till closing time?

SAM We close early today, and we are going to investigate the situation right now.

JAKE Ok, then. Come on boys.

(JAKE, MAX, HAROLD and RYAN exit the stage, and doors close.)

SAM *(peeking into his bag, and looking around to check if anyone is watching and eventually taking out the Golden Plate)* Kids, oh kids! Did they really think they could catch someone with twenty years of robbing experience? I must admit, though, for a forty-year-old, I am quite fast. Dashing out of the room with the plate before the door shut was no joke.

(SAM reveals a grappling hook from his bag, takes it out and launches it into the glass ceiling, taking off a few seconds later. The ceiling cracks open, and is broken.)

SAM *(laughing evilly)* Adios, amigos!

(CURTAIN)



The Magical Remote

Rishik Halan

CAST

KESHAV
MOTHER
MYSTERIOUS MAN
RISHIK



SCENE 1

A living room. KESHAV centrestage, facing audience, lying on beanbag, holding remote and “watching” TV through an imaginary screen. MOTHER enters stage left, facing KESHAV. MOTHER puts hands on hips.



MOTHER
KESHAV
MOTHER
KESHAV
MOTHER

Stop watching TV, your brain will get fried!
Please Mumma, just five more minutes?
No, you need to turn off that idiot box!
But—
No buts. TURN IT OFF!

(MOTHER exits the stage.)

KESHAV

Ugh! I have been watching for about ten minutes. She promised me thirty! I did all my studies as well! *(looks at the clock behind him)* Oh ... But I wish I could watch just a little more Naruto. *(He presses the off button. It doesn't work.)* Huh? *(He presses and shakes it furiously. A rattling sound comes from inside the remote.)* What's this?

(KESHAV pulls out a Post It note and reads it out loud.)

KESHAV 'From a friend.' What could this do?

(MOTHER enters stage left.)

MOTHER I TOLD YOU TO TURN IT OFF!

KESHAV I wish you would stop nagging me!

MOTHER ARE Y—

(KESHAV points the remote at MOTHER and presses pause. MOTHER freezes.)

KESHAV What?

(KESHAV points the remote at MOTHER and presses play. MOTHER unfreezes.)

MOTHER —OU SERIOUS?!

(KESHAV points the remote at MOTHER and presses pause. KESHAV exhales a sigh of relief.)

KESHAV Thank god!

(MYSTERIOUS MAN enters stage right.)

MYSTERIOUS MAN I see you have discovered
the secret of my remote.

KESHAV Your remote?

MYSTERIOUS MAN Yes, my remote. No one
can know about this ...
I'm not sure how, when,
or why it came to your
house, but now you
have to die ... I'm sorry.

*(MYSTERIOUS MAN snaps his fingers.
BLACKOUT)*





SCENE 2

A laboratory. Centrestage, KESHAV is tied to a wall. MYSTERIOUS MAN is pacing in front of him.

MYSTERIOUS MAN Hmm, how should I kill you?

(MYSTERIOUS MAN brandishes a sword. KESHAV whimpers.)

MYSTERIOUS MAN Perfect.

(MYSTERIOUS MAN is about to slice KESHAV, but then a shout comes from backstage. RISHIK enters stage left with a baseball bat.)

RISHIK NOOOOO!

(MYSTERIOUS MAN misses. He slices the rope instead, freeing KESHAV. KESHAV runs to stage right.)

MYSTERIOUS MAN RISHIK?! Beta, what are you doing here, I thought you had a class?

KESHAV RISHIK! Your dad tried to kill me!

RISHIK I'm sorry, Dad.

MYSTERIOUS MAN Why?

(RISHIK runs and hits MYSTERIOUS MAN with the baseball bat. MYSTERIOUS MAN crumples to the floor.)

RISHIK *(runs to KESHAV)* Are you okay?

KESHAV Kinda?

RISHIK *(going to MYSTERIOUS MAN and taking something out of MYSTERIOUS MAN's pocket)* Hold this Keshav, snap your fingers, and it will take you home.

KESHAV *(taking what RISHIK is offering)* Will you be okay?

RISHIK Yes, I will be fine.

KESHAV Okay then. Bye.

RISHIK Bye.

(KESHAV snaps his fingers. BLACKOUT)

SCENE 3

Back in the living room. Centrestage, KESHAV is sprawled in a heap on the floor. MOTHER is looking over him, scolding him.

MOTHER What is this?! Get off the floor and STOP THIS DRAMA!

KESHAV I love you, Mumma!
(Hugs MOTHER)

MOTHER *(enjoying the love but suspicious)* What happened?

KESHAV Nothing ...

(MYSTERIOUS MAN enters stage left, his hair messy, his clothes torn. He zaps MOTHER with the remote. MOTHER freezes.)

MYSTERIOUS MAN Just you and me now.

(CURTAIN)



Theft in a Museum

Anaya Chouksey

CAST

LEANNA: short brown hair, green eyes, and a white top with jeans, 17

KYLE: slicked-back black hair, black eyes, and khaki pants with a white shirt, 34

KYRA: black hair in a bun, brown eyes, and guard uniform, 30

MYRA: brown hair in a ponytail, black eyes and guard uniform, 24

MIA: blue hair, tawny eyes, and a white top with denims, 19

SUMMER: long brown hair, dark skin, and long dress with a tote bag, 40

SCENE 1

Museum. Alarms are blaring. LEANNA rushes in. All others are standing in middle.

KYLE Leanna! Wonderful you're here! This is Summer, a visitor, Mia, also a visitor, and the two guards Myra and Kyra.

LEANNA Alright, I take it nobody has left the building and nobody has entered since the painting was stolen.

KYLE That is correct, Leanna.

SUMMER Can this go a little quicker please? My babies are at home, waiting for me!

LEANNA I'm sorry miss, but we're going as fast as we can. Hopefully you'll be free by the end of the day.

SUMMER (*aghast*) The end of the day!? Can I at least phone my husband? Please!

KYLE He has been informed. Please quiet down a little.



MIA You're saying that as if you're not a suspect.
KYLE Really? I'm the manager! People like me don't need
to steal. On the other hand ...

(KYLE throws a dirty look at SUMMER.)

LEANNA Nobody is saying you did it Kyle, but you are a
suspect.

KYRA Let's just get to the bottom of this so all of us can get
home.

SUMMER Who are you interviewing first?

LEANNA I'll go with Kyra.

MYRA *(surprised)* We're suspects? But we're security!

LEANNA And security can steal too, Kyle, a private room
please.

KYLE At the back.

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE 2

Small room with two chairs. KYRA and LEANNA sit down.

LEANNA So, Kyra where were you at the
time of the theft?

KYRA Me and Myra were at the
gate, you can ask her to
confirm the alibi if you'd
like.

LEANNA I'll make sure to when I
interview her. Next
question, what do you
know about the painting?

KYRA It's expensive, large, and
honestly would need to be
hidden within the museum
itself.





LEANNA *(raises an eyebrow)* You say that as if you've had experience in stealing.

KYRA *(taken aback)* Of course not! Don't you think I'd be much richer if I did? *(laughs)* Speaking of experience, how come you're a detective at such a young age?

LEANNA I've always been smart. Now, going on. Who do you suspect?

KYRA Honestly, that lady. Ummm ... What's her name? Summer! Yeah, Summer.

LEANNA Alright, thank you, Kyra. Call Myra, please.

(Exit KYRA. Enter MYRA.)

MYRA Look, I didn't do it! I'm charged with protecti—

LEANNA Protecting it, I know. It does make it easier for you to steal does it not?

MYRA NO! It makes us less likely to. Our jobs are in danger!

LEANNA One last question, you and Kyra were at the gate, correct?

MYRA Yes.

LEANNA Wonderful! You may leave and call in Kyle.

(Exit MYRA. Enter KYLE.)

KYLE You do realise that since I'm the manager, I wouldn't steal, right?

LEANNA Well, the others would think it unfair if I didn't question you.

KYLE Yes, I suppose so.

LEANNA Do you suspect anyone?

KYLE Summer is quite suspicious.

LEANNA Strange.

KYLE *(with a hint of panic)* What's strange?!

LEANNA Oh, it's nothing. Call in Mia.

(Exit KYLE. Enter MIA.)

MIA It's quite unfortunate, isn't it?

LEANNA Very much so. Now correct me if I'm wrong but you don't seem like the sort of person to be at museums.

MIA Well, I'm not, but my mother is and she recently died.

LEANNA I see, so you were remembering her today?

MIA Yes, her name was Sara Silversky.

LEANNA Oh, I remember her. She was a teacher at Silverton high; she brought us here often.

MIA *(tearily)* You knew her?

LEANNA Yes, she was quite nice. Now moving on, do you suspect anyone?

MIA Honestly, Kyle, he seems a little too professional.

LEANNA You may leave, and call in Summer.

(Exit MIA. Enter SUMMER.)

SUMMER I know how it looks, but please, I didn't do it!

LEANNA I wasn't going to say you did.

SUMMER *(taken aback)* What?

LEANNA You're not suspicious at all! So, let me ask you, who do you suspect?

SUMMER Nobody. They're all so nice.

LEANNA I've some more checking to do, let's go out.

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE 3

Museum. Paintings are hung around. All are standing in a line except LEANNA.

LEANNA I'm going to look around a little bit, but first, Kyra, could you come here?

MYRA *(anxioulsy)* Okay.



LEANNA *(whispering)* You and Myra need to get ready to restrain Kyle at the slightest sign. Now, where could somebody hide the painting?

KYRA *(nodding)* There's a painting of a garden which lifts up. It used to be a safe, but it's now empty.

LEANNA Summer, come with me.

SUMMER *(shaking slightly)* Why?

LEANNA I'll let you know in a minute.

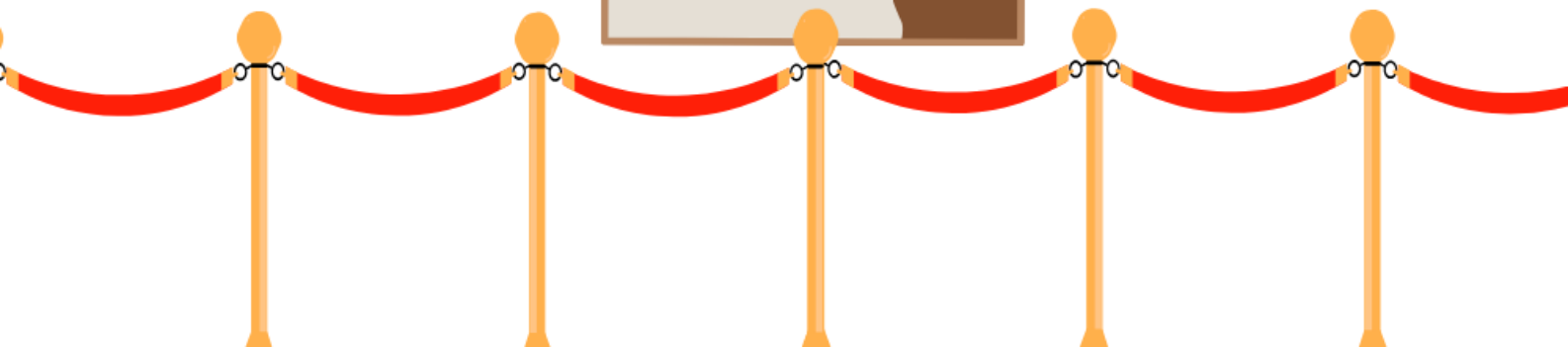
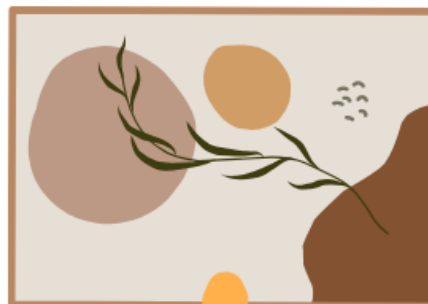
(KYLE immediately runs for the door, but MYRA and KYRA are too quick and restrain him. LEANNA picks up her phone and dials a number.)

LEANNA Good thinking about hiding it here ... Kyle!

(LEANNA takes SUMMER over to a painting of a garden. She lifts up the painting. Inside is a small hole containing the stolen painting.)

LEANNA Alright, I've dialled 911, meanwhile Kyra please handcuff him.

(Sirens blare and soon, the police arrive. KYLE is taken away. BLACKOUT)



SCENE 3

Jail cell. LEANNA is standing by the bars. KYLE is inside.

KYLE How did you know?

LEANNA Your behaviour, and at the beginning, you were rude and judgy with Summer, but she told me you were quite nice, which made me sure you'd threatened her.

KYLE Argh! Listen I'll give you \$1000 if you make them let me go.

LEANNA (*arches eyebrow*) You're willing to go to any lengths aren't you?

KYLE Just take the money and make them let me go, otherwise I'll kill your family!

LEANNA Is that the same threat you gave Summer once she figured it out?

KYLE (*laughs*) She does love her kids! Anyway, will you make them let me go?

LEANNA No, absolutely not.

KYLE You'd better watch out then Leanna Miller, because I will track you down!

(CURTAIN)



JAIL

The Magical Remote

Aymen Hussaini

CAST

JAKE
MAX
HAROLD
RYAN

SCENE 1

The living room. Enter JAKE.



JAKE Okay guys, who is ready to have the most hyped sleepover EVER!?

MAX Me!

HAROLD Oh, let's do this!

RYAN Who isn't?

MAX Oh, oh, oh, how about we start with a rad, horror movie?

JAKE For sure! What about *The Reaper of the Night*?

RYAN I'm down!

HAROLD Definitely.

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE 2

Jake's bedroom.

JAKE *(walking in a stressed manner)* Bro, you have to be joking. It's been twenty minutes and we still haven't found the remote!

RYAN Maybe we should just do something else!

HAROLD *(picking up a strange, unfamiliar object)* Oh, look! I think I've found it!

JAKE *(looking suspiciously)* Hey, I have not seen that remote in my house before; why is it light blue?

MAX Take light, if it is in your house it probably is connected to your TV.

JAKE True point. I think I forgot it was there.

RYAN Well, what are you waiting for? Let's get started!

JAKE *(inspecting the remote)* Hold on, let me just turn this big boy on—

(As soon as JAKE presses a button, an electrical surge spreads across the room, putting everyone to sleep. BLACKOUT)

SCENE 3

The same. Everyone is waking up.

MAX Mmm ... pancakes ... WAIT, WHAT? JAKE, W-WHY IS YOUR BASKETBALL RUNNING? WHY IS YOUR BATMAN ACTION FIGURE DOING THE MOONWALK?! WHAT HAS HAPPENED? Hold on, are you even awake?

JAKE *(turns over)* Huh? What are you—HOLY CRABSTICKS! You're right! How did that happen?!

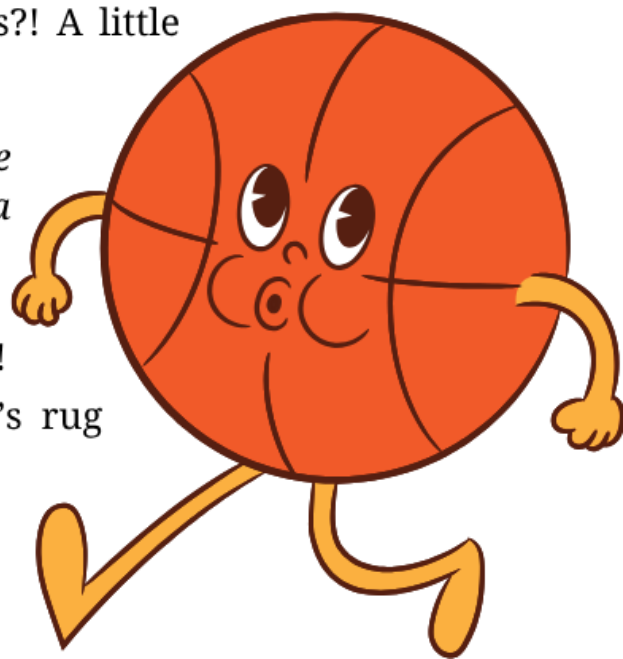
HAROLD Oh no, oh no! I think the objects in Jake's room have come to life!

RYAN *(from a distance)* Uh, guys?! A little help here?

(JAKE, MAX and HAROLD turn around to see RYAN being pinned onto a bulletin board by a few of JAKE's old toys)

MAX HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?!

HAROLD *(in awe)* W-w-woah! Jake's rug is lifting me up!

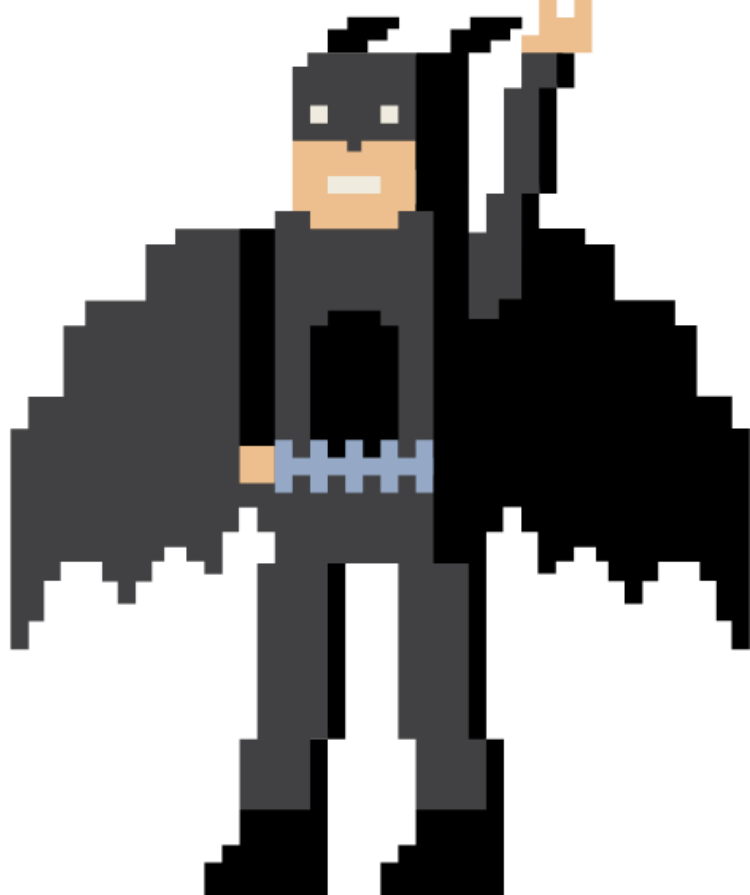


JAKE *(anxiously)* Ok, wow, oh my
 gosh, we need to reverse
 this. FIND THAT REMOTE!

*(JAKE, MAX, HAROLD and RYAN
try to find the remote while trying
to stop the objects from causing
more chaos.)*

MAX Come on, come on, where
 is it?!

HAROLD Hey, I see it! The toys are
 trying to drop it from
 Jake's top bunk!



JAKE What?! How do we stop them?! Should I try to make
 a run for it?

MAX Well, don't just stand there, GO!

*(JAKE runs, but then trips on a baseball. Lights dim to BLACKOUT when
JAKE is midair.)*

SCENE 4

The same.

JAKE YES! I HAVE IT! IT DIDN'T FALL AND BREAK!

MAX OH MY GOD! SWITCH IT OFF!

*(JAKE presses a button, and an electrical surge spreads across the
room. Everything returns to normal.)*

HAROLD Welp, I guess that means no horror movie tonight!

RYAN Oh, definitely not! That was a horror movie on its
 own.

JAKE, MAX,
HAROLD Indeed!

(CURTAIN)

The Magical Bookcase

Kabir Srinivasan

CAST

TOM THOMPSON: a quiet teenager
PETER THOMPSON (DAD): TOM's dad
ZEUS
HERMIONE
SUPPANDI

SCENE 1

A dining room. PETER is dismantling a cupboard, TOM is sitting on a sofa reading. The dining table has a slice of toast and a glass of juice on it.

PETER Tom, you have to do something else, you've been reading for four hours!

TOM *(irritated)* Let me read, please!

PETER I'm sorry, kiddo, but the attic hasn't been cleaned in years. You know that me and your mom are too busy to help. I'll buy you a few books afterwards.

TOM But Dad ...!

PETER Please, Tom, just do it, you can continue reading afterwards.

TOM Fine, then!

(BLACKOUT)



SCENE 2

The attic. Cobwebs everywhere. The room is full of boxes and stacks of albums. In the corner, a bookshelf, covered with dust. It looks extremely old but there are no signs that it will break. Enter TOM.

TOM Achooo! (He looks around.) Ugh, better start. (He cleans for a while, then looks at the bookshelf.) Aha! I've been needing another, I just filled my tenth one!

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE 2

TOM's room. Books take up more than half of the room. In the remaining space, a single bed is squished in. Enter TOM with bookshelf. It is now clean.

TOM (sighing) Finally. Better start putting the books on this old thing. (He fastens the bookshelf to the wall.) First this.

(TOM picks up a Greek mythology book, spotlight on the book. As he puts it on the shelf, there's smoke. Enter ZEUS through the smoke.)

TOM ZZZEUS?

ZEUS Greetings, tiny human! (looks around importantly) AHA! (looks at a soft toy sceptically) A plot to ambush me?! NO WAY! (He throws a lightning bolt at it and the toy is now ashes.) I have saved you, little boy!

TOM Uhhhh ... okay?? I just put a book here, I wonder ...

(TOM places a Harry Potter book on the shelf, spotlight on the book. Again, there's smoke. Enter HERMIONE through the smoke.)

HERMIONE Oh, you're Zeus, I've read about you, you're the king of the Greek gods and god of thunder and lightning. Your parents were Kronos and Rhea and—

ZEUS I appreciate your knowledge, but will you please SHUT UP!?

HERMIONE *(not listening)* But you're not a very good ruler, are you? And people stopped worshiping you ages ago and ...

ZEUS SILENCE!!!

TOM What in the world is going on here?

(TOM places a Suppandi comic on the shelf. In the same way, enter SUPPANDI.)

ZEUS *(grunts)* Well, another human. I'm pleased to meet you.

SUPPANDI Hi, mister, pleased to meet you, I'm Suppandi.

ZEUS HOW DARE YOU ...!

(ZEUS throws thunderbolt; it narrowly misses.)

SUPPANDI That wasn't very nice! Anyway, what's your birthday? Mine's today!

ZEUS Ugh, March first.

SUPPANDI Um ... ok?

(SUPPANDI starts marching, TOM slaps a hand to his face.)



TOM Suppandi, can't you see? He's really angry ... you better stop now!

(All of them start arguing. ZEUS is enraged, his face as red as a tomato.)

TOM This can't go on for any longer; I'm starting to worry for the safety of my room!

(TOM places a hydra soft toy on the shelf.)

ZEUS AHA! Another ambush ... a Lernean hydra! One of the most dangerous beasts. He shall rot in the pit of Tartarus for eternity.

(ZEUS throws a lightning bolt that almost hits Tom but collides with the books and they fall off the shelf. HERMIONE, ZEUS and SUPPANDI vanish.)

TOM Phew. That ... was close.

(CURTAIN)



The Jewel

Maya George

CAST

REEMA: a thin, lanky woman, very tall, 36

LIA: short, with untucked school uniform and messy hair, 17 ½

TARUSH: around Lia's height, 41, wearing a suit and tie

PERSON #1, PERSON #2, PERSON #3, PERSON #4

POLICEMEN #1, #2, #3

SCENE 1

A museum. Alarms begin to go off. LIA and TARUSH stand in the centre of the stage as REEMA walks past them to the doors to the ladies' washroom, towards the back of the stage, near the exhibits.

LIA Woah. What was all of that noise and hustle-bustle for?

TARUSH Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, oh my god—

LIA If you're done with your panic attack, maybe you could tell me what just happened?

TARUSH SOMETHING GOT STOLEN! From my museum. And now I'm trapped in here, all alone, with you. The thief. Oh my god, my life is great. Oh my god, oh my god!

LIA Uh, hold up, little man. Thief? A thief? How dare you call me a thief?

(LIA brandishes her school jacket, which was previously tied loosely around her waist in front of TARUSH's face.)

LIA I'm, like, seventeen! How the heck would I be able to smuggle away a huge painting?

TARUSH

It's not a painting! It's obviously not a painting. Have you seen the paintings? They're way too big. Something has been stolen. Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god. And just because you're a school student doesn't mean you're not the thief! It's definitely someone inside here. These doors shut the second something gets taken out of the glass, and the expensive exhibits, the ones which are priceless, are going to be far away from the doors. Anybody inside right now could be the thief. Anybody. Oh my god!

LIA

Do you mind shutting up with those 'oh my gods' (*she crudely imitates TARUSH*) and telling me what got stolen? If we're stuck in here, and neither of us is the thief, then someone must be, right?

TARUSH

Wow, I didn't know that, no clue. I am trapped in a small, confined space with a really dumb person who's not even seventeen. Oh. My. God.





LIA Excuse me? I'm seventeen, thank you very much. I was born in 2008. Got my ID right here, mister. And also, how dare you call me dumb? I'm, like, seventeen!

TARUSH And I'm forty-one. But you don't hear me bragging about it.

LIA Ah, shut up! Also, you're forty one? You look about fifty seven. (*TARUSH gasps in outrage*) Be quiet, boomer. Now, will you let me speak? If we are trapped in here, there's, like, a fifty-fifty percent chance that the thief will be trapped with us. They would hide whatever they stole here so that their accomplice or something can come back later. You know, like detective movies and stuff.

TARUSH Huh. Actually pretty smart.

(Just then, there is a sound of footsteps and REEMA comes in from stage right, pushing away a lock of hair. She looks around, and then at the two people standing shell-shocked in front of her.)

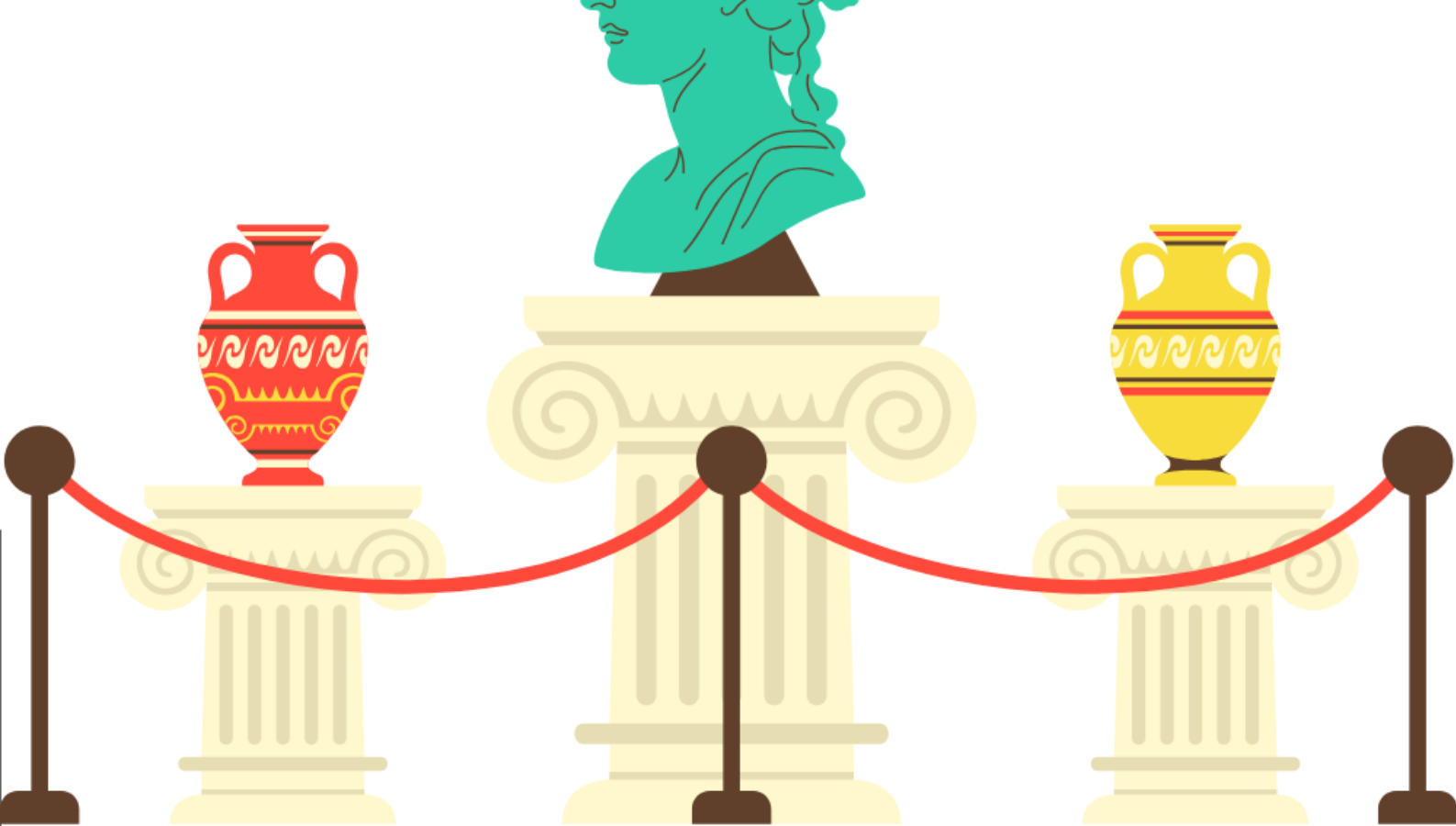
REEMA I'm sorry, did I miss something? I—

TARUSH THIEEFFFF! CATCH HER! KILL HER! HANG HER! AHH! WHERE IS THE EMERGENCY Mallet WHEN YOU NEED IT?

LIA Did I not tell you SHUT UP? Now, let's take things one at a time, shall we? I'm Lia. This is Boomer. I think it's his museum or whatever. Who are you? Did you steal the thing which got stolen which kicked everyone out of here?

REEMA (*over TARUSH's whimpers*) Something got stolen? Ah. Okay. Yeah, no, that explains a lot. Um. (*She smooths down her dress.*) I'm Reema, anyway. What are you, seventeen? What are you doing here?

LIA See, this lady gets it.



TARUSH

Are you the thief?

REEMA

Of course I'm not! I run one of the most famous PI firms in the country. I battle people like this.

TARUSH

Oh. Okay. My name is not Boomer. It is Tarush. Yes, I run this museum. I am the curator.

REEMA

Pleased to make your acquaintance, Tarush.

(They shake hands.)

LIA

Hold on, then. Tarush says he's not a thief. Obviously I am not the thief. And Reema says that she isn't, either. Then that means ...

TARUSH

One of us *is* the thief. And they're lying their way out of this. And it's up to us to find out who. Or the police. Yeah, the police sounds better.

LIA

Not really. But, yeah, that would be preferable.

REEMA

Well, then, I would be happy to help, before you call the police! You see, I am an art detective. I have credentials. I can show them to you. This sounds like a big enough case for me. And if these doors are shut, the thief is trapped inside, obviously. Won't they escape the second we open them?

LIA Yeah, she's actually right. They will be able to blend into the crowd the second we open the doors. So, does that mean that we have to solve a case? Like a real, honest to good detective case?

REEMA Mostly me, but sure, you can tag along.

LIA Great! Tarush?

TARUSH Well, I see your idea. And yes, the thief will probably just blend in if we give them a chance out of here. And ... hmm. Okay. Fine. As long as you promise that I will be able to get my Jewel back.

REEMA But of course! I am not a famous art detective for nothing.

TARUSH Alright. Let's do this. Let's get this precious artefact back.

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE 2

The same. REEMA, LIA and TARUSH are now sitting on the floor. REEMA has dragged a whiteboard from some other part of the museum and is holding a marker in her hands as well.

REEMA Look, it's also perfectly plausible that there is a fourth person hiding here. But as a PI, I want to help to solve this case, even if it raises your suspicions against me.

LIA You're very noble, you know.

TARUSH I did not do it! It is as simple as that. I am the curator of the museum. I have my life's work within these four walls. Why in the world would I steal something from here?

REEMA *(fixing him with a stern look)* You are the curator of the museum. However, even though I am sure you are compensated fairly for this job, there may be a third factor in your life. Something impacting your everyday life, which costs a lot of money. Gambling. Medical treatment. You need the money. So you take it.



Missing Diamond

Clues

Suspects

Evidence



- LIA Hold on, this is very cool, okay, love your little detective monologue, but people, what exactly has been stolen?
- TARUSH The Jewel.
- LIA I'm going to have to tell you to say a little more than that.
- TARUSH You don't know about The Jewel? The most expensive diamond in the world, the size of your heart. It had been circulating amongst kings and emperors for years before a wealthy jeweller got a hold of it and gave it to us. This diamond holds more historical relevance than your little brain.
- LIA HEY! But yeah, that does sound pretty cool. Let me guess, it's worth, like, a hundred million.
- TARUSH (laughs) Oh, trust me, a lot more than that.
- REEMA Well, by using common sense, if Lia claims that she hasn't stolen it, and that Tarush claims he hasn't taken it, and I, obviously haven't taken it, then we may be looking for a fourth party. I have been in this sort of situation before, and I know it takes barely a second for people to turn on each other. So let's entertain the possibility of a fourth party for now.

LIA Well, lady, you're making good points, but how do we know that it's not you?

REEMA I went to the bathroom at the time of the theft. Obviously it's not me.

LIA What do you mean by that? You could easily be lying! We need proof. If we're going to trust you to solve this case.

REEMA *(sighs like they're insufferable)* Alright. Come with me.

*(She takes them towards stage right, where a door is placed. It says **LADIES' ROOM** in bold letters. TARUSH stops short as they enter.)*

TARUSH That's—I can't—

LIA Don't be such a prude and come in.

(The stage fades to black for a brief second. LIA and TARUSH follow REEMA to a sink, where she points out a little red stain on one of the taps.)

REEMA This is my lipstick. I blotted it, and it stained the tap.

LIA Hold on, give me that lipstick. I need proof.

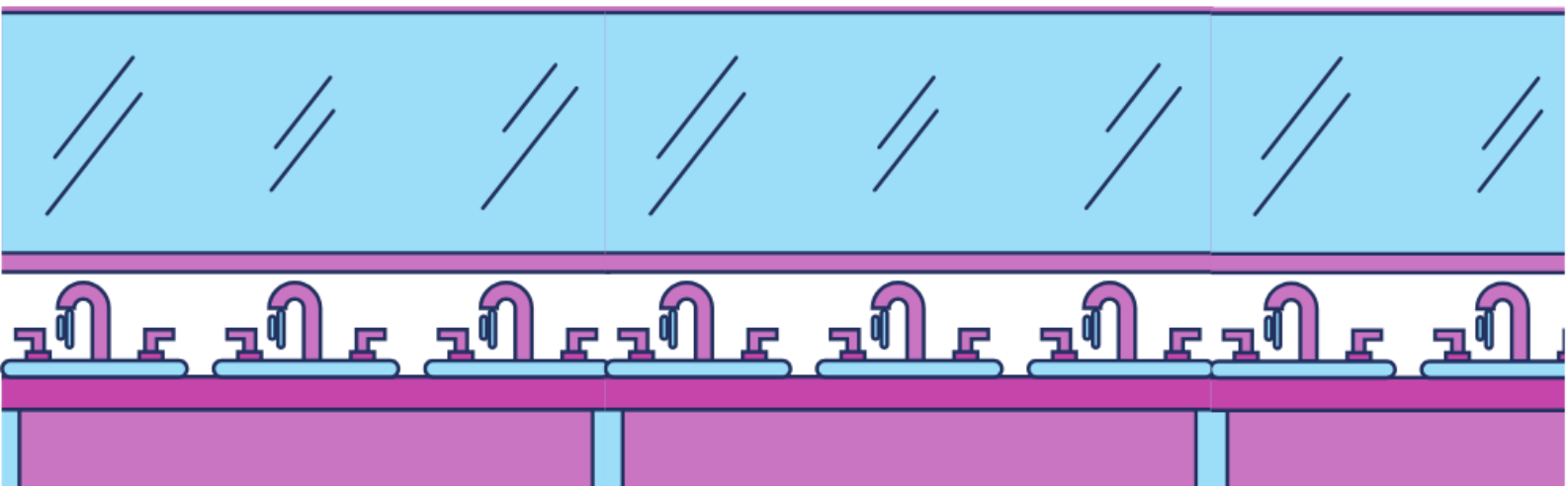
(LIA takes some from the top, and stains the tap herself)

LIA Okay, yeah, that's legit.

REEMA Do you accept me now?

TARUSH Yes. Now, please, let's get started. We need to solve this case.

(BLACKOUT)



SCENE 3

REEMA, TARUSH and LIA are back where they were before, sitting in a little circle on the museum floor with a whiteboard sitting in the centre. REEMA stands to take the lead on their conversation.

REEMA Tarush, since you're the curator, why don't you tell us a little bit about who may want the Jewel?

TARUSH Well, you already know what I told you about The Jewel. It's one of the most precious artefacts in the world right now, around eleven hundred million US dollars the last time I checked. We were incredibly lucky to get it. Really, anybody would be happy to get it. Uh, there was this one guy. A business owner, some hotshot CEO, who was particularly interested in this, and I obviously declined the offer to sell it. But he seemed to have a prominent image in the dark side of the business world if you catch my drift.

REEMA Ah. So it is your assumption that the thief may be a mercenary working for this man, which is why they really need to fulfil their duty. Good theory.

(REEMA turns to LIA, her eyes suddenly narrowed.)

REEMA Are you sure you don't have anything to say about this?

LIA What? What do you mean? I'm in school. Which gigantic business CEO guy would hire me? I can't fight to save my life!

REEMA No, not about the whole mercenary business. Are you sure you don't have a history in stealing?

LIA Of course not! What do you mean?

(REEMA stalks closer to her, a satisfied smile spreading on her face.)

REEMA Now, I didn't want to believe this, because it could not have been the most basic answer, could it have been?



LIA

What do you mean?

TARUSH

Yes, Reema, what do you mean?

REEMA

(pointing an accusatory finger at LIA) I saw her swipe your ten thousand rupee watch. And she stole my museum entry pass, when we were returning from the bathroom, right from my open purse. Hand over the diamond, Lia, or I'll have to call the police.

(LIA is silent for some time, before she lets out a huge sigh, and hands back the items which she swiped.)

LIA

Look, I'm telling you, I did nothing relating to that huge diamond. Yeah, I steal a bit. It's a problem, gives me the rush, that's why I do it. But nothing important. And I was doing you a favour, Tarush, that watch is freaking ugly.

TARUSH

First of all, how dare you, and also, how do we know that you're telling the truth about The Jewel? I'm telling you right now, Lia, if you have it, hand it over, because otherwise not only will your reputation be ruined, but also will any hope of getting out of jail before you're thirty.

LIA I'm telling you! I don't have it.

(She turns her pockets inside out, and shakes out her school bag.)

LIA See! I'm not the type to push a huge diamond into my undergarments just to prove that I can steal it, okay? I just do it for a bit of fun. Nothing important, nothing sentimental. Ever. I check.

TARUSH Okay, okay, fine. Then who stole it?

(REEMA sighs, and looks around at all of them.)

REEMA Look, I don't think we have a choice. We need to give up. Open the doors and call the police. I trust you have an emergency remote, Tarush?

TARUSH Of course. I'll find one. It should be there somewhere in the locker.

(TARUSH walks off stage. REEMA looks at LIA, who is not looking her in the eye.)

REEMA Lia, I really am sorry. If I had solved this case, I did believe that I was going to be one of the most famous art detectives of all time. I should not have pinned the blame on you so quickly. It was not at all correct of me to do so.

LIA No, it's fine. I did like this. Solving this with you guys. It was fun.

REEMA I'm glad.

LIA It does bother me that we will never know who did it, though.

REEMA *(smiling slightly)* Well, if it helps, two other people share your same predicament. I do believe this case will confuse us for the rest of our lives.

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE 4

REEMA, LIA and TARUSH are standing outside while the police sweeps the museum for any clues. POLICEMEN #1, #2, #3 are all walking around, looking busy.

LIA Well, I suppose this is the end of it. It was nice meeting you guys, you know. Thank god I bunked school today.

TARUSH Yes, thank god that one of the most expensive jewels in the history of the world got stolen from my museum. I'm ruined!

LIA Oh, be quiet, Boomer. You'll be okay. It's just some colossal diamond.

REEMA Yes, it is, isn't it?

(They part ways, and REEMA is left standing in the spotlight, alone. She peeks into her purse, smiles, and slightly pulls out a fist-sized, gigantic diamond.)

REEMA That's all it is. A huge diamond that's worth a eleven hundred million US dollars. Thank god they didn't see me run into the bathroom after I took it. *(She laughs slightly.)* My employer will be extremely happy.

(The stage fades to black. CURTAIN)



VARSHA SESHAN'S ONLINE CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAMME GUEST SESSION #35

BOOK COVERS - REIMAGINED

WITH ISHA NAGAR

Storyboarding
Colours
Lettering
Design!



Book Covers from Guest Session #35 with Isha Nagar

Shanaya Kudva



Stories

- | | |
|-----|--|
| 82 | No One in 4B?
Devika Aditya Singh |
| 85 | The Mystery of the Messy Room
Kabir Tayal |
| 87 | Lost and Found
Ronikaa Vijan |
| 90 | The Family Secret
Ameyaa Nair |
| 92 | Agent Cobra
Bianca Bisht |
| 94 | The Blood Drawer
Maya George |
| 100 | Friends?
Kabir Srinivasan |
| 102 | A Guitar Between Us
Bianca Bisht |
| 108 | The House at the End of the Road
Kaveri Kongovi Anand |
| 114 | Basketball Tryouts
Kaashvi Bhardwaj |
| 120 | The Death Overs
Kabir Srinivasan |
| 124 | Magic Pick? What Magic Pick?
Rishik Halan |
| 129 | The Bedroom Bog Monster
Kabir Tayal |
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- 140** A Song Sweet and Brave
Maya George
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Ronikaa Vijan
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Rishik Halan
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Aabha Sardesai
- 167** Where the Water Takes Us
Maya George
- 170** The Secret Weapon
Aymen Hussaini
- 174** The Pass
Devika Aditya Singh
- 177** Orker, the Guardian of the Ancient Mountains
Aymen Hussaini
- 180** Breaking the Surface
Maya George

GUEST SESSION #36

!!! Don't Get Inspired;
Get Mad! !!!

WHY IS ANGER MORE USEFUL THAN
INSPIRATION?
WHAT MAKES YOU ANGRY?
WHAT IS THE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE
IN THE WORLD?



A Creative Writing workshop with
Venita Coelho



What a brilliant workshop!

No One in 4B?

Devika Aditya Singh

Since the beginning of the existence of Stokes Head Hill Apartments, everyone in the apartment building had hated Flat 4B. In fact, the first resident to ever stay there, Ms Gupta, said that the resident dragged furniture across the floor at three in the morning. Her twins, Meera and Sameera, said with a rather disgruntled air that the resident left their stinky garbage right next to their house, while their uncle insisted that he once heard crying in the vents next to 4B. People had many things to say, no one knew who to believe, but one thing that was a confirmed fact was that no one had seen the tenant of 4B.

The building itself was old and narrow and was squeezed between two other grim looking buildings. To passersby, it looked like the buildings were engaged in combat. However, the outside was nothing compared to how odd the inside was. The lights in all the corridors went out even when it wasn't raining, and at night the hallways smelled faintly of damp newspapers and burnt wires which raised another question mark.

But on the first of November, the old skin was shed. For the first time in fifteen years, the door of 4B opened.

It was exactly 8:15pm, and I was returning to my apartment on the fourth floor when I ran into Ms Gupta outside her flat and began chattering merrily about how pleasant the weather was. However, as I was about to continue down the corridor, 4B's slightly ajar door caught my eye and for reasons I couldn't explain, my cheerful mood vanished instantly and my stomach clenched.



A shiver ran down my spine and although it was winter, the cold that seeped through my body was definitely not due to the temperature. Beside me, I could sense that Ms Gupta's reaction was somewhat similar and I watched as her normally pink and jolly face was now ashen, with fear etched into every wrinkle on her face.

"Oh, my word!" I heard her mutter. "The flat, it's—it's open!"



For a few dreadful seconds, neither of us dared to move. We simply stood frozen in the dim corridor, staring at the dark slit of the doorway as though something inside was staring back at us. At last, I swallowed hard and forced myself to tear my eyes away from the doorway.

"Well, maybe the tenant moved!" I said with an attempt to sound optimistic. As I said that, I found it tough to believe my own words. Ms Gupta nodded slowly. However, from the uncertainty in her expression, I could tell she did not believe those words either.

Just as I opened my mouth to speak again, a sudden creaking sound echoed from inside the apartment. In an instant, our heads snapped towards the doorway and my heart began pounding violently against my chest. We were both waiting for a sign and sure enough, as though by magic, the door, which had remained perfectly still until now, slowly creaked open even further.

In that moment, every instinct in my body screamed at me to run, yet my feet remained rooted helplessly to the cold floor. Ms Gupta's breathing had grown uneven and I noticed her trembling fingers clutching the edge of her shawl tightly.

Before either of us could react, a dark figure suddenly moved across the hallway inside the apartment. A shock of terror crashed over me so suddenly that my throat went dry. Beside me, Ms Gupta let out a sharp, trembling gasp.

At this point, I was half hoping I was imagining things but then, from deep inside the apartment came the unmistakable sound of slow footsteps approaching the door, each step echoing through the apartment and growing louder with every passing second. My palms had become slick with sweat and I could feel my pulse hammering violently in my ears while next to me, Ms Gupta had gone completely rigid and her eyes were fixated on the darkness ahead of us.

Then everything went dark. Almost instantly, the familiar smell of damp newspapers and burnt wires thickened in the corridor around us, stronger than I had ever smelt it before. A deafening crash suddenly erupted from inside the apartment, causing both Ms. Gupta and me to jump back in fright.

Both of us banged into each other in the darkness, turning side to side in terror. Before we could recover, the apartment door suddenly swung fully open with a violent creak.

A freezing gust of air rushed out from the apartment carrying with it the overpowering stench of damp newspapers and burnt wires. Then from the darkness inside, a pair of pale eyes slowly lifted to meet ours. Ms Gupta screamed and before I could even process what I was seeing, the figure lunged forward out of the darkness. Ms Gupta's instincts took over; she grabbed my arm and we bolted down the staircase.



We did not stop running until we reached the floor below. When we finally dared to look back down the corridor, another spike of horror hit us. The door of 4B was shut once again.

At that moment, an unspoken promise between me and Ms Gupta was shared; no one could know about this. Even after all these years, we haven't told anyone.

Although we're still alive, we aren't mentally sound. Ms Gupta always takes a flashlight with her in her handbag in case she encounters a dark corridor, and on the first of November, I make it a point to not step out.



The Mystery of the Messy Room

Kabir Tayal

The clock slowly ticked down to midnight, the metal faces clanging, “Tick tock, tick tock.” In the darkness, a girl silently waited, pretending to be asleep. Frida, as that was her name, had resolved to stay awake in order to solve a mystery. But as the hours passed by, she slowly grew drowsy, and eventually fell into a deep slumber. Her hours asleep were filled with haunting nightmares.

She woke up sweating, only to see daylight streaming in through the windows. Her gaze instantly swept around the room, only to pass, once more, over notebooks, trash and clouds of dust piled around her room. “Oh no,” she groaned. “They’ve struck again!”

She unhappily packed her bag and left for school. As she entered the yard, her friends, Ira and David, called after her. “Frida!” they shouted, seeing her gloomy expression. “What happened?”

She filled them in quickly—how she would wake up every day to find her room a complete mess, and how she suspected a ghost was responsible for it.

“That’s terrible!” Ira said when Frida had finished. “But are you sure a ghost is responsible for it?”

“I’m sure,” Frida replied firmly.

“Hey guys! I have an idea,” shouted David. “My Grandpa has an old camera that records live footage. Why don’t we use it to find the culprit?”

Frida enthusiastically agreed to the idea, so David promised to bring it to her house in the evening.

For Frida, evening couldn’t come fast enough. She eagerly waited as the hours dragged by, and ran to open the door when the bell rang. Quickly ushering her friends inside, she ran up to her room, excitedly carrying David’s camera. As soon as it was set up, she waved a hasty goodbye to her friends and invited them to watch the footage the next morning. After making sure to turn on the camera, she jumped into bed. “Now we’ll finally get some answers,” she grinned.

The following morning, David and Ira walked to Frida’s house. They rang the doorbell, but heard no response from within. “It’s okay,” Ira said. “I know where they keep the key.”



She lifted the doormat and pulled it out from underneath, turning it in the lock.

The two walked slowly up the stairs. “Frida!” David yelled. He opened the door, only to see her fast asleep. “Frida! Wake up,” he said softly. “We’ve got to see the footage.”

It didn’t take long for Frida to wake up and get dressed. As soon as she was ready, she flicked on the camera’s footage, tense with anticipation.

At first the footage was normal. It showed Frida sleeping peacefully. “Maybe the ghost didn’t come last night,” David whispered to Ira.

“Shush! I have a feeling something strange is going to happen,” she replied.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, how can we be so sure that a supposed ‘ghost’ is responsible for this mess when the more logical conclusion is that, somehow, Frida may just be responsible for it herself?”

David opened his mouth to protest, then sighed and put his head in his hands, deciding against arguing with the rather stubborn Ira. He resumed staring at the footage.

“Huh, that’s strange,” he mumbled, squinting at a tiny figure moving on the screen. His eyes widened in sudden revelation. “Frida’s woken up!” he exclaimed.

Indeed, she had. The footage showed Frida sitting up and pulling herself off the bed. She then began to rummage through her cupboard, emptying it and shaking piles of clothes onto the floor. Then, she pulled off the bedsheet, throwing it on the floor, simultaneously knocking down her toys from their shelves.

Slowly, David and Ira turned to Frida. Her already horrified expression was only amplified by their stares. “No! It can’t be possible—”

She broke off and glanced at their faces. David’s mouth was twitching, and Ira’s eyebrows were raised in an expectant, “I told you so.”

Frida looked at them for a few moments of awkward silence, then all three friends collapsed on the floor laughing.



Lost and Found

Ronikaa Vijan

It had been seven years since my older brother, Alex Ramirez, went missing.

For five years, I hoped for him to be alive. For the past two years, I hoped for at least a body.

It was 5:13pm when I got a call. By 7:19, I was in the police station.

I was seated in an interrogation room that smelled like stale coffee with Blair, his wife. Alex and Blair had met in college and I was the first one who had found out about them, also being Blair's best friend. Blair was a ball of sunshine. Yet, she was fragile. She was also blind.

Our bond changed after Alex went missing. It was like she closed off a little. It wasn't like before. But she'd come over every once in a while and we'd talk about the 'good old days'. She would reassure me and I would try to do the same. I could never imagine surviving these years without her.

Officer Ainsley came in, a grim expression on his face. He took a deep breath. It was like he couldn't process what he'd just seen or heard. I would. I had had seven years to process. I knew they'd found his body. I'd imagined this a million times. I'd cried a million and one. But today, I wouldn't.

"We found a body," he started.

"Can I see him?" I asked, choking back my tears. I wouldn't cry today.

"It's not him," he replied, eyebrow raised.

My brows furrowed. Blair stayed still, just biting her lip.

“Come in,” ordered Officer Ainsley.

The door opened and in walked a six foot tall man. He seemed familiar. His hair was brown, curly and messy, his eyes that hazel colour. There was a slight stubble on his face. His clothes were tattered. And impossibly, his name was Alex Ramirez. I stood up, tears rolling down my face. He smiled when he saw me and I ran towards him, pulling him in a hug.

“I missed you, sis,” he whispered into my hair.

I wiped my tears with the edge of my sleeves, the questions on my lips falling out.

“Where were you? Didn’t you remember your sister?” I asked, clinging on, wanting to never let go.

“I went to find her, Steph. I told you. I even visited once,” Alex said, his voice gentle.

My brows furrowed, as my mind raced through memories. It was all turning into a blur. As I tried, the slight pain behind my forehead increased. I gripped Alex’s arm tightly to balance myself.

“Who’d you go to find?” I wheezed.

“Blair. We found her body. She’d been murdered,” Alex replied, almost choking on his words.

The throbbing in my head increased. It grew till I thought it would explode. I turned to the second chair beside me. I turned to Blair.

She smiled at me. I blinked. And then she was gone.



The Family Secret

Ameyaa Nair

I was staring at the wonderful house standing in front of me when Myra suddenly waved in front of my face and screamed, “Come in, dude! What are you waiting for?”

“I guess I was in my own world. Your house is so big!” I replied.

“Not house, mansion,” she said, with a sly smile.

As I entered, I looked at all the huge chandeliers hanging from the ceiling and suddenly felt small. There were so many grand frames of old kings and queens. And then I remembered that my friend was the mayor’s kid and that I was just a simple nomad. She then led me up to the scariest place I had ever seen, the attic.

“This is my playroom,” said Myra.

“This, a playroom? This is the scariest room I have ever seen!” I said, shocked.

“Well, when I first came here, even I felt scared but then I got used to it,” Myra said. “Oh, and I also wanted to show you something.” She opened a large book with a skeleton on the cover. “I’m telling you a family secret, which you have to promise me that you won’t tell anyone. This book has been passed down generations, and everyone is scared to open it because whenever a person from my family opens it, there is suddenly an earthquake, and the skeleton on the cover growls and moves, shaking its fingers. So, you do it. Open it.”

I closed my eyes and opened the book with all my might.

Nothing happened.

I closed and opened the book again. Still nothing happened.

I closed and opened the book again. Still nothing happened.

Then suddenly, I heard a noise. It sounded almost like Myra, saying, "Who dares to open me?" I quickly shut the book.

"See?" said Myra. "I told you there was a family secret."

Right then, Myra's dad came in. He suddenly turned on the flickering light bulb, which made my heart skip a beat. "What family secret?" he asked. "I never knew that we had a family secret!"

"Ohh, come on dad, you spoiled all the fun!" Myra replied.

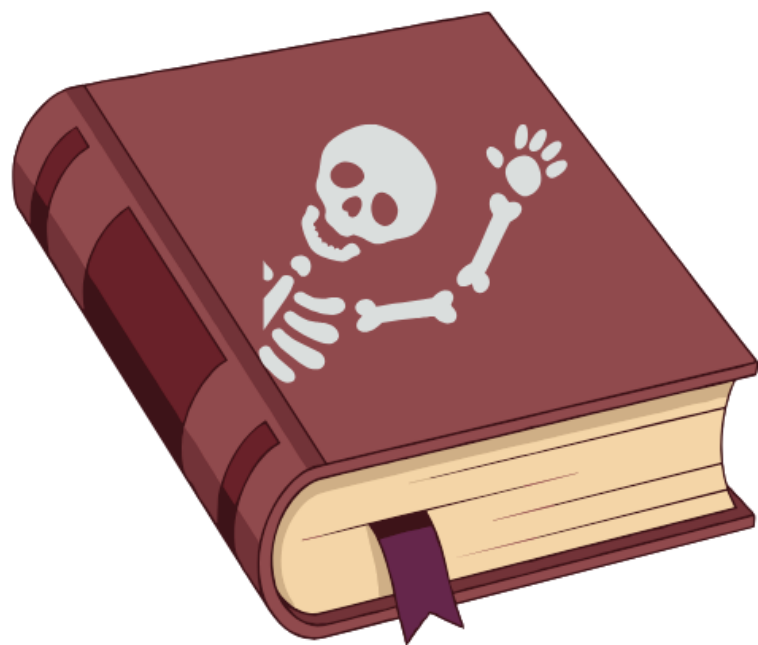
"Oh, sorry girls!" he said.

Once he went out of the room, I quickly turned back to Myra and said, "Oh, so this was a trick huh?"

"Yes, scaredy-cat! I never thought you would freak out so much!"

"Now can we please play some real games?" I asked letting out a small giggle.

"Oh yeah!" replied Myra.



Agent Cobra

Bianca Bisht

My school's annoying math teacher was famous only for three things: his horrible dad jokes (ugh!), his ugly sweater which the kids debated whether he washed or not, and repeating the line, "Algebra is very important for the real world", which was very doubtful because xyz was hardly getting used in calculating the cost of groceries.

All the kids secretly called him Sir Wikipedia because he was the living, breathing version of a textbook and seemed to know everything. Every single person in the school, including some of the teachers, believed that his life must be very boring for him to become a middle school math teacher.

One day, during a casual assembly, the principal was giving his usual speech. "And now for the announcements—"

"FREEZE!" a deep voice shouted from the hallway.

A collective gasp went through the auditorium as everyone turned to look at the owner of the voice. A masked robber was standing at the door, dressed in all black, his face covered, a gun in his hand. I turned to the emergency exit of the auditorium, and there was another robber standing there too, also with a gun pointed at us. Everyone started shouting and going crazy, running in all directions.



One of them held the principal hostage, fired a gun toward the ceiling, and commanded, “QUIET! Or your principal dies!”

As all the students hated the principal, we weren’t exactly sad about him being held hostage, but were scared to death because of the holdup. Many of us were worried if we would make it or not.

The teachers all stood up. Scared, they murmured amongst themselves as the other robber stayed beside them.

But the minute the math teacher saw the thieves holding the principal hostage, he slowly walked up to them.

The thieves warned him, “If you move one more step toward us, I swear I will shoot your principal right here on the spot!”

Sir Wikipedia didn’t pay any heed to them. He walked up to them and somehow—without breaking a sweat—five minutes later, one of the thieves was tied up with microphone wires, the other was on the floor groaning in pain and clutching his stomach, and the math teacher was brushing his sweater off like it was any other day.



A few minutes later, the police came inside to secure the perimeter. But the minute they saw the math teacher, the commanding inspector suddenly saluted. “Agent Cobra ... we thought you retired.”

The math teacher calmly replied, “I did. But these idiots keep showing up here, and by now it’s annoying!”



The Blood Drawer

Maya George

It's been four days since the coronation, and I'm still not used to going to the throne room right after getting ready in the morning.

They call me the Twenty-Year Queen, which is exactly what it sounds like. I'm twenty, nearly twenty-one, inexperienced, and I am the person my father left his heavy crown to, instead of someone braver, more experienced, someone he could have actually trusted it with.

I see it on their faces, the courtiers, every single day as I enter the throne room and take my seat on the Golden Throne of Elvira. They believe I don't belong there, and every day when I look at my kingdom out my window, I believe I don't belong here too.

As I step into my throne room, I see a group of my father's advisors chattering by the throne, voices getting high and heated.

The only one I recognise instantly is Randwell, who was like my uncle growing up. I used to hide underneath his desk when I was seven to catch glimpses of my father on the throne.



He seems to be advocating in my favour, considering his glee when he sees me approaching. "Ah, princess! I mean ... queen. Queen Victa. Queen Victa, could you please come here? Some of these courtiers have something absolutely horrible to say about you."

The courtiers have something horrible to say about me every day, Randwell. I bite back my retort and walk over with him to where the circle makes space for me and Randwell.

"Queen Victa, we wanted to know if you'll be doing the Ritual," says Calder, one of the sleaziest courtiers. He is young, but I can already tell he dislikes me, and I dislike him, too.

"What Ritual? My father did not make me familiar with the particulars of ruling, I'm sure you remember. My older brother, not me, was supposed to take over, before the tragic loss." The words flow out of my mouth like liquid, but I'll never forget Lark, my older brother by three years. He went missing six years ago on his eighteenth birthday, and though we searched long and hard, my father eventually called off the investigation.

He claimed it was too painful, and took years of his life. And he was right, because it took years off mine, too. By the time I took the throne, my father had lost his entire will to rule.

"Ah, yes. I forget." Calder smiles. He did not forget. "The Ritual, my dear Queen, is the visiting of the man in the dungeons."

"Calder, I'm sure you do not forget that there are many, many, many, men in the dungeons?" I ask sweetly, and the other courtiers laugh slightly, prompting Calder's expression to sour.

"My Queen, I mean the most important one," he says, grinning. "The Blood Drawer."



I suck in a breath. The courtroom suddenly seems colder, despite the morning sunlight filtering in through the intricate patterns in the ceiling.

“That’s right, my Queen, as part of taking the throne, you must meet the Blood Drawer. As is every time that a new monarch comes to power, they must go and meet him. The man who powers our entire kingdom, hidden in the shadows.”

The Blood Drawer. I haven’t heard his name mentioned in years.

The Blood Drawer is a person who everyone knows exists, though nobody talks about him. They’re a special kind of person, the only person whose blood can heal the dangerous affliction of Pencast which every so often runs like a plague through the kingdom. The Blood Drawer keeps my entire kingdom from dying.

They’re utilised well, taken from their families at eighteen and living in the dungeons till they die, bleeding out for their kingdom, and that’s usually when a new Blood Drawer is born. Four thousand years ago, my kingdom figured out how to deal with it and now we have blood in storage, enough to last us the eighteen years which it takes for the power to blossom.

Only the royals and the Blood Drawer’s family know exactly who he or she is. They’re sworn to secrecy. It was part of my coronation vows.

I suck in a breath.

“You owe him a visit,” Calder says, stalking closer. “Or are you too scared, your Majesty?”

Randwell steps forward, anger etched on his face. “How dare you? How dare you say such things to her Majesty? Of course she will not go down there into the deep, dark dungeons. No Queen ever has. After all, she is a lady. Are you not, your Majesty?”



I pause for a second, letting them look at me with confusion. “I am a lady, Randwell, but I owe the man a visit. I must go tonight.”

Calder leans back and smiles.

Randwell sighs.

And I walk up to my rightful throne and sit on it.

“Now,” I say, my voice carrying across the courtroom. “Are there any actual concerns? Bring them to me, please.”



I pull my long, wavy hair into a tight bun for this excursion. I have unseasonably long hair, such as is with the princesses of Elvira, but I don't want it to be a hazard to my safety by any stretch. I put on the clothes I generally wear for combat, slinging my belt across me, and tugging my sword into it.

With resolute steps, I walk all the way to the palace dungeon, where a guard hands me a lantern.

“Are you sure you wouldn't like me to come with you, Majesty?” he asks me. He looks worried, but I shake my head, grab the lantern and make my way down to the dungeon, keeping my wits about me.

The dungeons are cold and dark, and I can hear the soft tapping of prisoners' feet and hands on the walls, growing into a soft, slow beat. Apparently they do this every single time someone comes to visit him.

I push open the door, and it's so dark I have to blink a few times just to adjust.



The worst part about the room is that there are barely any windows except one so small, tucked into the ceiling. All I can smell is clotted blood. I fumble with my hands, touching the cool dungeon walls, letting the cobblestones guide me towards where the smell is coming from.

I hear a sharp, soft gasp—a human gasp, which makes me feel sick, and I lurch back.



Maybe because this is not my place, but maybe because some part of me refuses to believe that I'm scared. I light a candle, and that's when I see him. I see his chains, too, his wrists fallen over a bowl, and I can see the blood. All I can see, suddenly, is the blood.

I stumble back, sickness creeping up my throat, but I hear him then, raspy and deep, "Your Majesty?"

"My name is Queen Victa," I say, stammering over my words. "I was crowned four days ago."

"I see. And you came to visit me?" His head is bowed over the bowl, eyes not meeting mine. His ribs are visible in the cool candlelight, and though I cannot see much, I can see soft, wavy dark hair, mimicking mine. Almost familiar.

"I did. I suppose I must ... see who is responsible. For the welfare of my people. For the safety of my kingdom."

"Oh, and what a heavy price to pay, too." He raises his hands above his head, hissing with pain. I can see where the chains chafe his skin.

"I cannot help you," I say. "I do not ... I need to prioritise my people over you."

"Like I am not one of your people," he rasps, lifting his head slightly for the first time in the whole encounter. His lips spread into a smile. "Do you recognise me, Vee-vee?"



That's when I see it. The wavy, dark hair that so resembles mine. The nose that we both inherited from our mother. His hands, thin and bony now, but still the same hands that held me after our mother's death.

"Lark," I say, my breaths coming fast and little, my hands scrabbling behind me for the cobblestone wall.

He lifts his head further, though I can see the pain that it causes him. His eyes, dark blue, which I remember clearly from my childhood, are pleading.

"Get me out of here, Victa. If you truly love me, get me out of here. If you want me to help you rule, after Father, I will, I will do anything you want me to, please, please, just get me out of here." His words stumble over each other, jostling and crowding, and all I can hear is the desperation in his voice.

I pause, for a second, looking into my brother's eyes. Then I remember my people, I remember the courtiers, I remember the crown that sits in my room, and the kingdom I look at every single day in the morning.

I suck in a breath, flinching at the smell of blood. Then I look him in the eyes, those pleading, desperate eyes that I know from my childhood.

"I'm sorry, Lark, I really am." I reach for my candle, steeling myself. "But I have a kingdom to rule. And you are the only person who can ensure that I have a kingdom, not just whoever survives."

I open the door, and hear a wheezing cry behind me, and only when I slam it shut to I allow myself to sink to the floor and cry.



Friends?

Kabir Srinivasan

Rohan tucked his frail mother into bed. Her head was burning up with fever as he pressed a cool cloth on her forehead. They couldn't even afford food and they needed a doctor.

"Rohan beta, don't worry, I'll be fine," she croaked.

"Yes, I really hope so," he replied. His phone buzzed in his pocket as he stepped out to get some fresh air. Zohran was calling for the first time after two months.

"Hey Rohan, it's been ages!" said Zohran excitedly.

"Yeah! I know dude!"

"What are you doing for the summer holidays? I'm going all the way to Hawaii!"

"Oh ... um I'm just staying home. My mum is really sick."

Zohran kicked himself. How could he have forgotten that? He knew that Rohan had barely enough food to feed himself every day since his dad passed away tragically because of a heart attack. "Oh. Um, did you see the match last night?" Zohran tried to relieve the awkwardness of the moment.



"Yeah. Oh listen, are you free to meet me at this small café at 5, Rajpur Road at 4 o' clock? I need to talk to you and it's quiet there."

"Sure!"



“Ok. See you there.” Rohan cut the phone before Zohran could say bye.

Zohran sprinted into his parents’ room and told them he was going out.

“Okay, just be careful,” said his mom.

“It’s Rohan, mama!” Zohran replied, hurt.

The sun sizzled as he reached the café on 5, Rajpur Road. It was really hard to miss—it had a shabby sign which was unreadable, tilted to one side. The paint was falling off the walls. Zohran cautiously opened the door with a loud *CREEAAK* and took a seat. The last thing he saw was a message from Rohan before he blacked out.

He regained consciousness in a warehouse that had cobwebs in every corner and found that he was gagged, with his hands and legs bound together.

“Achha. Mereko pata nahin tha ki tere paas itna dum hai, ladka,” growled a rough voice.

“Aur mere 20,000 रुपये, mummy ke liye?” replied an unsettlingly familiar one. One he had heard many times. Its owner stepped into the sickly green limelight of the room. It was Rohan.

Zohran’s head burst with shock, hurt and confusion. His eyes embodied anger and his face was mingled with fury. How could Rohan have done this?

A feeble sorry left Rohan’s mouth as he stepped closer still. Zohran knew he needed the money for his mom. But nothing mattered. All that he could think of was Zohran’s betrayal as he vowed in his head to never be friends with him again.

A Guitar Between Us

Bianca Bisht

I sat in my room in the dark, clutching my pillow as I screamed into it. My parents, who were watching TV in the living room, even ran upstairs to check if something was wrong.

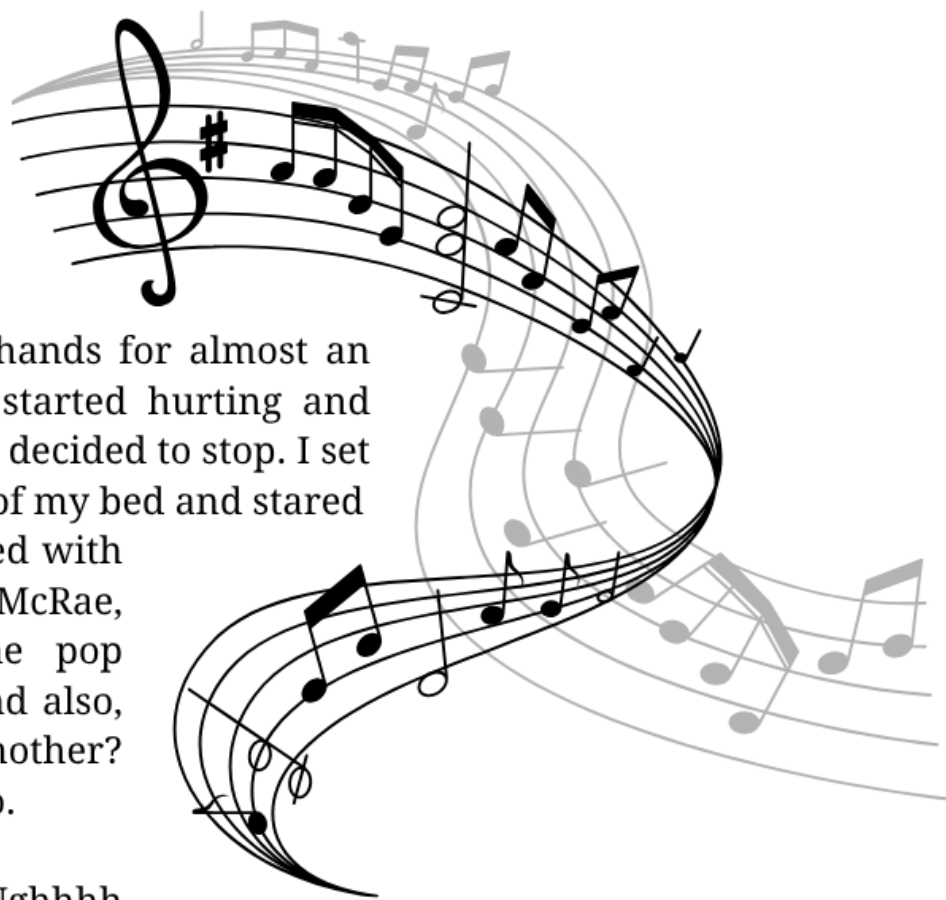
As I screeched into my pillow, I remembered how I hadn't got selected into the school band but my ex best friend had. And she'd come into music because of me! I was the one who had showed her the joys of music first. I'd stayed with her, sending her playlists and rooting for her when no one else had and look where that had got me. Now she'd got into the band I so desperately wanted to get into.

My jaw hurt because of how tightly it was clenched, and my face was red. Hot rage simmered inside me and I felt like breaking something. I mean, sure, we'd been friends once upon a time but then she'd betrayed me and now she got my spot? No way was I going to let that happen.

I threw my pillow back on to the bed as I picked up my guitar. I hadn't played for such a long time. My hands felt rusty. I closed my eyes and tried to remember the notes I played so easily in sixth grade. I strummed an E chord and felt an electric shock run through my body.

I opened my eyes and gritted my teeth. She had got the position I'd imagined myself in for months. Fine then. I would get better. I would get the place of lead guitarist. The band had already selected most positions, but they were still holding auditions for raw talent. That was the only reason I ever had a shot.





I strummed with my bare hands for almost an hour but then my fingers started hurting and turning red, which is when I decided to stop. I set my guitar down on the side of my bed and stared at my walls which were lined with posters of Billie Eilish, Tate McRae, and Taylor Swift, aka the pop queens of the world. Oh, and also, how could I forget my mother? (Not literally.) Olivia Rodrigo.

I stared at them and said, “Ughhhh this is so annoying!”

I took a deep breath and said, “No Alexa, you can do it. You will do it. All of these people must have faced failures in their life or they wouldn’t be where they are today. If they made it, so can I.”

I sighed, turned off my lights and went to bed. As I twisted and turned in bed, I dreamt about getting in, about me performing on stage with the band.

The next morning, I woke up late since it was Sunday. As soon as I got up, I grabbed my phone and my guitar and started practising. I found my old chord sheets in some drawers. They were covered with dirt and dust. I tuned my guitar and started playing one of the songs I had written down in sixth grade. My hands felt stiff as if they weren’t able to move properly on their own anymore like they once did. I kept playing until my fingers hurt and turned red again. I realised that I would need a lot of practice before auditions.

I took a deep breath, calming myself, and said, “It’s okay Alexa. You can do it. You haven’t played for two years. Of course you’re a bit rusty but you can do it. You know you can.” And with that, I got back to work.

I practised the whole day on Sunday and didn't leave my room other than when I needed to go to the bathroom or for meals. By evening, my fingertips burned and my chords were still messy but on a rare occasion, I would strum and they would sound exactly like they were supposed to. At this point I didn't want to get lead guitarist anymore because I thought I might be aiming a bit too high, so I just wanted to get in now.

Next day, I saw my ex best friend walking towards me. I ignored her and planned to walk straight ahead but suddenly, my ex best friend stopped me and said, "Oh hey, Alexa. I heard you were auditioning. Good luck!"

Before I could do anything but stare at her in shock, she walked away. My mouth was left hanging open. My eyes wide as my brain tried to understand what on earth had just happened. My best friend snapped me out of it and I walked ahead to my next class.

Over the next couple of days, I noticed some weird stuff. As I was walking down the hallway Gwenny would randomly stop me and say, "Oh hey, I saw you started playing again. I'm so happy for you." And "I hope you get in. I'm rooting for you." Sometimes she would randomly smile at me as we passed in the hallway. It was really weird. But I just focused on practising for my audition on Friday.

Soon Friday arrived and I was ready. I had practised the whole week and I was excited. I walked into auditions after lunch with my guitar and immediately saw Gwenny sitting in the first row. Her whole face lit up as she saw me, waving like crazy and giving me good luck signs. I ignored her and focused on my audition, which went smoothly. Everyone clapped and the judges smiled and I hoped that was a positive sign.

After auditions as I was walking out, I didn't realise it, but somehow I ended up walking next to Gwenny. She noticed me at the same time. She smiled and said, "Hey, you were awesome. I hope you get in. The judges loved you."



And I just snapped.

I turned to her and said, “Huh. Funny coming from you. You got into music because of me and then you replaced me.”

Gweny looked confused. Her eyebrows rose and her eyes narrowed. “What are you talking about? Replace you? I never did that!”

I rolled my eyes.

“Don’t even do the innocent act in front of me. You stopped talking to me.”

Gweny sighed. “No. YOU stopped talking to ME, not the other way around.”

I frowned. “Wait, so you thought I stopped talking to you so you ghosted me?”

Gweny said, “Uh, yeah, duh. You completely blew me off every single time we made plans and then at school you hung out with other people, which wouldn’t have been a problem if you hadn’t started ghosting me for it.”



Then I realised what she was talking about. “I got close to other people because you stopped replying to my texts.”

She frowned. “Yeah, because you left me on ‘read’ for, like, three days.”

My eyebrows went up. “That was because I got my phone taken away.”

“Ohh, I didn’t know about that.”

We stared at each other.

I laughed because I had a habit of laughing in serious situations. But also, the stupidity of it all was funny.

She looked at the floor.

I looked at her.

She said grumpily, “I’m still kind of mad.”

I laughed. “Yeah, me too.”

We stood there in awkward silence for a bit.

Then I saw the music teacher approach the bulletin board.

We both looked up and ran towards it as she pinned the list up.



I saw my name. And next to it: 'Lead Guitarist'.

At first I thought I'd read the wrong line but when I double checked ... It was actually my name!

I screamed in joy and danced and laughed and jumped like a maniac, grinning so wide my face hurt. I'd got it. I'd actually got the lead. I was stoked.

Gweny saw the list too and smiled. "Congrats. You did it."

I grinned. "Thanks Gweny."

Neither of us spoke as we both looked down at our shoes.

Then suddenly she spoke up. "Wanna practise together sometime?"

I grinned wider and nodded.

Then she smiled.

For a minute we stood there smiling like idiots.

After that we walked off to our respective classes, both of us still grinning.





The House at the End of the Road

Kaveri Kongovi Anand

It was raining heavily, and five children stood in the rain, soaking wet. They weren't wearing any raincoats and didn't have any umbrellas. The wettest boy was arguing loudly with the rest of them. "How would I know it was going to rain? Do you think I can tell the future or something?" he shouted.

"You could have checked the weather forecast, Anil. Use your brains," Anil's cousin, Nandini said. She had somehow managed to stay way dryer than everyone else.

"If he had checked the weather forecast it would have said that today would be sunny. It never tells you the correct weather," Riaan said. He was Anil's best friend and was always trying to support him.

Nandini rolled her eyes. "I think," she said, giving Riaan a warning look to tell him not to interrupt, "that we should knock on someone's door and ask if we can stay there until the rain reduces."

Anil shook his head. He didn't think that it was a good idea to go into a stranger's house.

Just then, it started raining so heavily that you couldn't see farther than two steps in front of you.

Nandini smiled proudly as if she thought that god had heard her and helped her make her point by making it rain harder than before.

Anil felt like whacking her.

"Maybe we should just look for a house in case," Riaan whispered to Anil. He looked at him a little hopefully.

Anil frowned and started walking. The others followed him. Nandini walked with her sister and brother, Sita and Arjun.

Sita suddenly jumped and her feet slipped slightly on the wet ground. "Look, a house!"

In front of them, at the end of the road there was a tall, brightly lit house and though it looked somewhat welcoming, as soon as they reached the doorstep they felt like something was wrong.

"So let's ring the bell," Arjun said nervously.

"Yeah, ring the bell, Anil." Nandini sounded innocent.

Anil turned around. "Who said I'm coming? I'm standing outside until the rain stops and I think all of you should too. There is obviously something wrong with this house."



Nandini, Arjun and Sita looked at the house doubtfully, but Riaan said, “There is nothing wrong with this house, Anil. You’re overreacting. Let’s go inside. It’s safer inside.”

Anil walked a few steps away from them and they knew that meant that he wasn’t coming. It was silent as Riaan rang the doorbell.

Almost immediately, the door swung open. A woman was standing inside. She didn’t let them speak and started talking instead, “It’s raining very heavily and you children are very wet. You’ll catch colds if you outside any longer. Come inside, quickly!”

Everyone, even Nandini, seemed to feel a little bad for leaving Anil alone in the rain.

The woman didn’t seem to notice Anil at all. There was something off about her. The weirdest part about her was that you couldn’t make out anything about how she looked. You couldn’t make out what colour she was wearing or if her hair was long or short. It was very confusing. She quickly took them into the house and the wind slammed the door shut.

They all jumped.

“It does that sometimes,” the woman said. “Do you want some dal rice? It’s nice and hot!”

They looked at each other, then looked at her and nodded hungrily. They knew that they shouldn’t eat food given by strangers but they were really hungry.

As soon as the woman went into the kitchen, Arjun turned towards the rest of them. “There is definitely something wrong with this house. How did the door open so fast and why can’t we make out how she looks?” he whispered.





“Now you sound like Anil. She seems like a very nice lady if you just get to know her,” Riaan said and looked extremely hungry for a second. Not hungry for food, but hungry for something else.

At that moment, the woman came back with four plates of dal rice and told them to sit on the sofa, but it was so uncomfortably soft that they all said that they would prefer to sit on the floor.

“You can call me Aunty. Just Aunty. No need to know my real name,” the woman/Aunty said. “So, what are your names?”

“Don’t tell her our real names. Fake names,” Arjun mouthed to them.

Again Aunty didn’t seem to notice.

“My name,” Riaan said carefully, “is ... ummm ... Jio and my last name is Hotstar.”

Nandini started giggling. “I am the Wizard of Oz,” she half-laughed, half-told Aunty after scanning the small bookshelf in the corner of the room.

Now everyone was laughing and they laughed even more when Arjun said his name was Sam Sung.

Sita said, “My name is Atis.”

Everyone looked confused. Why would she have chosen the name Atis? What did it mean?

“Oooooohhhh,” Nandini said, and Sita shushed her.

“Don’t tell them. Let them find out themselves.”

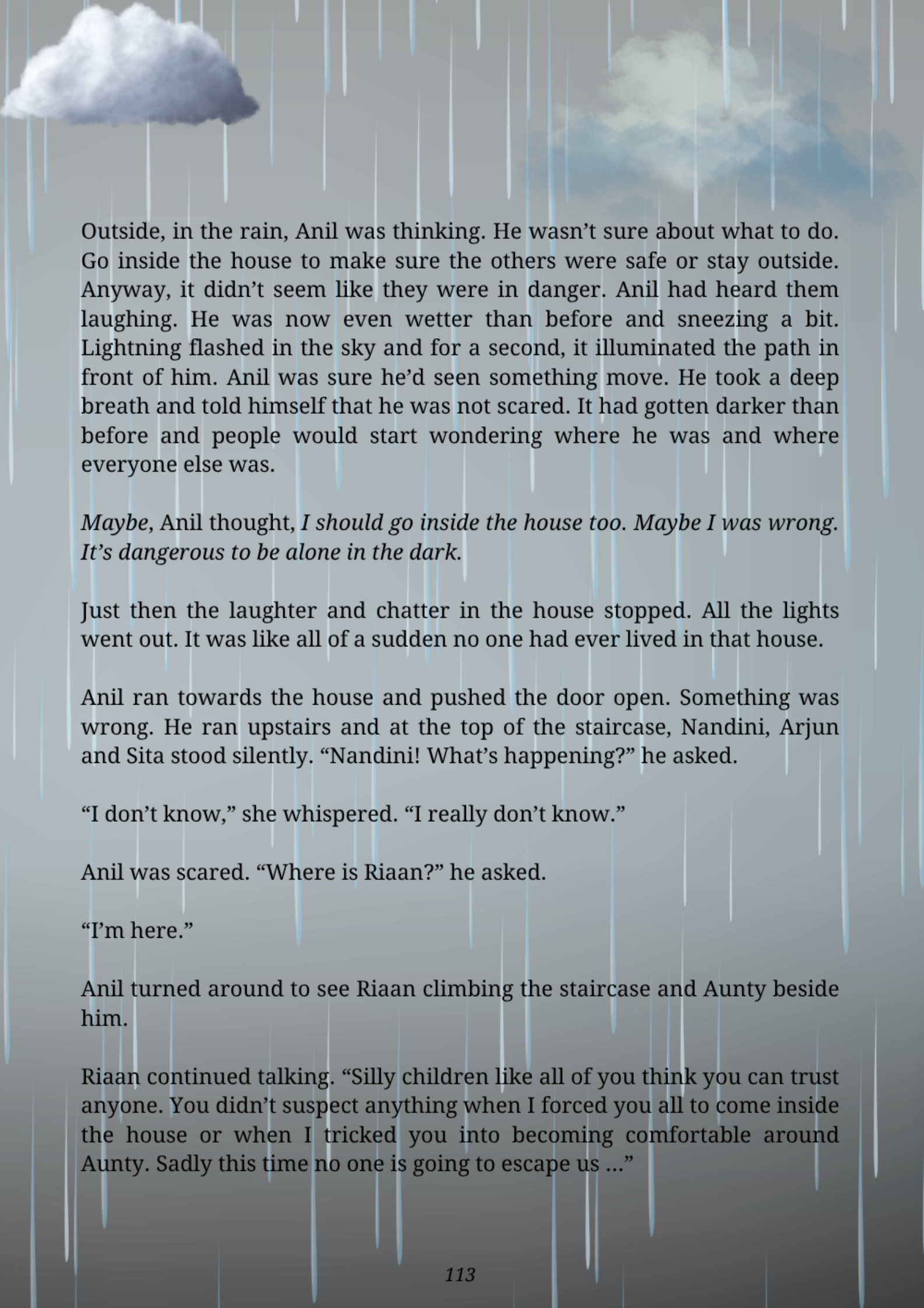
Aunty smiled at all of them and they felt much more uncomfortable than before. Her smile was like a snake slowly slithering into you, trying to steal all your secrets. “You children are very funny. Do you want to come upstairs with me and play some games?”

After she had smiled like that they felt like saying no, but she had laughed with them so enthusiastically that they weren’t sure.

“Come on, let’s go up with her. What could happen?” Riaan whispered.

“Fine,” Nandini said. “Let’s go.”





Outside, in the rain, Anil was thinking. He wasn't sure about what to do. Go inside the house to make sure the others were safe or stay outside. Anyway, it didn't seem like they were in danger. Anil had heard them laughing. He was now even wetter than before and sneezing a bit. Lightning flashed in the sky and for a second, it illuminated the path in front of him. Anil was sure he'd seen something move. He took a deep breath and told himself that he was not scared. It had gotten darker than before and people would start wondering where he was and where everyone else was.

Maybe, Anil thought, I should go inside the house too. Maybe I was wrong. It's dangerous to be alone in the dark.

Just then the laughter and chatter in the house stopped. All the lights went out. It was like all of a sudden no one had ever lived in that house.

Anil ran towards the house and pushed the door open. Something was wrong. He ran upstairs and at the top of the staircase, Nandini, Arjun and Sita stood silently. "Nandini! What's happening?" he asked.

"I don't know," she whispered. "I really don't know."

Anil was scared. "Where is Riaan?" he asked.

"I'm here."

Anil turned around to see Riaan climbing the staircase and Aunty beside him.

Riaan continued talking. "Silly children like all of you think you can trust anyone. You didn't suspect anything when I forced you all to come inside the house or when I tricked you into becoming comfortable around Aunty. Sadly this time no one is going to escape us ..."



Amelia was excited for basketball tryouts. She had spent months practising after school and was determined to make the team this year. Amelia's best friend, Emma, didn't really understand the fuss. Amelia had tried many times to convince her to play basketball too, but Emma preferred reading and drawing. A few days after school started, Coach made an announcement that basketball tryouts were going to start the following Tuesday. A few days before tryouts, Amelia woke up extremely sick. She was coughing, sneezing and feeling very cold even in 27°C weather. When Emma came to pick Amelia up to go to school, she was surprised to see Amelia so sick. "But Amelia, if you're so sick and tryouts are only a few days away, will you be able to try out?" Emma asked her best friend, concerned.

"What? No, I will be fine by then. Now you go off to school I will be taking a sick leave. Bye!"

Emma waved and left the house.

Unfortunately, Amelia did not get better; in fact, it was like she got worse.

"Yeah, sorry hon, we went to the doctor today and she said that Amelia won't be able to get better in a few days," Amelia's mom informed Emma sadly when Emma came to visit after school. "She won't be able to try out either. She's sleeping right now. She's been having a pretty bad day since she got to know."

“Aw, that’s bad” Emma said, bummed out. “Well, I should be going now. Please tell Amelia I hope she gets better!” Emma said as she left.

“Bye sweetie,” Amelia’s mom said, as she closed the door.

On the way home, Emma thought about how she could cheer Amelia up. “Hmm. Maybe I could bring her the sad sweater. Yeah, that could fix her mood; it always did!”

That evening, Emma again went over to Amelia’s house to check up on her and hang out. As they were talking, Amelia got a crazy idea. “You know you could also try out for basketball; it would be fun! I could teach you,” Amelia said when they were hanging out in her backyard.

“What! Are you crazy?! You know I am not into that kinda stuff,” Emma said, surprised that Amelia could even think of asking that.

“Please, Emma, it would be fun! Imagine, you could be in the team,” Amelia said.

“I mean, I don’t know ...” Emma said, unsure.

“Emma, come on, if you would try out, it will be like I am trying out,” said Amelia.

“Ok fine, fine, I will do it, only because me trying out would make you feel like you are,” Emma said, thinking maybe this was another way to make Amelia feel better.

“There are just a few days left until the tryouts and you know absolutely nothing about basketball, so I’ll teach you,” Amelia said.



"Yeah, Amelia, you could teach me, but I'd rather you didn't. I mean your health is obviously not the best right now. Maybe your brother can teach me?" Emma said.

"Yeah, yeah, you're right I could ask Tom to teach you," Amelia said. It was true that she was feeling more tired than she usually did.

"Yeah, good, now go rest. We'll figure this out later," Emma said, trying to escape.

"Nuh-uh, missy. You're not going anywhere. I will go call Tom and he will teach you right now. You need to ace those tryouts," Amelia said.

"Yeah, yeah, okay."

Over the next few days, Tom taught Emma the basics of basketball. To everyone's surprise, Emma picked it up incredibly quickly.

"Wait, you're actually good at this," Tom said after she scored yet another basket.



Emma laughed. "Beginner's luck!"

It wasn't beginner's luck. Emma was getting good at basketball. When tryout day arrived, Emma nervously stepped on to the court while Amelia watched from the bleachers.

That evening, Emma arrived at Amelia's house with a huge grin on her face. "Coach said that I was good today, and that if I keep it up for the next two days, I might make it!"

Amelia forced a smile. "That's amazing!"



But why didn't it feel so amazing to Amelia? She knew that Emma was good, but why did Amelia feel so ... weird?

On the last day of tryouts, Emma gave it everything she had. When Coach finally posted the list of students who had made the team, Emma could hardly believe her eyes. Her name was there. She had made the team. The first thing she wanted to do was tell Amelia! Emma thought that now that her health was better, this would be another addition to her happiness. That afternoon, she rushed to Amelia's house.

"I got in the team!" Emma said excitedly.

"Oh my god! Really?! That's great!" Amelia smiled, but the smile didn't quite reach her eyes.

Over the next few weeks, Emma attended practices every day. She told Amelia all about them—the drills, the games, the teammates she was getting to know. At first, Amelia was happy for her, she really was. But every time Emma told her how practice went, it was really just a reminder to Amelia that she could also have had that. Ugh! If only she hadn't got sick, maybe Emma and her could have got in the team together.

One afternoon, Emma excitedly showed Amelia her new team jersey. "Look!" she said. "Isn't it awesome?"

Amelia forced a smile. "Yeah. It's great." Emma was living Amelia's dream. And Amelia felt a sharp twinge of jealousy. The feeling shocked her. Emma was her best friend. She should have been happy for her. Instead, she found herself becoming quieter and quieter every time the topic of basketball came up. Pretty soon Emma noticed.

"Did I do something wrong?" Emma asked Amelia on the way back home when she was quiet again.

“No,” Amelia said, looking at the ground.

“Then why do you start acting like that whenever I start talking about basketball?” Emma said, annoyed.

For a while Amelia didn’t say anything. Suddenly, she burst out, “Because it’s not fair!”

“What?!” Emma said, shocked.

“It’s not fair, I worked for months, Emma. Months! And then I got sick and missed everything. You trained for a few days and made the team. Every time you talk about basketball, it makes me think of the things I lost. I thought you being in the team would make me feel like I was too, but it didn’t! It just made me feel worse.” The moment Amelia said it, she wished she could take it back.

“Amelia ... I never meant to make you feel that way,” Emma said.



“Yeah, I know,” Amelia said quietly.

For a while, it was quiet, just the nearby hum of cars and people.

Then, Emma spoke up, “Amelia. You do know that the only reason I actually got in the team was because of you,” she said. “I wouldn’t even be on the team if you hadn’t convinced me to try out.”

Amelia looked up.



“And next year,” Emma continued, “when you try out and make the team for real, I’ll be cheering louder than anyone else.”

Amelia smiled. She knew she was being stupid for ever feeling jealous.

The next afternoon, Emma dragged Amelia outside to the basketball court.

“What are we doing here?” Amelia asked.

Emma grinned and tossed her a basketball. “Preparing for next year’s tryouts, obviously!”

Amelia laughed as she caught it.

For the next hour, the two friends practised together, shooting baskets and joking around just like they always had. As Amelia watched the ball swish through the hoop, she realised something. Missing tryouts had hurt. Seeing Emma make the team had also hurt a lot. But losing her best friend would have hurt the most. Next year, she would get another chance at basketball. Friendships like hers and Emma’s were much harder to replace. And that was a victory all on its own.

The Death Overs

Kabir Srinivasan

The finals are close ... Kabir said to himself.

A sense of dread seemed to take over the week before they faced off India's best cricket academy in the league finale, the High Institute of Cricket (HIC). Their team was legendary and almost every graduate went pro. As they walked on to the pitch on the day of the match, it felt like seconds before the umpire announced, "The match between GKS and HIC shall now begin!"

His team was losing, so badly that by the end of the first inning, even the usually upbeat coach was looking hopeless. Their opponents had thwacked them badly. In the end, they needed only three runs in the last over with five wickets in hand. That was when it happened. "You're up, Kabir," the coach croaked between layers of sadness.



It felt like an eternity to him as he marked his run up, ran and bowled with all his might. The events of the past month all rushed into his head simultaneously.



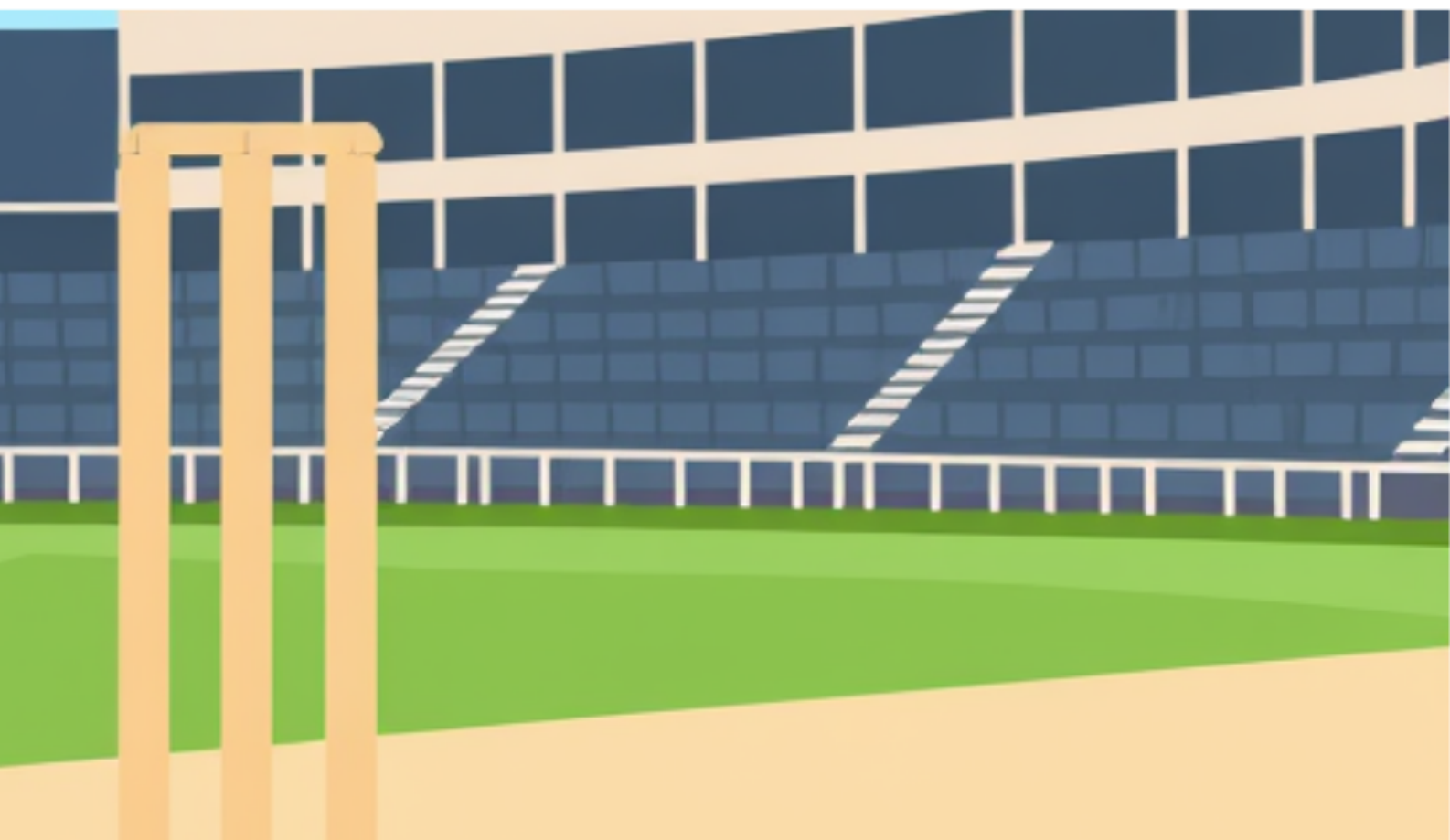
Kabir wiped the sweat off his brow. He was a lean, dwarfish boy, who visibly had no muscle. Tomorrow, he would be a new student in the prestigious Global Knowledge School (GKS). He had heard about their amazing cricket team led by their fearless opening bowler, Sid. Sid was his idol and he couldn't believe that he was joining the same school as him.

The birds chattered in the trees, announcing the sunrise. The light peered into Kabir's window.

“SNORE!!!!” his snore echoed across the walls that were plastered with pictures of Indian cricket stars.

“Wake up, now! You're going to be late for school,” screamed his mom.

Kabir sat up bolt upright, brushed, changed and darted out and onto the footpath to the school. His body seemed to be filled with the tingling





of nervousness. After a walk of a few kilometres, the red gates of the school came into view. They opened and he sprinted as hard as he could to the CCA sign up desk and bellowed, “CRICKET,” at the teacher. He didn’t wait for a reply.

“Look at him, such a weakling. How does he expect to play cricket?” snorted a snarky voice.

Kabir looked for its source. Upon finding it, a jolt went through his body. It was Sid. Sid was his hero, how could he be so insensitive toward someone just wanting to play the sport? Kabir then strove to prove him wrong.

The next few days went by quickly before the first match. He was left alone with Sid and his gang muttering behind his back all the time. They seemed extremely happy to put Kabir down with their regular comments on how he could never play cricket for the school. He didn’t get selected but was a sub even though the coach had never seen him play. He knew he was on the team only because his previous coach had given him a recommendation. Not that anyone who had a player like Sid would need another star bowler. In a matter of a mere hour, Sid had led the team to victory in the first match, reinforcing Kabir’s admiration for him, despite everything. The next few matches, including the semis, went by in the same fashion.

Then, he was brought back to the present. The match where it felt like everything was going wrong.



As the ball left his hand, he took care to give it the slightest swing. The sickening crunch of the opponent's best batsman's bat against the ball was short-lived. The ball zoomed back into his hands like a boomerang, turning them red as he closed his hands around it.

He'd done it. He'd done it! But the opponents could still win ...

His variations were bamboozling as three others fell to his skill.

The last delivery—do or die ...

The ball clashed with the stumps as the hopes of his team soared sky high.

THEY WON!!

“Not bad,” said Sid from behind him, “you might become better than me.”

All Kabir needed was that sentence as his blood bubbled with excitement.





Magic Pick?

What Magic Pick?

Rishik Halan

The thunderstorm raged on. I was trying to learn guitar, plucking notes and generally sounding like a cat screaming. I tried to launch into a guitar riff like my favourite guitarist, Jimi Hendrix, but managed to snap my pick. My shoulders slumped. I thought this would be easy. I would snap my fingers and become an amazing guitarist. But I guess Papa was right. I could imagine him now. “I told you, beta. We are spending so much money you better utilise it. It will be good for college,” he seemed to say. I turned off the lights, popped my headphones into my ears and turned on my playlist, full of Jimi Hendrix and football, and pop songs. When I listened to a Jimi Hendrix song, my teeth gritted. Hmph. Why was he so good? Did I just not have the talent? I didn’t have the potential! Suddenly, before I was going to click the next song button, I saw my walls lighting up. A faint glow came from under my bed. It was never there before. I pulled my headphones out of my ears, frowning.

I picked up my phone, turned on the torch function, and looked under my bed. What else would any other human do? I saw an envelope. I picked it up. There were no stamps, nothing! My face lit up when I saw the address.



I ripped it open. It had a new pick and a note.

Jimi Hendrix is a
member, I hope you
want to be one too.
The Picks.

I picked up the pick, and I instinctively picked up my guitar with my other hand. I tried that Jimi Hendrix riff again. It seemed like the pick was guiding me, not the other way round. I put the pick down, along with my guitar. I could investigate this tomorrow. I pulled my blanket over me, turned on the aircon and listened to music as my eyes slowly shut.

I woke up the next morning humming the Jimi Hendrix song I had been listening to last night. I grabbed a piece of toast and took my guitar. Wolfing down my breakfast, I sat on the bus. Keshav, my best friend waved to me. "Sit here!" he told me, gesturing to the seat next to him.

"Sure," I replied.

"Why'd you bring your guitar?" he asked with a quizzical look on his face. "No offence, but I've heard you."

"Ha!" I laughed. "Trust me, I'm better now. I'm going to sign up for the Battle of the Bands! This time I won't be watching you."

Keshav's face lit up. "Our band needs a guitarist!"

I smiled. "I'm definitely gonna cook!" I told him.



He passed me the sheet. Since I'd got the pick, I had been able to sight-read, fast. As I looked at the sheet, I saw them. C, C#, F, G, D ... All the notes rushed into my head. I spent the whole day staring at the clock. When it was time for rehearsal, I got up and walked out. The door to MUS22 creaked open and I heard the rest of the band. They were all sulking, muttering something like, "We need bass, we need bass." When Keshav saw me, his face brightened.

"Guys, our bass has arrived!"

I unzipped the case, plugged my guitar into the amp, and tuned it. I got my pick out and rattled a perfect Jimi Hendrix solo! The whole band was tapping their feet to the music.

"Oooh, that's FIRE!!" the drummer exclaimed. "All right guys, 1, 2, 3, 4."

I came in first, playing the notes. I was so hyped that I had already memorised the notes. Then the pianist came in, the drummer, and then Keshav started singing.

**I'm gonna fight 'em off
A seven nation army couldn't hold me back
They're gonna rip it off
Takin' their time right behind my back**

We played/sang with passion. As we were finishing, Ash, the teacher, walked into the room.

"I've never seen someone this good," he said, with an awestruck look on his face. "I daresay you are as good as Jimi Hendrix."

"Thanks," I replied.

I waited for the BATTLE OF THE BANDS! I waited. I waited. And I waited some more. My marker ran out of ink from crossing out the days on the calendar.



Finally, the day was here. I brought my guitar to school. We stepped on the stage.

Keshav looked at me. I nodded. He nodded. The drummer counted us down. “1, 2, 3, 4, let’s GO!”

Those were the longest 4 seconds of my life. I started. The pianist came in. The drummer came in. And then Keshav’s voice pierced the sky.

**I’m gonna fight ‘em off
A seven nation army couldn’t hold me back
They’re gonna rip it off
Takin’ their time right behind my back**

We finished the song. “Thank y—”

Keshav was cut off. I raised my palm. And I launched into a guitar solo, ending with a knee slide. The crowd erupted. Keshav looked at me, this close to laughing. I burst into laughter. He did too. We walked off the stage, clutching our stomachs (and instruments). “This was so fun!” I said, dabbing everyone up.



Keshav let out a sigh of relief. “To be honest, I was kinda scared.”

“Yeah, bro.”

“Seriously.”

“Hey, I’m just glad it’s over!” I exclaimed. “Bye, guys!”

“Bye, man,” the drummer and pianist said.

I turned to Keshav, “You wanna come in my Uber?”

“Why not?” he replied.

“Wait ... Where’s my pick?” I asked anxiously.

“Check your pocket, buddy,” he replied, sounding as laidback as possible.

I checked my shirt pocket, nothing there. I checked my right pocket, something there. I pulled it out and saw that it was—drumroll please—**THE PICK!**

“Phew!” I let out a sigh of relief.

“So ... about that Uber,” Keshav continued.

The Bedroom Bog Monster

Kabir Tayal

In London, there once lived a girl named Charlotte, who prided herself on being the grubbiest child in the world. Soap and water were complete strangers to Charlotte. Everywhere she went, a huge cloud of dust and grime followed her.

Needless to say, everything that came in contact with Charlotte became grubby too. Her notebooks were encrusted with unspeakable stains, and she vehemently refused to let her clothes be washed.

But the grubbiest thing about Charlotte was her room. Every time she used something, she dropped it on the floor, so in no time her room was swamped with a barrage of rotten food, old wrappers, and dirty clothes.

Charlotte's poor mother simply couldn't stand it. She prided herself on living in an otherwise spotless house, where a single crumb on the carpet would be cleanly disposed of. As a result, she had made many attempts to persuade Charlotte to clean her room, but the girl's response was always the same: "BOG OFF!" (The phrase was not intended to be ironic, even though Charlotte did live in somewhat of a swamp.)



“BOG OFF!” shouted Charlotte. She couldn’t believe her eyes.

Pacing the girl’s bedroom, the monster began scooping up the mess that Charlotte had deposited on the floor and devouring it. As it ate and ate, it grew at an incredible rate. In no time, the monster was so big its head hit the ceiling.

“Carry on eating, monster!” ordered Charlotte, a smug smile spreading across her grubby face. She had realised something. Her mother had told her to tidy her room thousands of times, and now a monster was doing it for her!

In no time at all, the room was so tidy you could even see the carpet again. And now that the monster had cleared her bedroom, Charlotte could start filling it with rubbish all over again.

“Thank you so much,” Charlotte said. “You may kindly bog off now.”

But the monster didn’t go anywhere. Oh no. It still looked hungry. It turned to face the girl, its gruesome pepperoni eyes focused directly on Charlotte. “BOG OFF!” she shouted, but it was too late.

Drawn by all the commotion, Charlotte’s mother raced towards the bedroom. “Charlotte!” she yelled, throwing open the door, just in time to see her daughter slipping into the monster’s gaping maw. The monster then quickly slinked out of the bedroom window.

For a while the mother sat stunned in the now spotless room. Her face swept through the clean surroundings, before focusing on the wide-open window. Then a grin over her face, a grin filled with accomplishment and selfish satisfaction. Humming to herself, she skipped out of the room, liberated at last.



Wicket

Kaveri Kongovi Anand

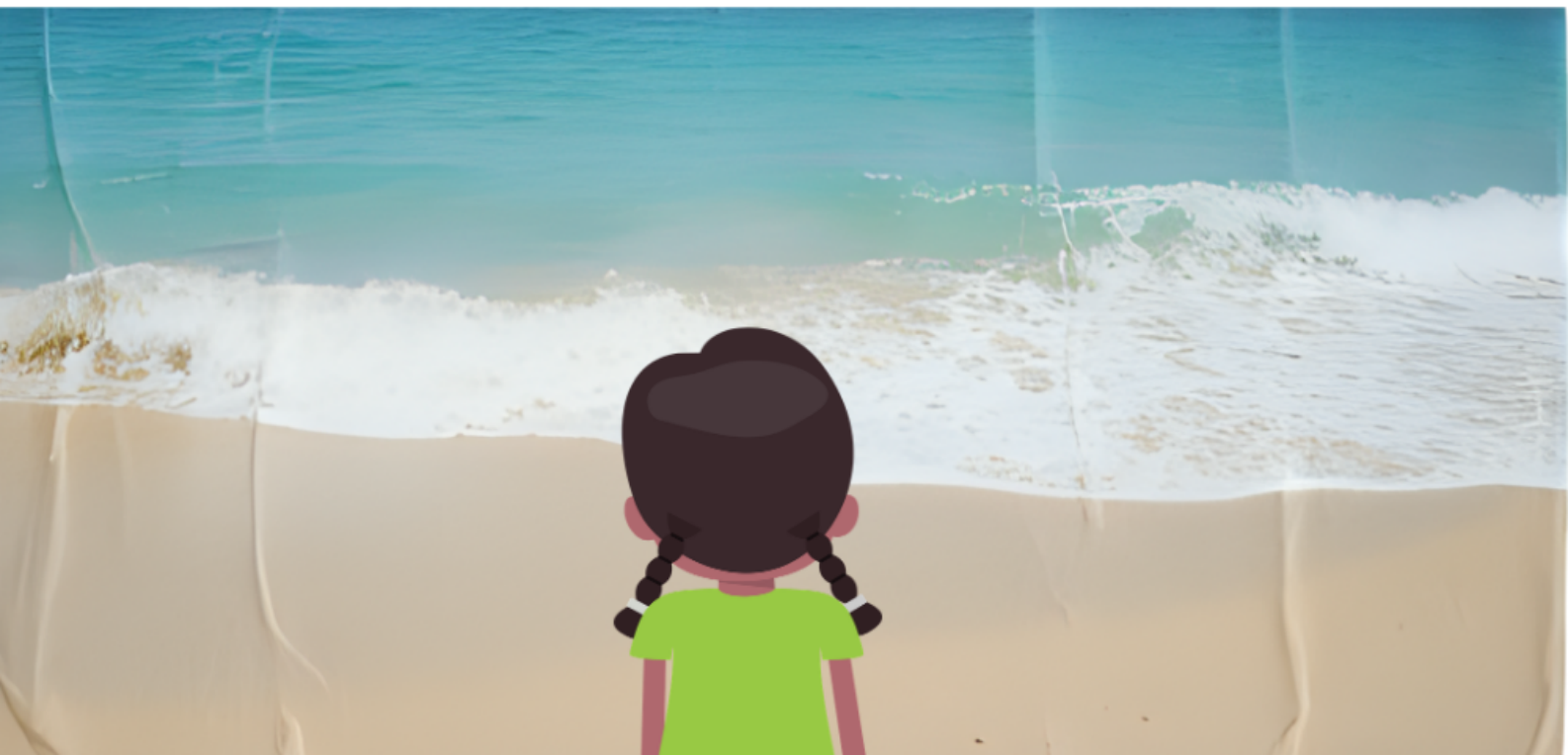
Simi was looking at the deep, green sea in front of her and its huge, crashing waves. The water writhed and pushed like something within it wanted to escape. Simi sat still despite the grey clouds above her and the forked lightning that occasionally hit the water. According to her, there was nothing scary about storms except when you're the tallest thing in your area because then lightning will most probably strike you.

Simi decided it was time to go home and dusted the sand off her clothes. The walk home was going to be long and probably rainy. Simi wished she had something to play with. On her way to the main road, Simi saw something half buried in the sand. It was something she had played with so many times before, a small tennis ball, a bit dirty but still something. Simi bounced it again and again in a rhythm as she walked.

tak ... tak ... tak ...

She bounced it all the way home and inside her house too.

tak ... tak ... tak ...



The next morning was school. Simi didn't want to leave her ball so she put it in her bag.

In her Games class, she took it out again and watched her friends play basketball, football, dodgeball and cricket while bouncing her small, green ball over and over again. The worst to watch was cricket because she felt like joining them again so, so, so much. She didn't play because she knew what would happen if she did. As soon as the ball reached a level above her head and flew towards her, she would scream, run and refuse to come out from wherever she was hiding until the game was over. Last time she'd played, that had happened and it had been so embarrassing that after that she hadn't played any sports at all, not even her favourite, cricket.

"Simi," a voice said.

Simi turned around to see her Games teacher staring at her. "Yes?"

"What was that trick you just did with that ball?"

Simi showed him. She bounced the ball and it spun in the air, then it landed about two meters in front of her, bounced again and came back towards her.

"Wow!" he said. "Simi, I know you get scared of the ball sometimes but if that's going to stop you from playing cricket then I will most definitely ... ummm ..."

Simi laughed because her Games teacher looked like he didn't know how to continue the sentence. She thought for a second and then said, "Will it be fine if I try playing cricket again and if I still get scared I stop?"

"Please try doing that," he said and walked away.





The next day Simi woke up earlier than usual so she asked her parents, then took her ball and went to the beach. No one else was there except the small, black dog with super floppy ears that always sat in the same spot every time she went there. “Hello,” she said to the small dog, and he turned around to face her.

He tilted his head as if he was thinking about something and then turned back towards the ocean.

Simi looked at the ocean too. It looked different from the day of the storm. Instead of huge, crashing waves the waves made gentle sounds that calmed her down but also made her want to use the bathroom. She looked at her watch, petted the dog’s head and walked back home, knowing that in twenty minutes she was going to be playing a sport that she never thought she’d play again.

They had Games class in the first period and Simi knew that. She wished that time would slow down but at the same time go faster. She walked towards the field slowly but then suddenly started running then started walking again.

Her friend, Veena, kept on looking at her, trying to figure out why she was doing this. “I can’t make out whether you are excited to play cricket again or not,” she said.

“Neither can I.” Simi started running again and continued until they reached the field.

“Simi, come here,” her teacher called. He was standing in the corner of the field where kids were playing cricket.

Simi went over there and got put into a team. Some of her teammates were whispering about what she had done last time. She frowned at them like she wanted to murder them. She watched as her teacher flipped a rock to see which team got to choose what they wanted to do first. Her team won the rock flipping thing.

“Simi, I’m making you captain. What will your team do? Batting or bowling?”

Her, captain? Did he have make her captain? Now she had one more person she wanted to murder. She looked at the rest of her teammates and one of them mouthed “batting” to her. She looked at her opponents and then said, “I think we’ll bat first.”

“Don’t you need to discuss your choice with the team?”

Simi looked at her teammates again and most of them smiled at her. “No,” she answered.

“There are a lot of people playing and last time, quite a few people didn’t get a chance to bowl or bat so every few balls we’ll switch the batsman and the bowler so that more people get a chance, okay?”

Then the match started. Simi watched her team bat and the other team bowl. The match was for two overs each. She was starting to get a little nervous.

What if batting first wasn’t a good choice? They had 27 runs in two overs and that didn’t seem too bad. She just hoped the other team did not have good batsmen. She wasn’t close to as good at batting as she was at bowling. It was time for her team to bowl. She waited and hoped that she would get a turn to bowl. She didn’t want to ask if she could bowl next because she didn’t want to bowl even though she also really did want to. Plus, she wasn’t sure if she was still as good a bowler as she once was. When it was the last over her teacher told her it was time for her to play. It was time for her to bowl.



The ball she was holding now was heavy and felt weird compared to her other one. She lifted her hand and threw but it was a wide.

Simi thought that she must have lost practice. She threw again and this time the batsman got a six. This was not going so well. Simi looked straight at the wicket and imagined herself holding her own ball, the one she had found in the sand. She threw and this time it was a wide again. She tried again. The ball went straight towards the wicket and hit it. Simi smiled.

The new batsman came. He looked strong. Simi took a step back and then threw the ball again. It went straight towards the wicket like last time but just before it hit it the batsman slammed his bat at the ball and it came right towards Simi. It came so fast that she didn't have time to react and it hit her on her face. Simi's cheek stung a tiny bit.

The batsman said sorry again and again.

Simi's teacher put a hand on her shoulder. "Maybe someone else should bowl now," he said.

Simi was about to say 'no', but then she understood. She was making her team lose. She could have caught the ball that had hit her face. She nodded and walked away. Now she was fielding. The other team had 24 runs and needed 28 to win. It was the last ball. Simi saw the batsman hit the ball and she saw it fly towards her.

She knew it would be a four unless she caught it. There was no way she could stop the ball from hitting the boundary once it hit the ground. She wasn't fast enough. If she didn't catch this they would lose. She watched the ball as it sank lower and lower and she refused to get scared. It came closer and closer and Simi just kept on getting more scared. She cupped her hands and got ready to catch the ball.



The ball went right beside her hand and hit the ground. Simi couldn't believe it. She had made sure she didn't get scared and put in all that effort. It was not fair. She didn't turn around because she knew the ball was going to hit the boundary, it was moving too fast for anyone to stop it. There was no point trying. The other team was going to win.

Then she heard her team cheer. "Why are they cheering? We lost!" Simi thought. She turned around and saw that the ball hadn't reached the boundary. Something had stopped it. Someone.

With the ball in his mouth a small, black dog with super floppy ears stood, staring at her with a mysterious look in his eyes.

The dog walked towards her and dropped the ball then looked up at her proudly, as if he knew how much he had helped her.

"Thank you!" Simi whispered to the dog.

"You won!" Veena said, running towards her.

"Yes," Simi replied, still looking at the dog, "we did."

"No you didn't!" Veer, from the other team, said. "The dog got the ball and it's not part of your team is it? It's not fair!" He was screaming.

"Okay, okay," their Games teacher said, walking towards them. "Veer is right. The dog is not part of Simi's team. But we can't say that Simi's team loses either since we do not have any proof that Simi still wouldn't have caught the ball if the dog hadn't been there."

"She wouldn't have!" Veer argued and Simi knew he was right. There was no way she could have caught that ball but she wanted to hear what her teacher was saying so she kept quiet.

"I think we should redo that last ball. Why doesn't someone else bowl this time? Who wants to?"



No one in Simi's team raised their hand.

"Ummm, can I try one more time?" Simi said softly.

Her teacher answered, "Sure, if your teammates are fine with it."

Simi looked at them and one of them said, "Yeah, I don't mind," and most of the others nodded.

Simi wanted to say thank you to every single person on the planet as she started walking back to the place she was going to bowl from, the dog walking beside her.

A few minutes later she was opposite the batsman and the ball was in her hand, probably wet now because of how much her hands were sweating. Her hands did that when she was really nervous. She looked straight at the wicket and aimed for it. But when she let go of the ball her hand accidentally turned. It wasn't a good ball and it didn't go the way Simi wanted it to. It bounced at a weird angle and flew right towards the

batsman's bat. He would have hit it easily, it would have been a four easily but it wasn't because when it bounced once more something strange happened. The ball curved and went around the bat, hitting the edge of a wicket. They had won! Her full team cheered and laughed happily.

Veer was smiling.

"Why are you smiling?" Simi asked. "You lost."



“Yeah, but when there’re a bunch of people laughing around you, you feel like laughing too.”

Simi smiled at that.

“Oh, what are you naming your friend?” Veer looked at the small, black dog beside Simi.

Simi thought for a bit and then reached down to pet the dog. “Wicket,” she said.

“Wicket?” Veer wouldn’t stop laughing. “That’s the silliest name ever!”

“He got me a wicket. Plus he gave me a chance to bowl and then my team got a wicket. I think Wicket is a pretty good name.”

Veer still didn’t stop laughing and Wicket was looking at him with the expression on his face that had some time ago made Simi think that he was just an ordinary dog. She had been very wrong.



A Song Sweet and Brave

Maya George

Their eyes follow her as she walks into the speakeasy, lips pursing and gossip beginning to flit across the room on rouge-coloured wings like a moth. Ladies fan themselves as she walks past on the arm of a new man, because that's who she is, someone with a new man on her arm, always. Men nudge each other, because she's magnetic like that. She consumes your conversation, your mind, your feelings, for the short duration that she's here.

Nobody knows her partner's name, of course not, because why would they? He barely matters to the story, her story. They only know hers.

Miss Sarah Jay, famous Chicago socialite, known for being both the most loved and most hated person in all circles of the city.

But here she is, in a less-frequented speakeasy with drinks that aren't nearly as good as the ones in the speakeasy on Earl's Street, wearing her best pearls and hair in that fashionable little bob that everybody longs to cut.

Her lips draw into a smile as she walks past women she's never met in her life, hands tightening around her companion's sleeve. But as she approaches the bar, she looks away from the spotlight that is being cast on her, turning to her companion.

“Honestly, Sarah?” he says, brushing his boyish brown hair away from his eyes. “They care that much about you? I swear to god, you could make millions as a performer again. I mean, everybody’s eyes are on you when you’re walking on the street.”

Sarah slaps his arm lightly. “Quiet, James. I don’t want to hear it, really. And besides, it’s useful that nobody knows you over here. I mean, you’re just my cousin, but nobody else is aware of the fact. It’ll maintain my image.”

“Your image,” James says, laughing slightly. “Isn’t that what you’re always trying to get rid of?”

“Oh, darling James, I’ve grown to love it in the ten years you decided to settle down and get involved with the estate, and promptly abandon all of us, though I felt particularly miffed. I mean, we’re practically siblings. Thank god they don’t know, though,” she says, red lips spreading in a smile. “Now, pipe down. I want to hear this.”

“Ah, yes, the reason we’re here,” James says, smirking in his cousin’s direction. “Ralph.”

Sarah’s cheeks colour, though it isn’t rouge. “I am not here for Ralph. I am simply here for a musical experience.”

“Oh yes, Sarah, a musical experience where your ex-partner on stage is singing,” James says, keeping his eyes solidly ahead as his cousin shoots him a glare.

“I would like to focus on the music, James,” Sarah says, leaning against the bar and watching as people flood to the dance floor, the lights dimming slightly and the spotlight suddenly focusing.





There is a soft trumpet sound, and then he comes on stage, grinning as they all applaud him. Ralph Di Loreto, in the flesh.

Almost unconsciously, Sarah sucks in a breath before Ralph opens his mouth and began singing, a short riff at first, a catchy beat which gets everyone on the floor tapping their feet, and dancing with their partners, but the song slows, as is with jazz.

The partners join hands, and begin to spin each other around, laughs breaking out over the room as people bump into each other, and the lights dimming and brightening with the music.

The scent of whiskey and gin mingle with the scent of the sharp Parisian perfumes that the women are wearing, and though Sarah is usually on the dance floor by this time, her eyes don't fall away from the man on stage at all.

James leans closer. "Didn't you write that song?"

"I did," Sarah whispers as Ralph throws his head back, stepping down and dancing with another woman to finish the song.

"Back when you were engaged?" James murmurs.

"Of course," Sarah mutters. As Ralph walks off the stage, she stands almost still in the haze that the song has left her in, and begins walking towards the backstage areas.

James grabs her arm, and hisses in her ear, “Sarah, what are you doing?”

“I want to meet him,” Sarah whispers back. “Now, people are looking, so properly take my arm.”

The whispers automatically begin taking rounds across the room, and as they walk past, Sarah catches a hint of it.

Is she going to go back for him?

How does her new gentleman feel about it?

Didn't they used to ... be performers together or something?

—broken off engagement.



Sarah takes a deep breath and they take the stairs backstage.

As they make their way together, James's shoulder bumps roughly into another man's, who pauses and stares at Sarah for a few minutes before breaking out into a smile.

“Sarah Jay! I haven't seen you in years! Are you ... planning to perform?” He clasps his hands excitedly.

“Oh, Mr Ryland. It's amazing to see you, but ... I'm not here to perform. This is my cousin, and we're seeing someone backstage.”

“Ralph?” he asks conversationally, and Sarah gives him another smile.

“Yes. I hope you have a good night,” she says, and tugs James away.

“Who was that?” James asks. “You know him?”

“My old manager,” Sarah whispers to him. “He gave me up for Ralph when we ... split. Now, please. Stick close to me. I know these parts.”



They press against the wall, Sarah deftly leading them through a veritable maze of corridors till she stops short near one person's door.

There is a soft singing from behind the door, male singing. Sarah's fingers dig little crescent marks in James's sleeves.

"Come on. You wanted to come here. Now go inside," James prompts.

Sarah takes a deep breath, and then knocks on the door.

"Come in!" Ralph calls.

James nods encouragingly, despite the fact that he does believe that this is a very bad idea.

Sarah smiles encouragingly to herself, like she is forcing herself to believe that it isn't a very bad idea, and puts her hand on the knob, turns it, and swings the door open.

Ralph pauses midway through looking through his music book, eyes meeting Sarah's in an explosion of his shock.

After a second, he stands up abruptly, smiling in her direction, though it is unsteady around the edges. "Sarah. How are you?"

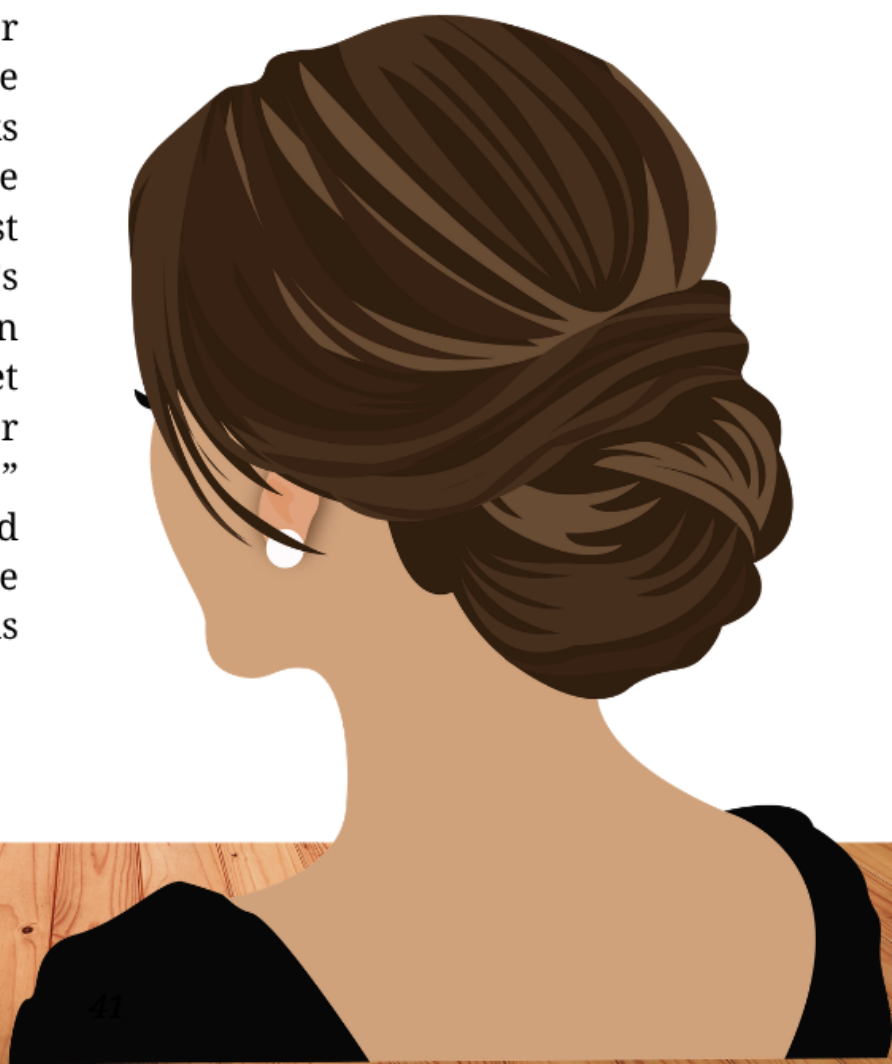
Sarah smiles too, her smile as unstable as his. "I'm alright, Ralph. How are you? What is happening in your life?"

Ralph rakes a hand through his hair. "Uh, same old. As you can see, I've been performing some of our ... old songs at clubs. People seem to love them. Were you there for the performance?"

Sarah nods. "I was. It was good. You sang it well. The duet part was ... odd, though. I almost thought of standing up and singing it out right there."

Ralph's smile fades. "Ah, yes. That would have been embarrassing, would it not?" His gaze falls past Sarah for a second, and his smile returns. "Ah, Sarah! Meet my wife. Darlene, come out here, darling!" He ushers someone out from behind her.

She's about four years younger than Sarah, with her bronze hair styled perfectly, cheeks rouged and a darling little smile on her face. "You must be Sarah Jay! You were Ralph's old business partner back in the day, right? So nice to meet a woman who can make her own way in the world." Darlene raises a gloved hand to shake Sarah's, even as the other woman's smile falls slowly off her face.





Sarah raises her own hand, and shakes Darlene's. "I'm sorry for taking my leave. I must leave, I have an appointment." Sarah grabs James's arms, too well aware that eyes follow her down the corridor as she rushes out to the bar.

"Are you alright, Sarah?" James asks as they run down the stairs, and then across the dance floor as a performer is ending his song, moving towards the bar with a force so strong, James is practically dragged out.

His cousin turns to him, eyes filled with joy, not sadness like he thought they would be. "I am so happy, so happy I got away from that man when I had the chance, James," she says, throwing her head back and laughing, pulling him on to the dance floor, and wrapping her hands around his waist. "Now, let's dance!"

She throws her head back, letting the music flow over her, spinning him around as the singer reaches a fevered pitch of an aria. She stands like that for some time, letting the music consume her as other people get off the dance floor.

This is what a promise sounds like, Sarah thinks as the singer lets the music slow to a stop, softening slowly with every single word. Soft, sweet and brave all at once.

Go with the Flow

Ronikaa Vijan

I took a deep breath in as my pointes touched the stage again for the first time in three months. The stage lights felt brighter than usual, hurting my eyes a little.

It still hurt a bit, but I could dance, I knew it. I knew this choreography in my veins. I did the moves like I'd practised, but I felt a little rusty.

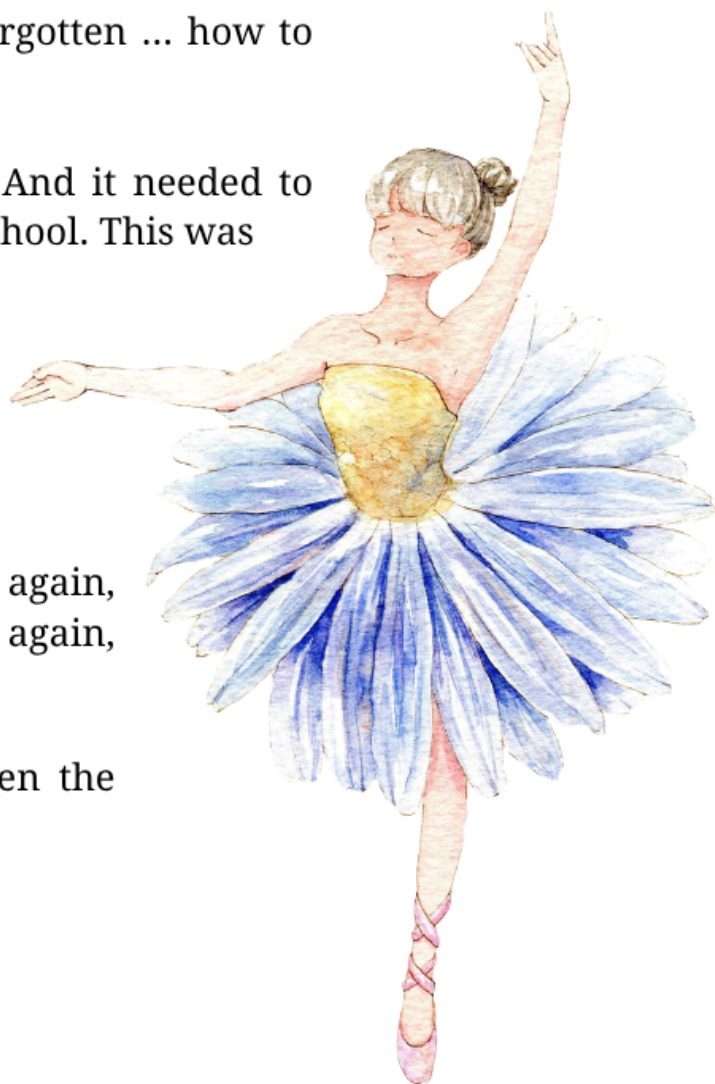
"Stop, stop, stop, THEA!" Miss Carre exclaimed, standing up from her chair, a distasteful expression on her face. "Look, Thea, you know this choreography. But there's no flow, there's no ... connection to the MUSIC!"

I nodded, gulping. There'd been this fear in the back of my mind since last night. What if I'd forgotten ... how to dance?

Dance was my lifeline, my everything. And it needed to be, especially at the Paris Opera Ballet School. This was my last chance to bag a solo for the end-of-season show. Otherwise, I wasn't going to make Company either. And that scared me to the depths of my soul.

The music played through the speakers again, and I started with the choreography again, making sure my form was perfect.

I was in the middle of a pirouette when the music stopped.



“Take five, darling. Go rehearse again with somebody,” said Miss Carre, before exiting the hall with a deep sigh.

I tried to even my breath, slipping into my full splits. That was when I heard Cleo come in. “Hi, Thea,” she said quietly.

I looked away, trying to hide my tears.

“It’s alright, you know. It’s a tough choreography,” she comforted me, sitting down beside me.

“It’s not that, it’s ... Carre says I don’t have a connection to the ...”

“Music,” Cleo finished.

I nodded. “Even you think so?”

“See, the thing about this piece is that we’re all familiar with the choreography. What’ll make you stand out is how you flow with the music. Here, let me show you,” explained Cleo, standing up and slipping on some socks before playing the music.



She was right. Every step was on time with the music and I suddenly understood what ‘flowing with the music’ meant. Cleo looked lost in the music, in the notes, and looked like the dancers people use as inspiration to make these piano pieces.

When Cleo finished, I tried again, but just went more off-beat.

Agitated, I went to the barre, practising my relevés.

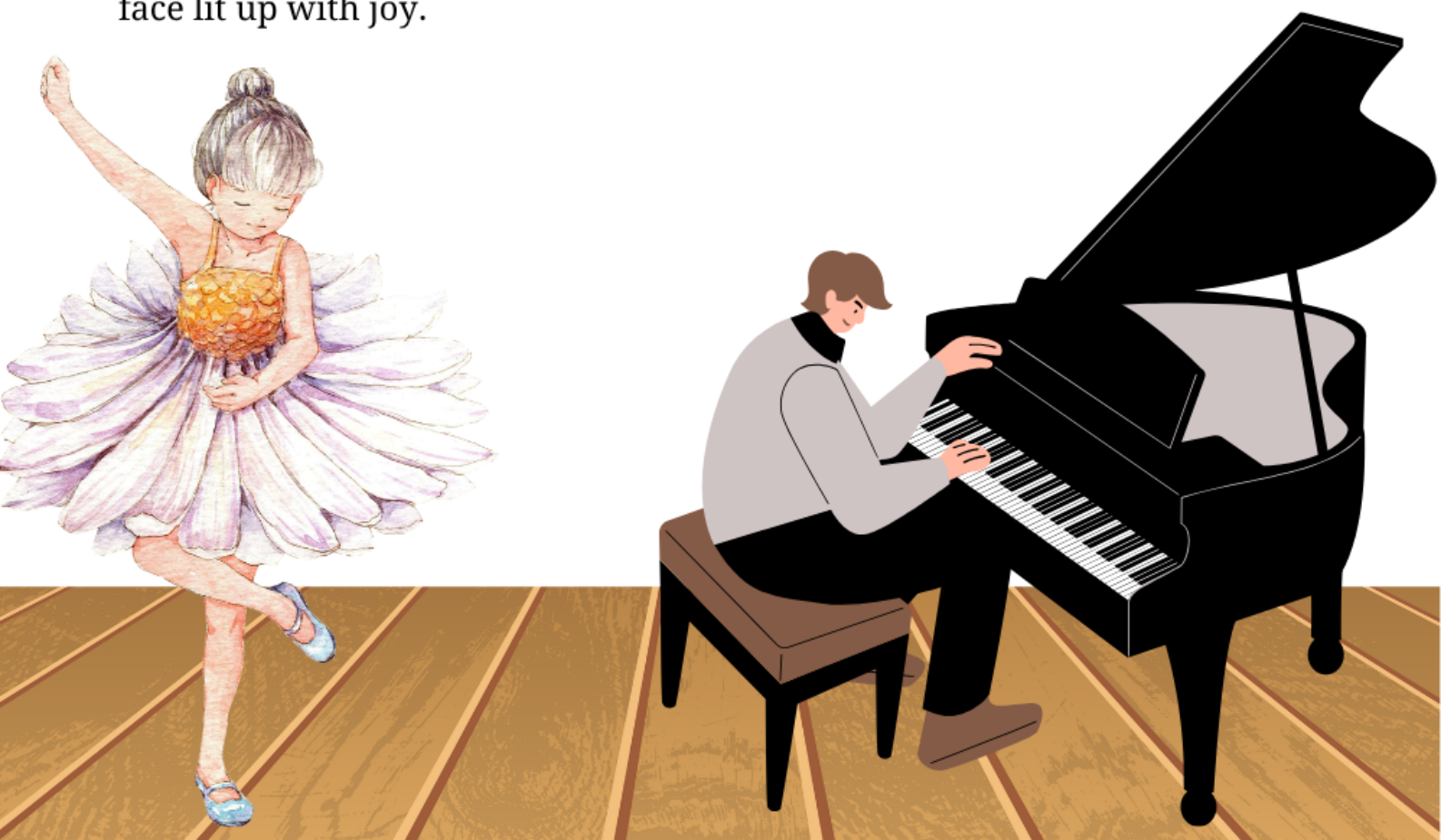
Cleo exited the room, looking slightly done with me. However, a few minutes later, she came in again, silently dragging me to another rehearsal hall.

It was the one with the grand piano, where now a young man, not older than twenty, sat. A tall ballerina dressed in an extravagant tutu stood in the centre, stretching.

Cleo nodded to the ballerina, who nodded to the pianist. He waited for a beat as the ballerina adjusted herself and then started playing the piece. His fingers glided over the keys with ease, like music came to him and was an extension of his soul. His shoulders were hunched and his body was slightly swaying with the music, drawing the soft, familiar melody from the piano.

The dancer moved in sync with the melancholic piece, her each move filled with poise. As the music cascaded to an end, she gently leaped and landed in the end pose, like a feather.

I clapped loudly, a smile on my face. Cleo ran and hugged the ballerina, wrapping an arm around her shoulder as they walked to me. The man sat there for a minute, and as he opened his eyes and saw my smile, his face lit up with joy.





Cleo introduced them to me. “Thea, these are Helena and Mark. They’re from the youth centre.”

I frowned. “How’s she not in a proper ballet school?”

Cleo glanced at Helena before turning to me. “Helena’s ... deaf ...”

I stared at her.

“But she dances beautifully. She’s learnt all this by reading books, some videos, and some classes that happen monthly where students from here go to teach. She has this ... unexplainable connection to the music, something I thought you needed to see,” Cleo finished.

I looked at her in admiration, mouthing ‘You dance beautifully’ as clearly as I could. She grinned widely, bowing before leaving the hall with a slight bounce in her step.

“And Mark?” I asked.

“He volunteers at the youth centre to teach piano to the younger kids and because I teach ballet, I meet him often.”

Mark continued, “I come from a family of business and practising music is often ridiculed in my home. I do like to sneak out sometimes to the youth centre, though. Every child deserves to learn what they like.”

“You have a real gift for music, Mark,” I complimented.

He bowed as well before leaving behind Helena.

Cleo waved at them before turning towards me, placing her hands on my shoulders. “Thea, you know the dance. Just connect to the music. Don’t go against it, flow with it. Sync with it. Feel it.”



I nodded and just then, Miss Carre walked in, gesturing to me to dance.

Cleo went and stood to the side as I stood in the centre.

The slow tunes of the piece started and filled the room. I closed my eyes, imagining Helena and Mark, imagining feeling the music without hearing it. I thought of Mark, who couldn't practise his art. I danced with anger, with pain. Anger for Helena, who couldn't get into Paris Opera and Mark, who couldn't practise his lifeline, pain for the three months I lost. My movements felt more fluid and I got lost in the music, feeling tranquil. As the music cascaded, adrenaline rushed in my veins as I performed the leaps and the pirouettes, landing perfectly.

I'd ... danced.

Miss Carre gave me the smallest smile. "Congrats on your solo, Miss Thea."

Football Unites

Rishik Halan

The lift dinged and the doors slid open. I walked down with my water bottle in hand, and wearing my studs. I should have worn my Astros, but I play better in studs. As I walked along, I realised, there was a 100% chance of rain! OH NO!

I saw the cleaning staff and said hi. Their faces instantly lit up. “Hi Niheet,” they waved back. “How are you doing?”

“Good,” I replied.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, fine. How’s the family?”

“All good.”

“Bye!”

“Bye!” they said.

I walked on, admiring the lush greenery in my complex, Panache. How much work would the gardeners have to do?!

I looked forward to going down because of this walk. It really stimulated my senses. I could see the green pitch.

As I opened the gate and walked in, a nice refreshing drizzle veiled the football pitch. I looked up. How long were they going to take to put that roof in? We would finally have aircon! I wiped the sweat on my brow.

“Oh, everyone, it’s the boy who can’t kick a ball!” Krishiv called out, chuckling at his own joke.



“Ha, ha, so funny,” I replied.

Cracking my knuckles, I put my water bottle down, jogged over, and started the kick-off.

I glared at the big, burly defender, Krishiv. That guy was annoying. He would always go out of his way to step on my foot or hit me. I told myself to shut up and play my best.

I got the ball. I could sense it was going to be a good day. Two defenders rushed at me. I shifted the ball to my right foot and kicked it through Dom’s legs. Sweat poured down my chin. I gritted my teeth and ran on, determined to reach Krishiv.

Running fast, I was in front of him. I ran towards Krishiv. I could see his brain trying to process what I would do next. I didn’t want to lose my momentum. So, I moved the ball to my left foot and then kicked it around his left side while I ran down the right. That was a new skill I learnt.

“OWWWWW! Mummy!” he cried. “I think I sprained my ankle!”

Astonished, I froze in shock.

“I’ll pla—” he winced.
“Nope, no, I’m not gonna be able to,” he told himself while hobbling off to the side.

Yes! I’d managed to skill him! I ankle-broke him! I was not gonna have to get fouled! Come on!





I fired off a shot to top corner. I clenched my fist. My team surrounded me.

“Did you see that ankle-breaker?” one of my teammates asked.

“Krishiv actually sprained his!” one replied.

“What about when Dom and the other guy—”

“Did you see that nutmeg?!”

I started to feel queasy. Why wasn’t I happy? He fouled me all the time, right? I was gonna go home without a bruise today! But something felt off. I couldn’t celebrate. I pushed all my excited, adrenaline-full, teammates aside.

Krishiv had tested my patience, sure. But he had proven to be a challenge and he helped me improve. I had to learn new skills, and just be more convincing in general, if I wanted to pull off my new moves. I walked up to him. “Hey, are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’ll be okay,” he replied.

“Do you want anything?” I asked.

“Nah, I’m good.” But as I walked away, he asked, “Umm, could you pass me the water bottle?”



I smiled. "Sure!"

I ran back into the game. I felt much better. Their team had the ball. Krishiv was egging me on. There wasn't a better feeling in the world. The second I got the ball, I drove a shot into the top-right corner. Yes! The game restarted and I won the ball. I fired a cross into the box and my team scored. Too easy without Krishiv. It was much more fun with him. Now I see why he did all this. I turned to him and smiled. He called me over.

"When I get better, I'm not falling for that trick," he said, grinning.

"Don't worry, I'll find a new skill, just for you."

"Deal!" he said, laughing.

"Video games, my house tomorrow?" I asked.

"What about my house?" he said, gesturing to his leg.

"Alright!" I replied.

I checked my watch. It was 7:13! I needed to be home by 7:15!

"Bye Krishiv! I need to go!" I said hastily while I ran home with a smile on my face.

"BYE!" he called back.



Formula Won

Aabha Sardesai

I hear the engines roar, and my fists clench the steering wheel in anticipation. The air is still and tense, as usual, heavy with the smell of burnt rubber and gasoline. All the drivers around me seem to be thinking the exact same thing.

I'm going to win this.

But my mind flashes back to six years ago. I wasn't a driver then. But my sister was. She wasn't just a driver. She was amazing at driving. She was just simply extraordinary. She was so good, people called her the 'Mozart of Racing.' In every race, she drove with all her heart and soul. She was—she was—something else.

But there's always something that goes wrong. The last time I was here, I was hurt. The last time I was here, I was shattered. The last time I was here, the memories I made were bitter. The horrible kind that leave a sour, disgusting taste in your mouth even after swallowing a million times.

The last time I came here, my sister was taken out of the arena on a stretcher.

The doctors said she would die. They said they were trying their hardest, but that she might not make it. My mind was numb that day. My heart was still and my brain was confused and tired, and it refused to shut up.

But my sister? She's a brave girl. She hung on. She fought through, and she made it. She made it off her deathbed.

And she decided she wouldn't race again. She said she'd had enough. But I hadn't. I wanted to win. Win in this exact arena, the arena that had denied my sister the life she deserved, that had forced her to back down, that had made her feel unsafe and unsure.

And that's exactly what I'm planning on doing today.

Today, I'm finishing what started six years ago.

Today—I race for my sister.

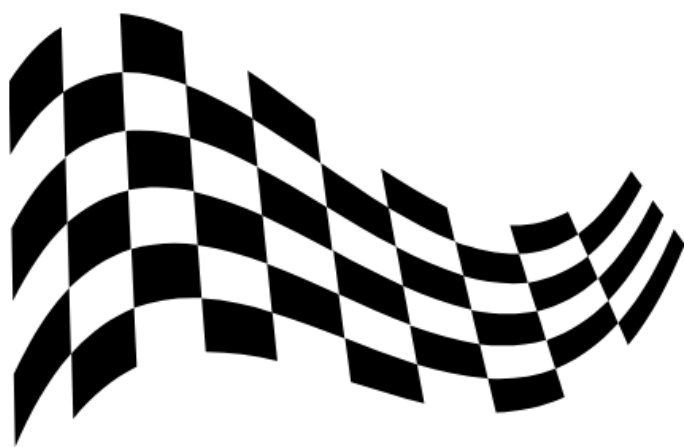
Now, the helmets are tilted forward, the same determined expressions in all eyes. Expectant fingers hover near the controls. Nobody moves unnecessarily. Nobody dares to look away. The checkered flags are going to wave at any moment now, and—

The flags wave, high in the air, and I'm off.

An Audi takes the immediate lead, but she won't stay there. I make sure to tail her convincingly enough to show her that I'm trying to overtake her, but I stay tailing her with my foot on the gas.

If I'm going to pull this off, I have to be patient, calm and ready because at that peak point—wait for it, wait for it—the moment we're at the turn I push hard on the throttle and pull in next to her. We're close enough to each other that I can see her eyes flinch before she presses her brakes and skids off, her car moving quickly off course, stopping just in time to not crash into the wall.

I've pulled off my first feint of the season.



I've pulled off my first win for Aavyah Didi.

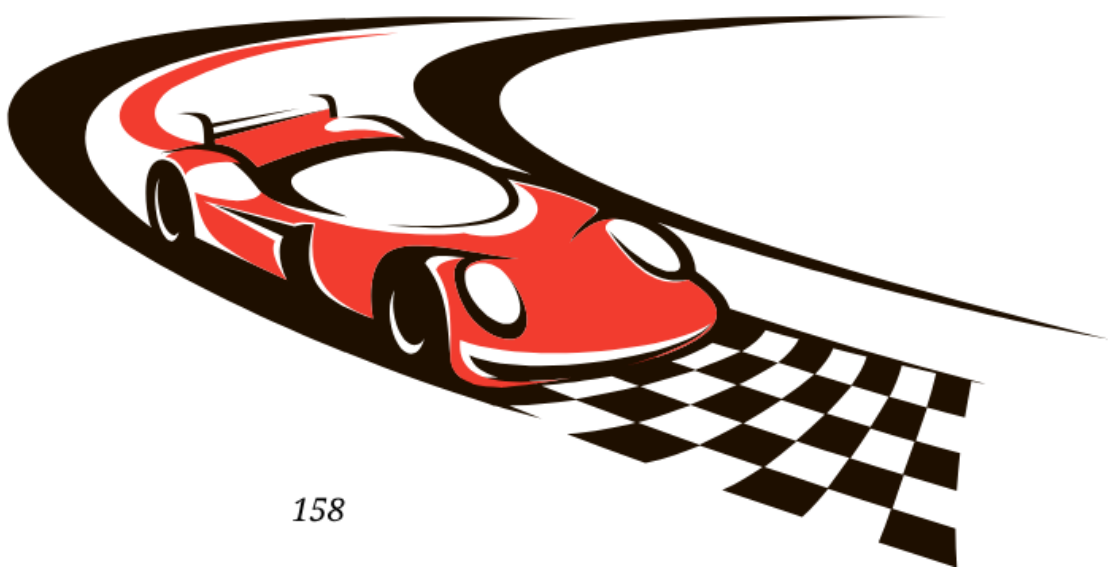
But it doesn't end here, of course it doesn't. The race has only just begun.

I accelerate, making each turn with the aim of moving faster, and the car behind me seems like a speck in my rearview mirror. I can feel the crowd waiting, anticipatory, and soon enough, I hear the screams and chants as I race past the starting line to complete my first lap. Five more laps to go.

The second lap is like driving on an open highway for a short while. But the cars behind me are catching up quickly, and I know that if I don't get past the next turn seamlessly, the driver behind me'll be neck-and-neck with me in seconds. The next turn is the trickiest. It's been the one, singular twist where I've messed up consistently. As the turn approaches, too quickly, far too quickly for my liking, I turn my steering wheel just enough to enter the small, hairpin bend in the road. This turn requires the most attention, and you have to be constantly alert. One false move, one second late, and that's it. Quick, turn, and almost—almost—almost, not—not quite—and I'm OUT. Thank God.

My timer dings and I realise that I've just touched the fifteen minute mark. The course is long, but I should've finished two laps by then. But here I am, in the middle of my second lap, time running away from me.

"Aargh!" I groan. It's annoying enough to make me lose focus, but I bring my focus back onto the track. The race matters more than my small personal goals. Plus, I'm still in the lead.



I hear my engineer's voice crackle over the comm. "Aditi. Behind you. Be careful. ADITI!"

I notice, just before the warning comes through, that the Mercedes has come from 'not even close' to tailing my car. My speed is constant—any faster and I might skid off course. I survey the surroundings—no sharp turns, nowhere she could corner me, nothing, nope. Until it dawns on me. But I'm too late. She wasn't doing anything more than purposefully staying behind me. And now she'll—the Mercedes swings out from behind me as soon as I realise it. In the next second I hear her engine scream as she uses my slipstream to slingshot ahead of me.

No. No NO no.

NnononoooNOoo.

Oh no.



I continue at the same speed, still flighty from the shock, but my focus is entirely on the track ahead of me. It was bound to happen, anyway. It's not possible to stay in the lead throughout. My foot hovers over the accelerator, but I keep it still for sometime while I regain my thought process. I'm about to regain my original speed when a Ferrari and a Renault zoom past me. I slam my foot on the accelerator, but I can't get past them. More speed than this and I might skid off.

I try to stop the tears welling up in my eyes. I've worked so hard for this, how did I let it go? How did I give away my lead?

But my ears ring with what my sister would say.

"Aditi. Focus. You've got the pace. Trust the car. You're the best. Just trust the car!"

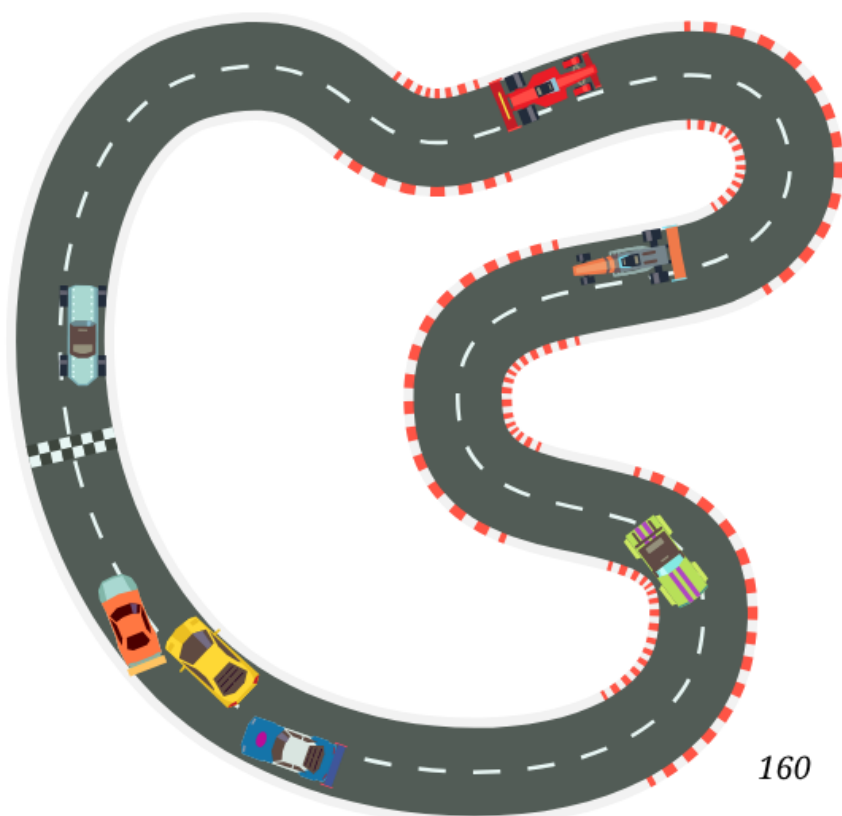
My head swims. I've got this.

I keep my eyes on the Renault ahead of me. Not the fact that I've slipped, or that I may lose the race if I don't keep up my pace. The only way to solve my problems is to look at them like they're actually solvable. And right now, my only problem, my singular problem: is the Renault. I keep my eyes trained on it. It's moving at a certain speed. Like it's satisfied being in third place. It's satisfied by overtaking me. I keep well behind the Renault as the next corner approaches. I inch closer and closer, not so quick that I'm recognised in the rearview, but enough that I'll be able to—

I'm quick to accelerate the moment the corner approaches. Like most complacent drivers, the Renault chose to turn into the deeper side, leaving the height of the track to me. I press in closer, not crashing into it, but savage enough to make it ease out, its speed slowing, but not stopping. I keep my speed constant, moving ahead, and eventually overtaking the Renault by a good distance while it regains its speed.

I focus on the Ferrari, my brain whirring. The next corner is much farther than I'd like. I have to overtake it before then. The chances aren't low, but—

I hear the crowd cheering. The Mercedes which overtook me must have completed its second lap.



OH NO.

I can almost hear my sister groaning and shaking her head, screaming advice from wherever she's watching me.

The starting line is ahead of me again. But the Ferrari crosses it before I do.

I hit my steering wheel in frustration as I cross the starting line again. End of lap two, my time is horrible and I'm in third place. Ugh.

Lap three. My breath is rushed and my heart is beating with trepidation. Lap three is decisive. Lap three, the lap where I regain the lead. Hopefully. The Ferrari is in sight, just behind the Mercedes. They're in competition, and they aren't expecting this Wild Card entry.

I accelerate, my movement precise and calculative. The two cars ahead of me are most probably at their maximum speeds, and my eyes narrow in anticipation. The track goes slightly wider after the starting line, just before the first bend. As expected, the Ferrari takes advantage of this and drifts ahead, moving in next to the Mercedes. Perfect. Neither of them notices me. Their attention is fixed on each other, each driver determined to be the one entering the bend first. For a few precious seconds, they race side by side, neither willing to yield. The gap between them narrows. The road ahead narrows with it. I don't hesitate.

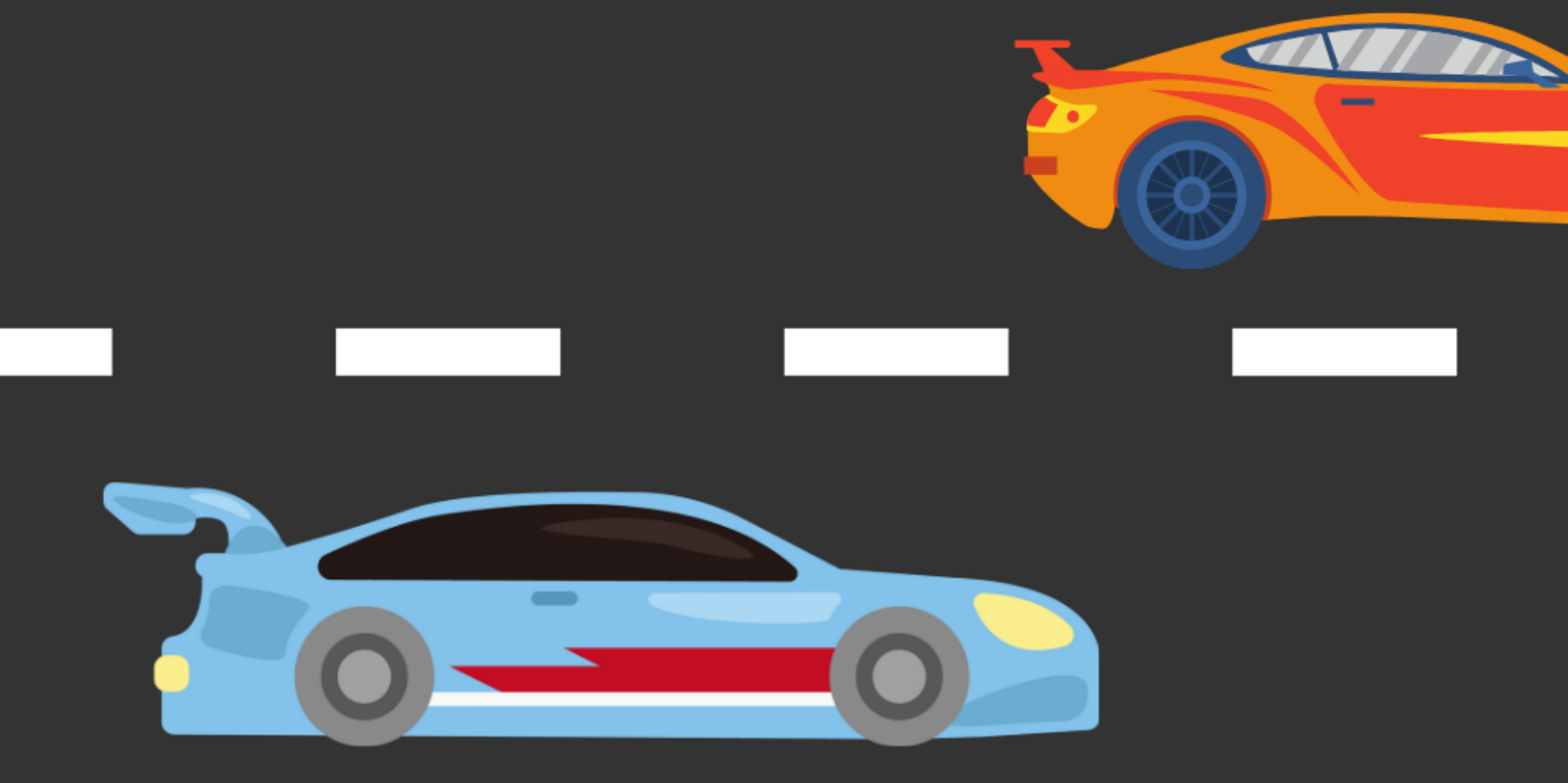
My foot presses harder against the accelerator and my car surges forward. The engine screams in protest as I thread my way toward the inside line. The bend rushes towards us at an alarming speed.

Too late, the Mercedes notices me. Too late, the Ferrari realises what I'm doing.

They brake, and I don't.

I cut into the corner, clipping the apex perfectly and shooting out of the bend ahead of both of them. By the time I glance in my rearview mirror, the Mercedes and Ferrari are fighting for second place. And I'm back in the lead.

I move quickly, keeping my eyes trained on the track ahead of me, my eyes flitting up to the rearview mirror, constantly making sure that there are no threats from the back. I've seen enough of those for today. I continue, and the rest of lap three shows no more excitement of any sort. My pace is next to perfect, and I flit past the starting line yet again.



Lap Four. I make sure to keep my ears trained, and when I don't hear any chants from the crowd, I decide that my competition is a long way behind. I press my intercom button.

"How's it looking?"

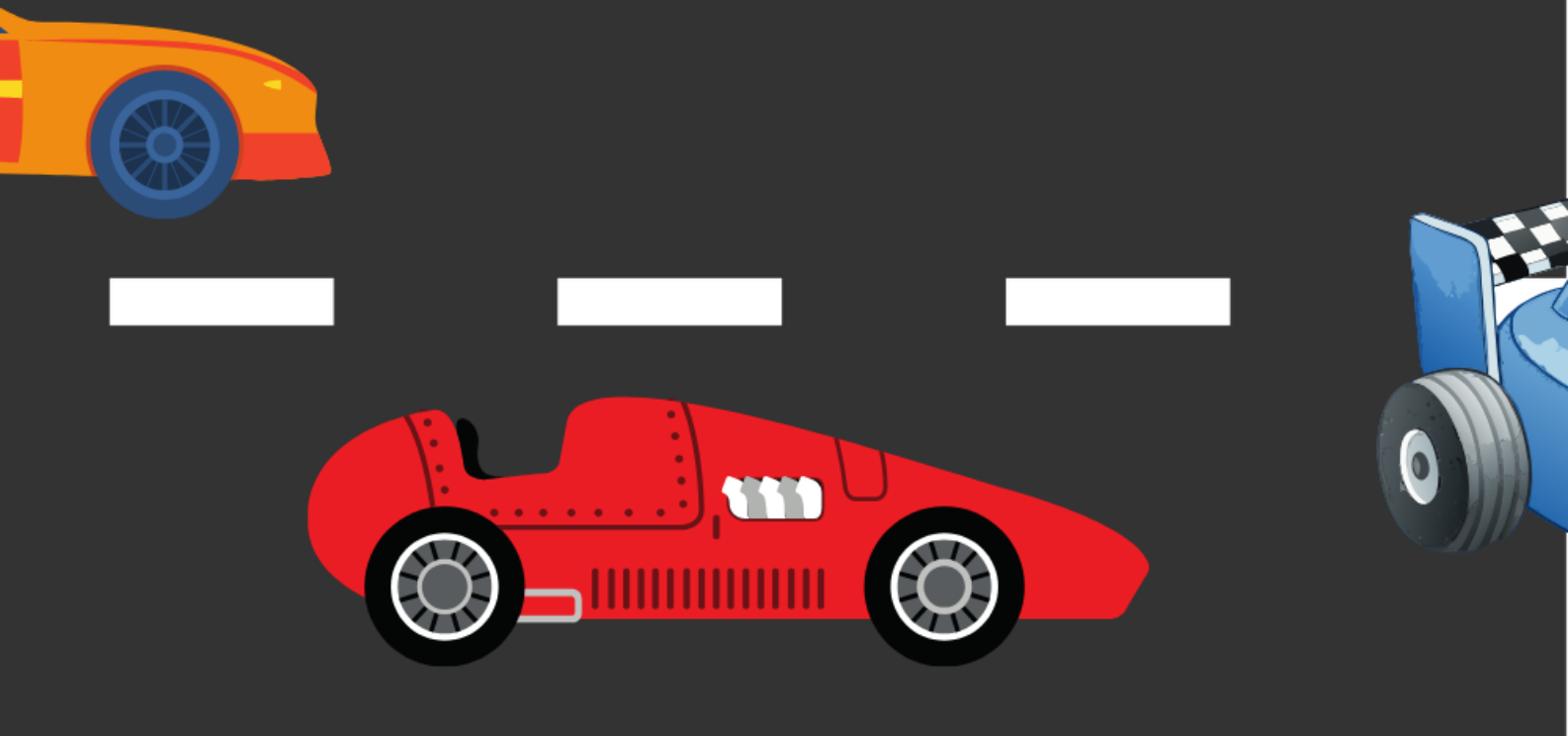
"Clean. Keep your pace steady. You have the Mercedes crossing the line. She's still a threat."

"Got it. Do I need a pit stop?"

"Nope. Keep going."

Tough bends, gut-wrenching twists, and a consistent Mercedes in my rearview mirror later, I come to the end of lap four.

Lap five. I'm two corners in, seamlessly, but my shoulders are aching, my feet are cramped and I'm feeling claustrophobic in my microscopic car. The mixed smell of asphalt, rubber and gasoline is stifling and my body is close to giving up out of exhaustion. The four laps of constant attention and focus are taking their toll on my body. The crowd is a distant roar now, and all I can hear is my engine, tyres against the track, and my own wild heartbeat.



For a fraction of a second, my attention slips. But a fraction of a second is all racing needs.

The infamous hairpin bend arrives sooner than I expect. And I brake. Too hard, too haphazardly. My car lurches awkwardly through the turn, losing speed on the exit. The Mercedes doesn't hesitate. She pulls next to me, engine squealing, and slams her foot on the gas, moving on ahead of me. The Ferrari, who'd spent her own time chasing in my rearview mirror, sees her opportunity. And she takes it, slipping past before I can recover.

First place. Second. Third. Just like that. One tiny mistake is all.

I slam my foot against the accelerator as the track straightens. Anger surges through me, hot and sharp, but anger won't help. If anything, it'll make things worse.

Breathe. Focus. One lap left.

The Mercedes and Ferrari race ahead, fighting each other for the lead, while I tuck in behind them. For the first time all race, I'm not leading.

For the first time all race, I'm chasing.

I don't have enough time to do anything about it this lap. The starting line flies beneath me, disappearing in an instant. My final lap.

Ahead of me, the Mercedes and Ferrari continue their fight for first place.

Behind me, the rest of the field is too far away to matter.

There are only three cars left in this race now.

Theirs. And mine.

Lap six.

The final lap. The one that will decide everything.



I take a deep breath and tighten my grip on the wheel. The Mercedes and Ferrari are ahead, each pushing harder than I thought possible. Their tyres screech against the asphalt, engines roaring like beasts. I can feel every vibration through my car, every hint of their speed and intent.

The first bend comes fast, sharper than expected. I turn steep, crossing the apex seamlessly. The Mercedes blocks the next straight, trying to force me wider, but I anticipate her move and slip through a narrow gap, my car brushing just close enough to the barriers to keep my speed. The Ferrari follows the outside line, giving me the tiniest opening.

The track straightens. My opportunity. I floor the accelerator, feeling the car surge beneath me. The Mercedes and Ferrari are fighting each other, too focused on maintaining their positions to notice me building speed in their slipstream. I feel the wind tearing past my helmet as I rocket forward, the world a blur of asphalt and sky.

Another bend approaches. I brake late, just enough to hold the line, and I'm beside the Mercedes. Her eyes widen through the helmet visor, too late to react. I take the inside, clipping the apex, and surge past.

The Ferrari isn't far behind, trying desperately to block me. But I've learned every curve of this track, every inch of every turn. I accelerate hard out of the final corner, the finish line stretching ahead like a promise.

And I've done it. I've pushed, and hauled and chased and run, and moved and moved and moved, and I'm finally, finally, finally here. I'm finally, finally at the end of the most exhilarating race of my life.

For a moment, I can hardly believe it. The finish line disappears behind me, but I keep driving, my hands trembling against the wheel. Six laps. Six exhausting, exhilarating laps. Every overtake, every mistake, every second of doubt flashes through my mind at once.

Then the realisation finally sinks in.

I've won.

I've won, and I've escaped and I've finally replaced my bitter memories with sweeter ones. Mistakes happen. Bad things happen. And sometimes, what happens happens for the best. Bad experiences can help you make good ones. Bad times eventually end.

And I've won for Aavyah Didi.





A laugh escapes me before I can stop it. Not because I beat the Mercedes. Not because I beat the Ferrari. But because I made it. Through every setback, every challenge, every moment when giving up would have been easier.

As I slow the car and pull into the pit lane, the other drivers begin to arrive. The Ferrari driver lifts a hand in acknowledgment. The Mercedes driver gives me a nod. I return both with a grin.

The race is over.

The crowd is still cheering, but now it sounds different—warmer somehow. Less like noise and more like celebration.

I lean back in my seat and let myself enjoy it.

The pressure is gone. The finish line has been crossed. And for the first time all day, I don't have to think about the next corner.

I just smile.

Because after six years of chasing, fighting, and refusing to give up, I finally made it to the end.

I finally avenged my sister.

Where the Water Takes Us

Maya George

I haven't stepped into the water in a long, long, time. Not since I was eight and one day, my head dipped a little too low in the tides. I still remember the feeling of my limbs going limp, my lungs filling with water. It took me a long time to be able to stand near water, let alone be near it for longer periods of time.

Now, here I stand, on a beach, on a beautiful evening. The sky has turned violet and is reflecting the churning, indigo waters. The pier is abandoned and I can't see many people. I take a deep breath and remove my cover-up, standing now only in my swimsuit.

I step into the water, letting the icy cool wash over my feet. That's when I see him, a little boy, watching me curiously. He's tiny, probably no more than four.

"Do you know how to swim?" I ask him, and he shakes his head, watching round-eyed as I step into the shallows.

The tides are higher now, crawling up my feet faster. I give him my hand, bending slightly so that he can look me in the eye.

"Do you want to stand with me here?"



He smiles and nods, the kind of sticky-sweet, excitement filled smile of childhood. He takes my hand and moves closer, and I guide him towards a place where the tide now reaches his knees. The sea is moving faster now, freezing water churning around our feet. He almost loses his balance.

“This is fun,” I say, and he nods, smiling as he sees the tide crashing towards us.

It reaches his chest, nearly, and he scream-laughs in shock and happiness. “This is so much fun!” he says, his whole face lit up.

I laugh. “Isn’t it?”

I lead us so that the water reaches his chest now. I can hear the roaring in my ears, like when you listen into a shell. His smile slips slightly. It’s too cold for him, but I don’t lead him back to the shore, I just grab his hand tighter, smiling at him.

“Stay with me, please,” I say, even as he looks back at the shore. I know what he sees. The shore is now just a couple of sparkling dots.

Somebody calls out, “RANDALL!”

That must be his name. I bend so that I’m at his level. “Don’t leave me, Randall. Please.”

“Can we please go back to the shore?” he says, his teeth now chattering.



I wrap my arms around him, hoping to quell his cold for some time. At first he leans into me, the way only children do, with a kind of innate trust. Perhaps I remind him of someone. A mother, an aunt, a sister, a cousin.

Then he flinches, and pushes me away with both his tiny hands. His eyes are suddenly wider.

“Randall,” I whisper. “Stay with me, please.”

He's trembling more, now, less from the water. His breaths are coming ragged, pupils enlarged.

“Randall.” I push his damp hair away from his little face. “Stay with me. Please, Randall. Don't leave me, Randall. Please, please, please.”

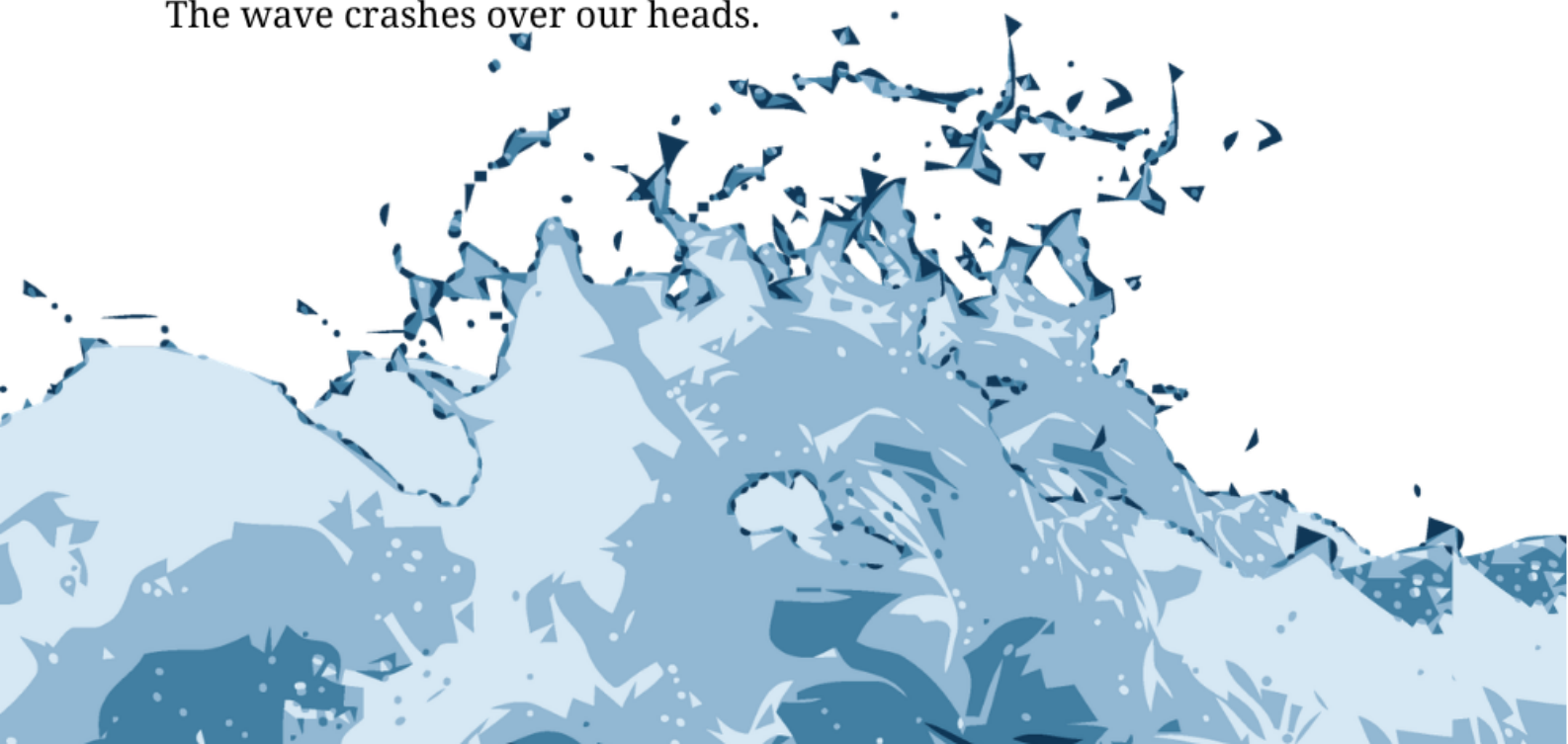
“You—Y-y-o—” he stammers.

“What? Tell me, Randall.”

I see the darkness of the gigantic tide reflected in his eyes, water roaring in his eyes. I tighten my grip, and he winces. “Tell me, Randall.”

“You don't have a heartbeat,” he whispers, eyes too wide, hands too cold, and then—

The wave crashes over our heads.



The Secret Weapon

Aymen Hussaini

The evening before the finals of his intersection tournament, Jack was cycling through the streets, gazing at the orange sunset. He was tired from practice, and wanted to take a break and do something more relaxing. He had practised all his passes and shoots for the big day tomorrow.

He was ready.

Out of the blue, as Jack was taking a turn, he crashed into a cone, and went downhill as fast as a rocket.

“Woah, woah, WOAHH!” He fell off his cycle, and landed on his knees. The rocky, hard gravel bruised him and blood oozed out. As he tried to get up, he felt a sharp pain.

His right knee was twisted.



“Shoot, I gotta get home, now!” he yelled to himself and limped all the way. Jack was nervous about whether he would get to play in the final tomorrow. When he got home, he got escorted to the hospital immediately. Now, he was really scared.

“He needs to wear a cast on his knee, the injury is bad—” said the doctor.

“No, I don’t care even if I am injured! I am playing tomorrow! I am not going to let all my practice go to waste!” interrupted Jack.

“Jack!” said his mom. “You will do what the doctor says.”

“I mean, I do appreciate his situation and enthusiasm, but he can play only if he takes this medicine,” the doctor continued, handing the medicine to Jack’s mom.

The next morning, at school, Jack told his teammates all about his cast and how his injury had happened.

“How are you gonna score, then? You’re our only striker!” his friend Max replied in a worried tone.

“I know it’ll be hard, but I’ll do my best,” replied Jack.

It was time for the big match. The finale. 7A versus 7B, and only one winning section. Jack was desperately trying to warm up, but couldn’t really do anything with his restricting cast. “This stupid cast!” he yelled angrily.

His chances of winning were 0-100, but little did he know the cast wasn’t just any old cast.

When the match started, Jack’s heart was pounding relentlessly. The match was off to a bad start, and Jack blamed his cast as many times as he failed to tackle his opponents because of it. In just the first ten minutes, 7A was getting squished 0-2. Jack was as irritated as someone struggling to catch a fly.

“Okay, my cast may be restricting me, but I cannot lose hope,” Jack said to himself. “I can do this.”



He got the ball and tried to move as fast as possible. Surprisingly, all the opponents who tried to take the ball, ended up failing to do so because of how fast Jack dribbled. Eventually, there were no defenders left. Only the goalkeeper.

Jack decided to shoot with his right leg, even though it was twisted, as he had no experience with his left. He hoped for the best, and the ball shot past like a bullet. The crowd erupted into cheers.

By the last thirty seconds of the game, the score was 3-3. An enemy player was on his way to 7A's goalpost. Jack ran towards him, in an attempt to tackle. Twenty seconds were left on the clock.

As soon as Jack reached the enemy, his opponent decided to pass the ball to a teammate, but Jack ran even faster, and took the ball mid-pass.



There were only fifteen short seconds left. Jack then made his way to the enemy side by zig-zagging his way past his enemies. When he did get there, it was ten seconds on the clock.

Five defenders circled mercilessly on Jack. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six.

“Looks like your cast has run out of luck,” said an enemy. “GET HIM!”

There were only three seconds left when Jack was completely cornered. He swallowed a humongous gulp.

“Okay, it all comes down to this. This very moment decides it all,” said Jack to himself. “Here goes nothing.”

Jack made one last attempt to kick.

The whole stadium was silent. Nobody uttered a word.



The kick was so hard that not only did it demolish 7B's entire defence, but also reached the goalpost.

The ball touched the back net when half a second was left.

"7A wins the intersection cup 4-3," said the referee.

"HURRAY FOR JACK!" the crowd erupted. It was unreal glory.

When Jack ran to his team, they congratulated him about the kick. "No, no, no. Don't congratulate me," he replied. "Congratulate my cast. It surprisingly turned out to be a game-changer."

From then on, all the matches Jack played with cast on, he won by a landslide, and in all of them he always remained positive and confident. He forgot all about the pain didn't feel it for a single second.

Even after he got better, Jack decided to keep his cast in his pocket for every match he played.

Jack named his cast "The Cast of Hope".

The Pass

Devika Aditya Singh

The blinding orange light of the scoreboard showed 48-48. There were only ten seconds left in the basketball final and the crowd was on their feet. The noise in the gym was proof enough that the crowd was excited. It shook the walls.

I wiped sweat from my forehead and glanced at my best friend, Kaavya. We had been playing basketball since we were nine years old. We had won and lost matches together and practised every day on the cracked court behind our school. But at the moment, every tournament we had ever played was unimportant. Everything came down to these final seconds.

Our opponents passed the ball, but Kaavya, who was quick on her feet, intercepted it and immediately passed it to me.

“Go!” she shouted.

I didn’t need telling twice. I sprinted down the court. The basket was directly ahead. For a moment, it felt as though the pathway to victory was clear.

Suddenly, like a shock of lightning, the deep voice of my coach floated into my head. I remembered that before the match he had said that the team’s captain would be decided after this game.



But then another thought flashed through my mind. If I scored, everyone would remember it. The winning basket. Maybe even remember me as the winning girl. But what would I be risking? Perhaps the shot would not go in. And maybe, I realised with a jolt, this wasn't the best position after all. Four defenders were closing in around me. The pathway to victory, which I had been so certain was mine just seconds ago, was blocked.

Five seconds. The crowd roared. Four seconds. I tightened my grip around the ball. Then I saw Kaavya. Somehow, she had managed to get completely free from her defender. She was in a far better position than I was.

For a split second, I hesitated. If I passed the ball, she might score. If she scored, she would become captain. She was my best friend, but the gleaming golden captain badge hovered in my head.

Three seconds. Then two.

I took a deep breath and passed.

The ball flew across the court.



Kaavya caught it and released the ball. The buzzer sounded. The ball struck the backboard. For one horrible second, I thought she had missed. Then it dropped cleanly through the net. The gym exploded with cheers.

Our teammates rushed onto the court. Someone nearly knocked me over in excitement. In the middle of the celebration, Kaavya hugged me.

“That pass was amazing!” she yelled.

I managed a small smile, but part of me wondered whether I had just given away my chance to be captain.



The next morning, the coach called the team together. “I’ve made my decision,” he said.

As soon as he spoke those words, the chatter died down and everyone fell silent.

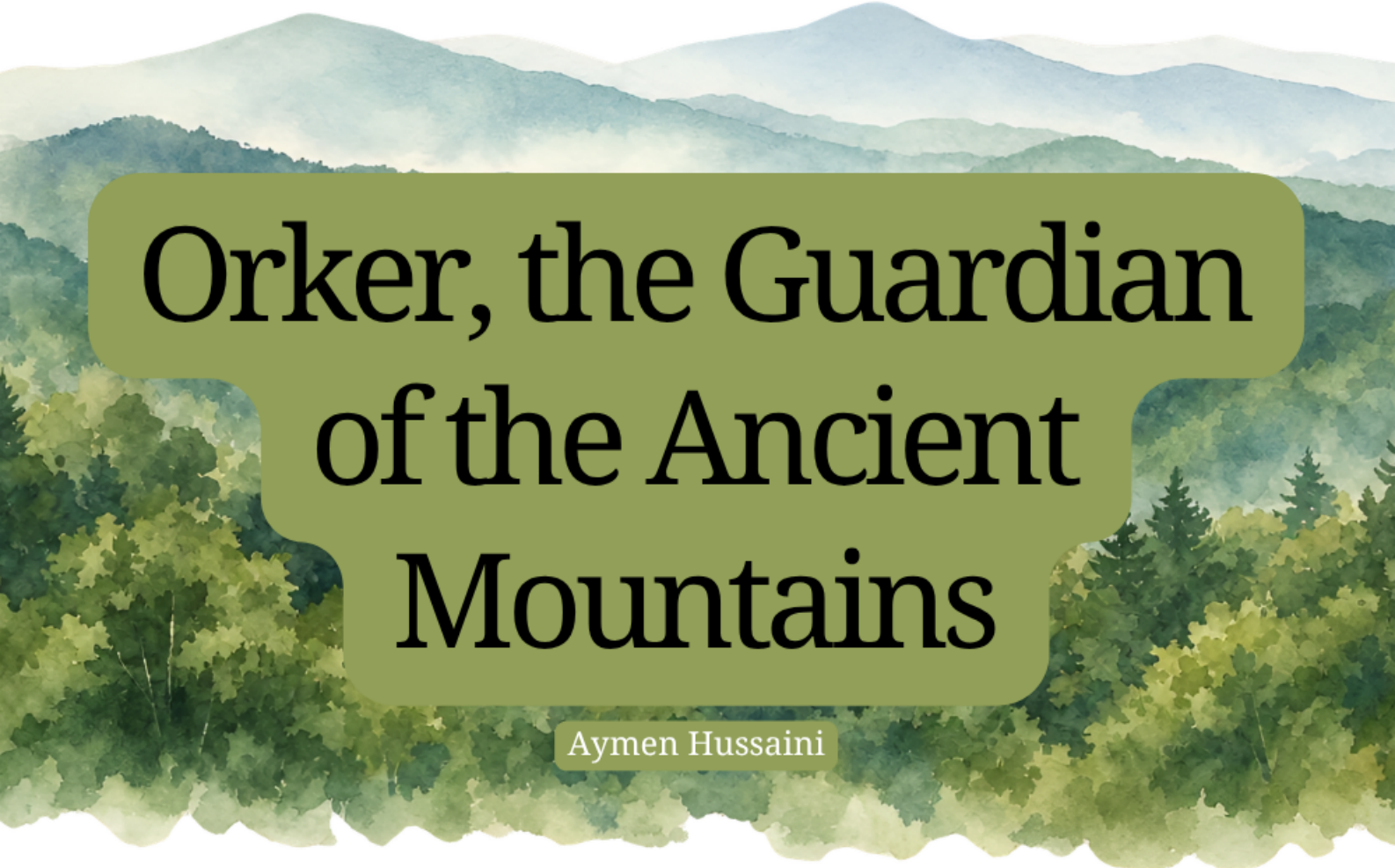
“Your new captain is Aanya,” he announced.

I simply stared. “But I didn’t shoot!” I said.

He smiled. “No, you didn’t. But you made a difficult choice. You chose to pass it to Kaavya rather than basking in the glory yourself. A true captain would prioritise the team’s win rather than personal gain.”

After he said this, everyone stayed silent. Then the room burst into applause. Kaavya beamed at me. I couldn’t help smiling back.





Orker, the Guardian of the Ancient Mountains

Aymen Hussaini

Jack stared at the mountains around him, wide-eyed.

He tried to resist the urge to explore the hills, but eventually, he said to himself, "It can't hurt to just explore, right?" Then he walked forth.

"Woah. There's so many ancient letters here!" Jack said to himself. "I have never seen anything of this sort before! The mountains are covered with a circle of light!" It was as wonderful as can be.

Jack was walking in a slow, curious manner, when all of a sudden, a deep voice called out, "WHO DARES ENTER THE ANCIENT MOUNTAINS!"

Jack got a fright and responded progressively faster, "U-u-um it's me, Jack. If I'm disturbing you, I c-c-can go back. Please don't kill me! I was just trying to navigate my way home, but I tripped and it lead me here! Your home is really beautiful, and I was just exploring!"

A humongous creature walked forth, and eyed Jack. The creature was a mix of a grey-brown color, with green eyes. It had a viking like helmet and a tall axe.

"SO. YOU ARE JACK?"



“Y-y-yes ...,” Jack responded. “I don’t want to harm your h-h-home. I can go back if I’m not w-w-welcome.”

“I SEE, THEN. MY NAME IS ORKER, AND I GUARD THE ANCIENT MOUNTAINS. I HAVE NO FRIENDS, SO I RESORT TO KILLING, BUT YOU—YOU CARE FOR MY HOME,” the creature continued. “YOU DON’T WANT TO HARM IT!”

“N-n-n-no, sir! I don’t want to get k-k-killed!” Jack replied anxiously.

“NONSENSE, I ONLY KILL WHEN PEOPLE HARM MY HOME,” Orker clarified. “I HAVE A PILE OF HUMAN SKULLS IN MY HOUSE!”

“So, uh, nice to meet you Orker, how long have you been guarding this place for?” Jack asked nervously, trying to escape the topic of death.

“SEVENTY THOUSAND YEARS,” Orker responded.

“Okay, uh, that is long for sure! What do you do when your bored?” Jack asked.

“I SMASH MY AXE TO THE GROUND,” Orker replied.

“That is crazy,” Jack said in awe.

“IT IS AN EVERYDAY ACTIVITY. WHAT BRINGS YOU TO MY HOME?” Orker questioned.

“Oh, yeah, so I was getting home from afterschool detention, and I got lost, so I ended up here. I hate school,” Jack clarified.





Orker interrogated, “WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED ‘SCHOOL’?”

“Oh, it’s this place where you learn stuff, but I hate it cuz of the teachers and bullies.”

“VERY WELL. DO YOU WANT A FLING BACK HOME?” Orker asked.

“I mean, considering how desperate I am, sure?” Jack responded.

Orker picked Jack up, put him on his axe, and out of the blue, swung Jack from his axe like a tennis racket except ten thousand times stronger, and Jack was up in the air like a bird.

Jack saw his house and landed there flawlessly.

In the end, Jack murmured to himself, “Boy, I’m sure Orker could give Ms Fierce a whopping!” and eventually walked inside his house.



Breaking the Surface

Maya George

I walk into the training late. I can tell I'm late because they're all staring at me. By them, I mean my teammates. Bisma's halfway up the ladder, Kelly is half-underwater and Farrah is doing backstroke in the clear, cerulean water. But she pauses as Coach Katrina walks out from the locker room and looks me up and down, disappointment evident on her face.

"Take that cover-up off and I want you ready on the board in ten, Cass," she says, voice harsher than it usually is. It takes me by surprise because Coach Kat is maybe the nicest person on the team, despite being the actual responsible adult who is supposed to look after us.

I breathe in the chlorine scent of the pool, pulling my cover-up dress off me and pulling my hair into a bun for optimal efficiency. Nervousness still creeps into my throat as I eye the diving board.

"Championships are in a week," Bisma says, before she dives. She pulls a smooth forward somersault and splashes into the water. She's by far one of the best on the team, second to probably only me when I was in my prime.

"Which sections are we doing?" I ask, walking up to the lineup. Kelly begins ascending the ladder.

“Well, we’re going Kelly and Farrah in the easiest and you and Bisma against the most powerful divers.”

“Coach, I had a sprain at the last championship.”

“Which you didn’t let heal, and kept diving, against my wishes. And then you messed up horribly and made sure that we completely bungled the most recent one.”

“Exactly. Coach, it was a disaster! I literally fell off the diving board, landed badly with that horrible twist and my leg ...”

Coach Kat moves closer, giving me a look. “Cassie. You are going to be okay. I checked with the team doctor. She’s given you the go-ahead. And I’m right here. You’re coming back to the practice for a reason. You’re going to do so well.”

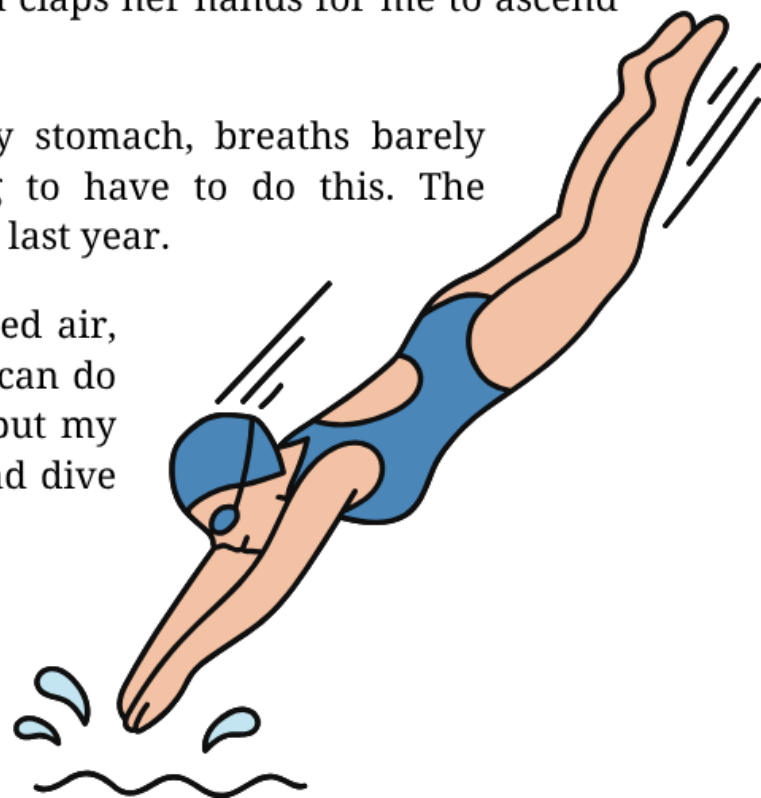
Ahead of me, Farrah does a somersault and twist right before she hits the water and fluidly swims back.

“I’m not ready,” I reiterate. I’m really not.

“You’re going, Cassie. I have professionally dived for years, and I know that you are an extremely good diver. You’re going to be fine.” Coach Katrina doesn’t wait for my reply, and claps her hands for me to ascend the ladder.

I do so with nerves churning in my stomach, breaths barely coming through properly. I’m going to have to do this. The championships. Again. After the fiasco last year.

I take a deep breath of chlorine-infused air, and shake myself out on the board. I can do this. One dive at a time. With that, I put my hands over my head, angle myself, and dive in.



Championship day comes far too early.

I breathe in a calming breath before walking to the centre where they're holding it. And all I can see are pools and diving boards. And divers.

So many of them. We're all clad in similar swimsuits, similar tight buns, but I can see eyes following me. Not unusual, considering what happened last championship. I can still hear the sharp landing, my leg twisting at an unnatural angle and my unrestrained cry of pain as I fell off the diving board. Clearly everybody else does, too, because I can almost hear what they're saying.

"Wasn't she ... like ... injured?"

"Hardest section? Wow, they're brave."

"I cannot believe she's here. I mean, Cassie had her moment, but ... she's a bit out of her prime, yes?"

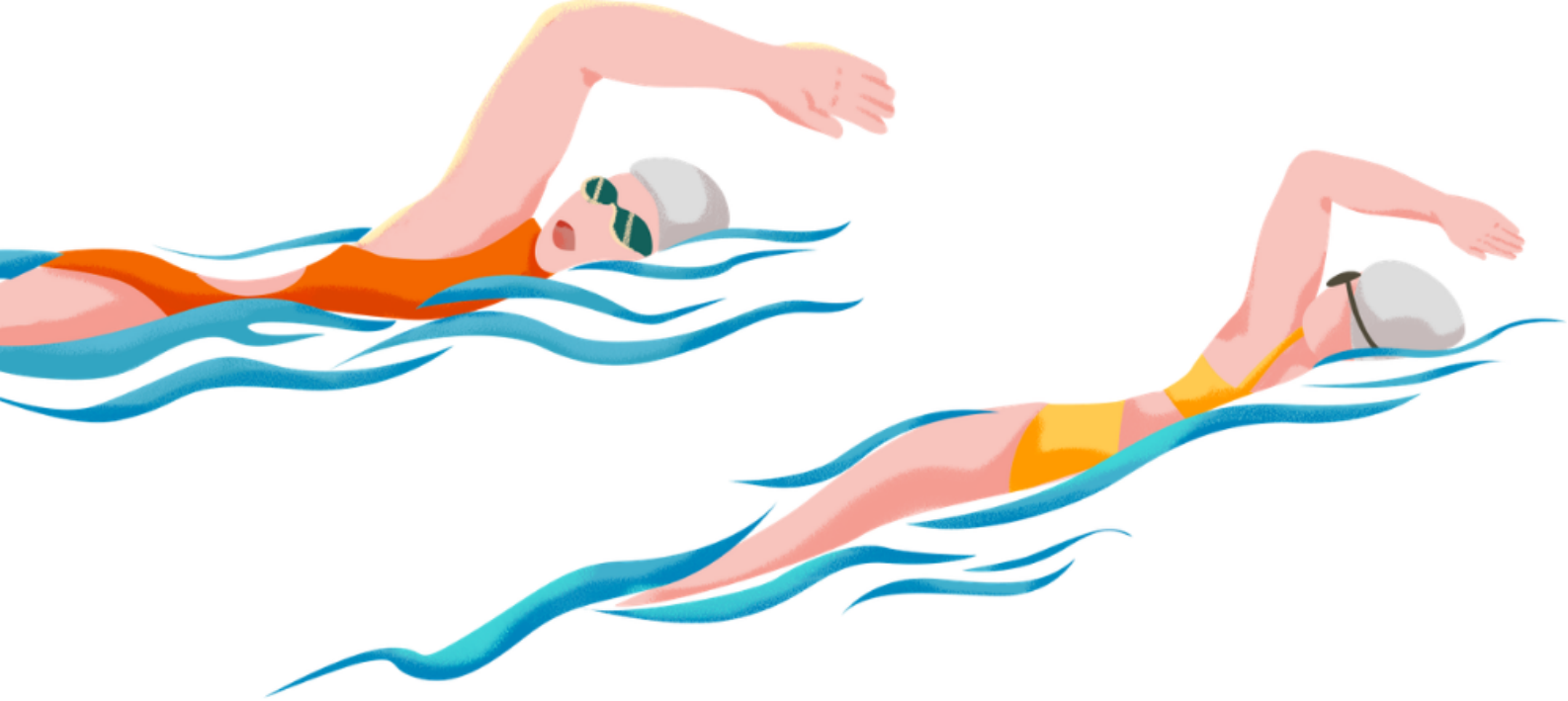
"Totally. It'll be easy as pie to compete against her. I mean ... what can she do with that leg?"



I take another deep breath, trying to centre myself as Coach comes up.

"Coach ... I don't think I should be doing this. I mean, they're right. I shouldn't be competing." My words spill out in a rush but Coach Katrina just smiles.

"That's exactly why I'm putting you in the harder sections. You're healed, Cassie. You went to the doctor yesterday, and they gave you a go ahead. It's going to be okay. And the best thing about this? You're our secret weapon." She gives me a reassuring pat on the back, and I follow her to our team, who stand, preparing themselves for the dive.



The quarter finals fly by. Kelly and Farrah come back glowing. Our team's in for the semis.

Coach Katrina smiles at Bisma and me. "Go do your best, girls."

Both of us walk up to our boards, and do our stretches while our opponents jump. My opponent is particularly good. She does a simple twist, with a certain amount of elegance I could never muster. I keep it simple, too, with a move I've done a million times, but I do it better, and end up in the finals.

Bisma, though out of the competition, gives me a huge hug, whispering, "Do this for the team."

We've only won once before, against another town's school team, in the five years I've been diving for this team, though at the time I wasn't enlisted in the competition. We've won only four times total, in the last twenty years. This is my chance to bring home the trophy.

I inhale, the smell of the pool rising up off the water, chlorine flooding my senses. I can hear the soft chant of the crowd, the quiet buzz of the stadium, and after so many weeks of practice, I can practically taste it. Cool water closing over my head, the splash, the clapping which would be muffled underwater, and I can see it, sharp and clear as daylight in my mind's eye, the cup.

The golden, beautiful, shining cup.

All of my efforts, all of the training, all of my exhausted nights dragging myself to the diving board, all of the evenings I spent after school pushing myself to practice.

This is what it all comes down to, I realise, as I step onto the first rung of the ladder and begin climbing. This dive. This dive is the epitome of everything I've done for the past eight months straight.

I take a deep breath as I slowly approach the end of the board, prepping myself and shaking myself out. "This is it," I tell myself.

And I jump.

As I execute my moves, I hear a soft ooh from the audience, goading me to be better. Try harder.

And as I pull my final twist, I can hear the tension. This was the move, one year ago, which had taken me out from half this championship.

But when I finally hit the water, all I can hear are claps.



They take more than an hour afterward calculating the scores.

We mostly sit around, eat snacks and talk about stupid things, trying to keep the cup in the back of our minds.

Though we aren't able to do it as well as we usually can. My teammates trail off mid-sentence, their eyes flitting to the shining, golden trophy on the table opposite. Coach Kat barely talks, mostly just to reprimand us for saying slightly rude things about the other dives.

When the judges finally come into the room where we all sit, there's a silence that falls over the room, breaths held everywhere.

When they bring their gaze to us, I already know it. We've done it. We've won the championship.

My teammates scream as they announce it, a group hug quickly ensuing, the biggest smile ever plastered all over my face. We go up, take the cup, and lift it above our heads, cheering like there's no tomorrow, as Coach Kat watches from the sidelines.

She smiles directly at me, eyes telling me she's proud of me.

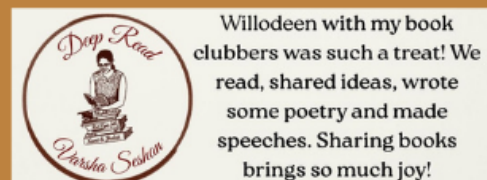
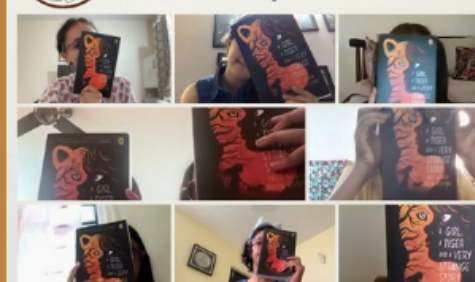
I breathe in a deep breath, the smooth feel of the cup in my hands, my teammates grabbing me and hugging me ... and that's when I realise it, as easy as breathing.

This. This is where I want to be.





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