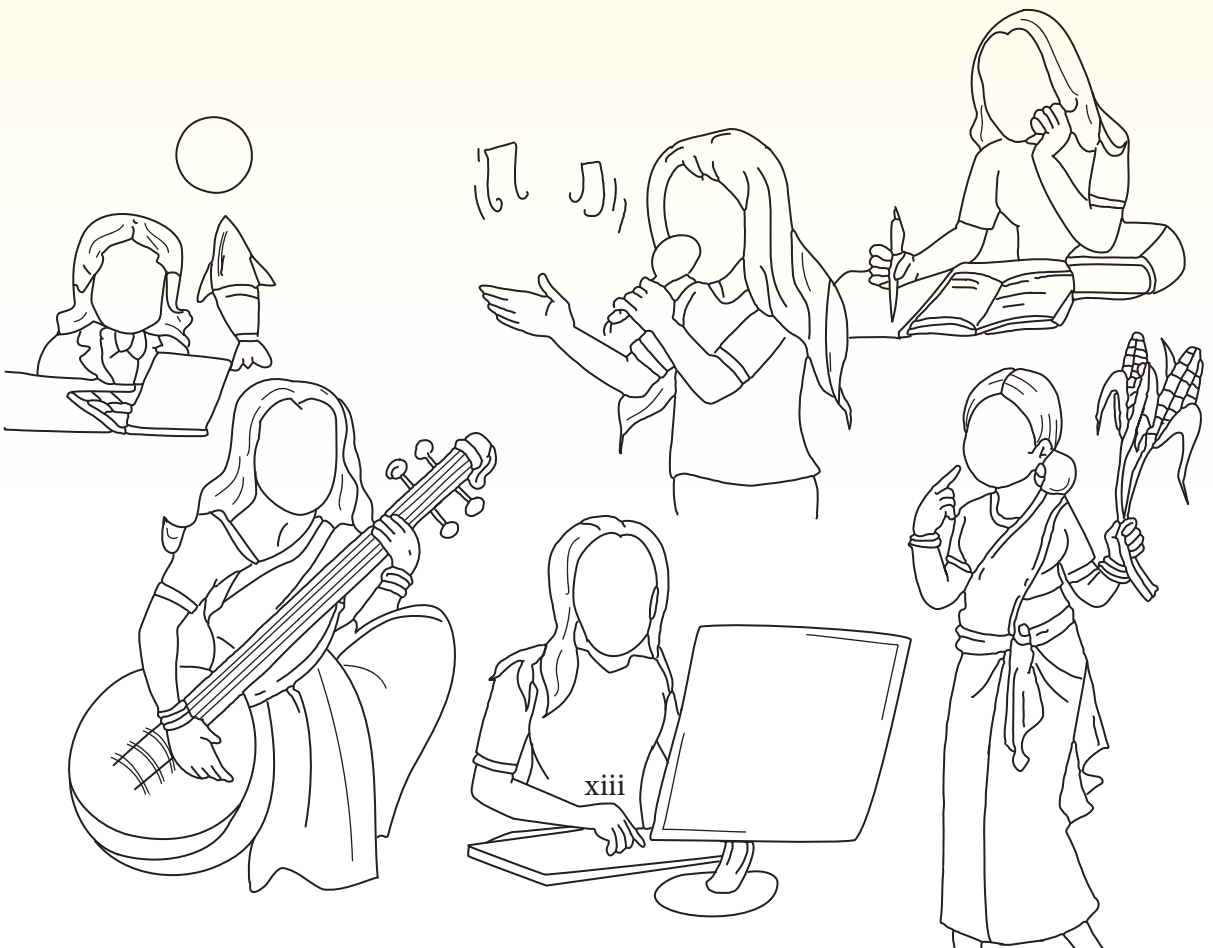


Voices

AN ANTHOLOGY OF INDIAN WOMEN WRITERS

A Supplementary Reader in English
for Middle Stage





एक कदम स्वच्छता की ओर

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विद्यया ऽ मृतमश्नुते



एन सी ई आर टी
NCERT

राष्ट्रीय शैक्षिक अनुसंधान और प्रशिक्षण परिषद्
NATIONAL COUNCIL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND TRAINING

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FOREWORD

The National Education Policy 2020 lays emphasis on the development of reading among students right from the foundational stage for fostering lifelong learning opportunities. Literature stands out as a significant resource for language and literacy development. By providing a variety of books, including supplementary readers in schools, we can cultivate a sense of appreciation for *sahitya* (literature). The National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 also highlights the importance of students gaining an understanding of the vast array of languages and the richness of cultures in India. Students can appreciate diversity in linguistic, and cultural identities through samples of various kinds of literature from languages spanning the subcontinent. This involves selecting content that comprises writings of authors from diverse backgrounds and includes various types of literature that represent local, regional, and linguistic diversity. This approach encourages an appreciation of the subcontinent's cultures. To cultivate literary skills, students must be introduced to and exposed to different genres of literature. At the Middle Stage, the introduction of both nonfiction and fiction can broaden students' horizons and enhance their critical reading and writing abilities.

The National Council of Educational Research and Training is committed to providing students with high quality reading materials. This supplementary reader comprises selected literary pieces representing the rich and proud lineage of Indian women writers who have contributed to literary, cultural, and linguistic diversity while being rooted in Indianness. This category of scholarship covers a wide range of themes—personal and social—their lives, achievements, opinions, imaginations, struggles, and triumphs of these remarkable women. Women's writings serve not only as a form of expression but also as a means of transmitting cultural heritage, traditions, knowledge, dispositions and values from one generation to the next. The emotions conveyed in their writings and the issues they address help readers appreciate the authors' intent, understand the context, identify core content, interpret possible meanings, and most importantly, foster gender sensitisation.

The authors chosen for this supplementary reader have also received prestigious awards such as *Padma Bhushan*, *Padma Shri*, and *Sahitya Akademi* awards, among others. Both language and library classes allow students to explore books that interest them, allocate time for reading, support student literacy, and provide a literature-rich experience for developing interest in reading. Consequently, students transition from 'learning to read' to the 'reading to learn' stage. By the Middle Stage, students are developmentally prepared with the capacity to analyse, synthesise, describe, narrate, and apply their language skills, and become independent readers. This

supplementary reader is an effort to achieve that curricular goal. Students can recognise, contemplate, and express independent responses to social events and interactions, thus developing critical reading skills.

NCERT welcomes suggestions from students, teachers, teacher-educators, and parents, as these insights will aid us in further enhancing the quality of materials in subsequent editions.

September 2023
New Delhi

Professor Dinesh Prasad Saklani
Director
National Council of Educational
Research and Training

ABOUT THE BOOK

The National Education Policy 2020 places strong emphasis on providing adequate reading materials, such as supplementary readers and other teaching-learning materials, to offer students a literature-rich experience that fosters a lasting interest in reading. This content should create opportunities for students to delve into the beauty of literature, both in depth and breadth.

With this objective in mind, we have compiled a selection of Indian Women's Writings. The literary contributions of Indian women have been diverse and prolific, and it is essential to recognise the voices of women writers from all corners of the country. Various genres, including prose, poetry, and short stories, often employed by women writers, offer readers a wide range of writing styles to explore. This collection not only broadens the readers' horizons but also exposes them to India's rich literary heritage.

Furthermore, this compilation delves into issues that span the spectrum of languages, providing exposure to a variety of literature and forms appropriate for students at the Middle Stage. This exposure has been designed to cultivate an interest in reading among students.

The National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 emphasises the importance of students in the Middle Stage becoming independent learners. As students progress, they develop a more critical understanding of the text, recognising that authors have specific viewpoints and multiple perspectives are possible. They can express their own understanding and critically evaluate text, allowing them to enjoy reading and write reviews, use reading for references, and develop an interest in reading various books, thus enhancing their critical and creative skills.

The selection is based on the themes outlined in NEP 2020 and aims to cultivate students' competency as independent readers. It comprises twelve representative stories and twelve representative poems from celebrated Indian women writers. The stories and poems are organised thematically as far as possible.

'How I Taught my Grandmother to Read' depicts the interaction between different generations, highlighting the positive contributions each can make to the other. 'Don't Wash' showcases Rasha Sundari Debi's motivation to learn, marking an early movement in the history of women's writing in India. 'Cowgirl' introduces Govindi, who displays determination and perseverance in solving her problems, drawing inspiration from the positive power of the media to find creative solutions.

The poem 'Home' raises questions about the freedom to do what one likes, while 'Vitamin M' humourously conveys a tale that age doesn't diminish a person's wit and wisdom, addressing ageism. 'To the Chinese Restaurant' revisits memories through a restaurant's ambience. 'Plumpie and Pommy'

explores the world of beauty queens and sports enthusiasts, challenging gender stereotypes and parental pressures. 'Tea and Bridge Party' satirises how children can become a source of parental self-esteem in social circles.

'Guilt Trip' narrates the adventure of three girls venturing out on their own for the first time without parental permission. 'Monsoon Mathematics' describes raindrops in mathematical terms, while 'Something from the Mountain, Something from the Stream' tells the semi-graphic story of a young girl mature beyond years. She finds ways of coping with loneliness and modern family dynamics. 'Unloyal Memory' questions the reliability of memory and why things seem to slip away.

Parents and children both have expectations from each other and these are often based on comparisons that may be unfair. 'Bringing up Amma' emphasises the value of individuality and the value of appreciating people for who they are. 'Middle Age' offers a mother's perspective on transitioning from uncritical dependence to critical independence. 'Can you Hear Silence?' addresses the noise of modern lives, yearning for quiet amid the frenetic pace. 'Can You Play Silence' explores the concept of silence and the games one can play with it.

'Enid Blyton in Rajasthan' illustrates the importance of experiential and contextual learning. 'A Sea of Foliage Girds our Garden Round' compares a garden's vibrant shades of green to the evergreen sea. 'Doing What You Like is Freedom' examines two parenting approaches and the concept of freedom.

'Harvest Hymn', is a hymn praising the deities *Prithvi*, *Varuna* and *Surya* for the a bountiful harvest. 'The Coward' illustrates the drawbacks of technology, however convenient it may be. 'Jazz' showcases music as an international language. 'Centre Stage' focuses on the age old wisdom that practice makes a person perfect in their craft. 'Making Peace—A Song For Children Everywhere' urges seeking peace for the sake of children. 'The Pot Maker' discusses the preservation of traditional and indigenous art and craft forms, questioning the role of market forces and social expectations.

Following each creative piece, questions are provided for reflection. Additionally, brief bio-notes of all the writers are included to offer readers a comprehensive picture.

We hope that students will enjoy reading this selection of Indian women writers and develop literary acumen. Remember, this selection is not an end but a beginning! The voices of women writers from across the country, in all their glory, deserve recognition.

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1

HOW I TAUGHT MY GRANDMOTHER TO READ

When I was a girl of about twelve, I used to stay in a village in north Karnataka with my grandparents. Those days, the transport system was not very good, so we used to get the morning paper only in the afternoon. The weekly magazine used to come one day late. All of us would wait eagerly for the bus, which used to come with the papers, weekly magazines and the post.

At that time, Triveni was a very popular writer in the Kannada language. She was a wonderful writer. Her style was easy to read and very convincing. Her stories usually dealt with complex psychological problems in the lives of ordinary people and were always very interesting. Unfortunately for Kannada literature, she died very young. Even now, after forty years, people continue to appreciate her novels.

One of her novels, called *Kashi Yatre*, was appearing as a serial in the Kannada weekly *Karmaveera* then. It is the story of an old lady and her ardent desire to go to Kashi or Varanasi. Most Hindus believe that going to Kashi and worshipping Lord Vishweshvara is the ultimate *punya*. This old lady also believed in this, and her struggle to go there was described in that novel. In the story there was also a young orphan girl who falls in love but there was no money for the wedding. In the end, the old lady gives away all her savings without going to Kashi. She says, 'The happiness of this orphan girl is more important than worshipping Lord Vishweshwara at Kashi.'

My grandmother, Krishtakka, never went to school so she could not read. Every Wednesday the magazine would come and I would read the next episode of this story to her. During that time she would forget all her work and listen with the greatest concentration. Later, she could repeat the entire text by heart. My grandmother too never went to Kashi, and she identified herself with the novel's protagonist. So more than anybody else she was the one most interested in knowing what happened next in the story and used to insist that I read the serial out to her.

After hearing what happened next in *Kashi Yatre*, she would join her friends at the temple courtyard where we children would also gather to play hide and seek. She would discuss the latest episode with her friends. At that time, I never understood why there was so much of debate about the story.

Once I went for a wedding with my cousins to the neighbouring village. In those days, a wedding was a great event. We children enjoyed ourselves thoroughly. We would eat and play endlessly, savouring the freedom because all the elders were busy. I went for a couple of days but ended up staying there for a week.

When I came back to my village, I saw my grandmother in tears. I was surprised, for I had never seen her cry even in the most difficult situations. What had happened? I was worried.

‘*Avva*, is everything all right? Are you ok?’

I used to call her *Avva*, which means mother in the Kannada spoken in north Karnataka.

She nodded but did not reply. I did not understand and forgot about it. In the night, after dinner, we were sleeping in the open terrace of the house. It was a summer night and there was a full moon. *Avva* came and sat next to me. Her affectionate hands touched my forehead. I realised she wanted to speak. I asked her, ‘What is the matter?’

‘When I was a young girl, I lost my mother. There was nobody to look after and guide me. My father was a busy man and got married again. In those days people never considered education essential for girls, so I never went to school. I got married very young and had children. I became very busy. Later I had grandchildren and always felt so much happiness in cooking and feeding all of you. At times I used to regret not going to school, so I made sure that my children and grandchildren studied well ...’

I could not understand why my sixty-two-year-old grandmother was telling me, a twelve-year-old, the story of her life in the middle of the night. But I knew I loved her immensely and there had to be some reason why she was talking to me. I looked at her face. It was unhappy and her eyes were filled with tears. She was a good looking lady who was usually always smiling. Even today I cannot forget the worried expression on her face. I leaned forward and held her hand.

‘*Avva*, don’t cry. What is the matter? Can I help you in any way?’

‘Yes, I need your help. You know when you were away, *Karmaveera* came as usual. I opened the magazine. I saw the picture that accompanies the story of *Kashi Yatre* and I could not understand anything that was written. Many times I rubbed my hands over the pages wishing they could understand what was written. But I knew it was not possible. If only I was educated enough. I waited eagerly for you to return. I felt you would come early and read for me. I even thought of going to the village and asking you to read for me. I could have asked somebody in this village but I was too embarrassed to do so. I felt so very dependent and helpless. We are well-off, but what use is money when I cannot be independent?’

I did not know what to answer. *Avva* continued.

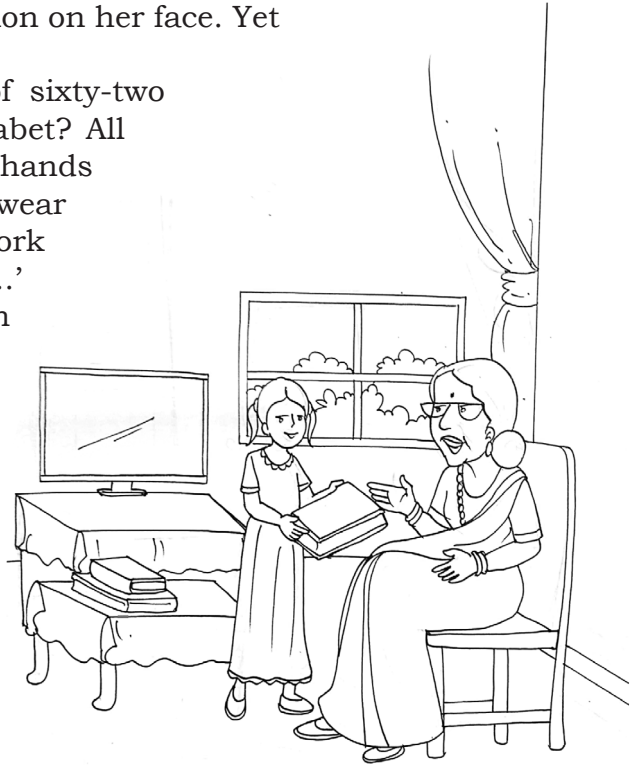
‘I have decided I want to learn the Kannada alphabet from tomorrow onwards. I will work very hard. I will keep *Saraswati Pooja* day during *Dassara* as the deadline. That day I should be able to read a novel on my own. I want to be independent.’

I saw the determination on her face. Yet I laughed at her.

‘*Avva*, at this age of sixty-two you want to learn alphabet? All your hair is grey, your hands are wrinkled, you wear spectacles, and you work so much in the kitchen...’

Childishly I made fun of the old lady. But she just smiled.

‘For a good cause if you are determined, you can overcome any obstacle. I will work harder than anybody, but I will do it. For learning there is no age bar.’



The next day onwards I started my tuition. *Avva* was a wonderful student. The amount of homework she did was amazing. She would read, repeat, write and recite. I was her only teacher and she was my first student. Little did I know then that one day I would become a teacher in Computer Science and teach hundreds of students.

The *Dassara* festival came as usual. Secretly I bought *Kashi Yatre* which had been published as a novel by that time. My grandmother called me to the *puja* place and made me sit down on a stool. She gave me a gift of a frock material. Then she did something unusual. She bent down and touched my feet. I was surprised and taken aback. Elders never touch the feet of youngsters. We have always touched the feet of God, elders and teachers. We consider that as a mark of respect. It is a great tradition but today the reverse had happened. It was not correct.

She said, 'I am touching the feet of a teacher, not my granddaughter; a teacher who taught me so well, with so much of affection that I can read any novel confidently in such a short period. Now I am independent. It is my duty to respect a teacher. Is it not written in our scriptures that a teacher should be respected, irrespective of the gender and age?'

I did return *namaskara* to her by touching her feet and gave my gift to my first student. She opened it and read immediately the title *Kashi Yatre* by Triveni and the publisher's name.

I knew then that my student had passed with flying colours.

—Sudha Murty

Reflect on

- They say that one is never too old to learn. Do you think this is true or not? Why?
- Have you ever tried to teach something to an older person? Is it different when compared to teaching someone younger? From your experience of teaching what did you learn about yourself?

2

DON'T WASH

No, don't.
Don't ever clean with water
the dark, sooty walls
of your kitchen, Rasha Sundari.

For the *akshara* you scratched
on the walls so furtively,
the *akshara* you tried to match
with the sounds you heard
they've quickened now, with life.
Even as you wash rice, fish, vegetables
even as you peel, cut, bake, stir and cook
the thieving letters on the wall will take wings.

They fly down to the palm leaf
you once stole from your son.
See how the letters move
in the eyes of the mind,

then leap over, back to the wall
from the page of Chaitanya Bhagavata you
tore from the book
when no one was looking.

You need no book, Rasha Sundari
no paper or pen either
you have the black, smudgy kitchen wall
for your magical scribbles

lines, ellipses, curves
all of them your secret codes for
a whole new world.



—Lakshmi Kannan

This poem is on Rasha Sundari Debi, born 1810, Rasha Sundari Debi wrote the first autobiography in Bangla titled Amar Jiban (My Life). She is totally self-taught. She lived during the times when literacy

was denied to women because of a deep-rooted superstition that a woman who reads, or as much as touches a book will be widowed. Rasha Sundari Debi tore a page from the book Chaitanya Bhagavat, when her husband left it in the kitchen for a moment. She also stole a palm leaf used by her son for writing. Then she compared the two, learnt the syllables of the languages on her own by writing on the walls of her kitchen, and by matching the letters she saw with the sounds she heard. Her autobiography was acclaimed for its lucid and readable prose.

Reflect on

- Is it wrong to deny someone the right to education? What opportunities are lost the moment education is denied?
- Speak to your grandmother or a woman of her generation and ask them about their experiences of education? Do they place a different value on education when compared to you?
- Have you ever wanted to learn something that was denied to you? What arguments were used to dissuade you? Were you convinced? What did you do?

3

COWGIRL

Govindi hurried down the rocky path that led to the slate-roofed cottage where she lived with her mother. Suddenly a familiar voice cut through the clear mountain air. With a start, she halted. How compelling it was, that sharp crisp tone with just a hint of excitement, which promised more to come! She glanced at the twist of newspaper in her hand. Her broad forehead wrinkled as deeply as the newspaper, as she chewed her lip.

The voice tugged at her, battling with the image of her mother waiting by the fire for the dried red chillies that would add flavour to their evening meal. Then twelve-year-old Govindi looked up at the evening sky, as if for guidance. The summer sun had plunged behind the distant blue hills, but its light lingered. It took her only a second to make up her mind. She raced down the path, scooted through the paved courtyard and skipped over the saffron-painted threshold of her home.

‘Com-ing, Ija!’ she sang out to her mother, putting down the packet of chillies, then ran off, ignoring her mother’s admonitions. Hopefully, the programme wouldn’t be over by the time she reached the flat piece of ground where people gathered to watch television at the headman Madan Singh’s house. To her relief she could still hear the voice as she scrambled up the slope, panting. When she saw the group gathered there, she hesitated. As usual, there wasn’t even a single woman or girl there. Mostly elderly men and some kids, probably waiting for the news to be over so that they could coax the headman to put on a more entertaining programme.

Govindi squatted at the edge of the group and let the small screen carry her away. Yes, it was Sanaa Raz, her favourite anchor! She was interviewing Kalpana Devi, a woman politician who had been accused of misusing public funds. Govindi’s eyes gleamed as she listened. How sharp Sanaa Raz was, how quick to pin down Kalpana Devi when she tried to evade her questions! The word fear didn’t exist in her dictionary. She was always so cool, whether at the scene of action or in the studio—reporting a shoot-out live, or cornering a wrongdoer with the right word.

Govindi watched enthralled. If only she too could become... someone like Sanaa Raz! There were so many things that needed to be set right.

Then as she gazed at the screen, the gripping scene dissolved into an advertisement. To Govindi's dismay she realized that it was already dark. Ija must be worrying. She got to her feet and ran down the slope. But Sanaa Raz's words continued to echo in her ears while she ate her simple dinner of spinach and *chapattis*, scrubbed the utensils, then lay down in bed next to her mother.

Her face grew hot when she thought of the letter she had written to Sanaa Raz, telling her about the poor condition of her school building. Had she been too bold? Had the anchor even got the letter at the television channel's address? Would she do something? Or would she dismiss it because of the sender—a mere schoolgirl in a little village in the foothills of Uttaranchal?

These thoughts were still buzzing in her head when she returned from school the next day. As usual, she changed out of her uniform and took the cows—Ramli, Bhanu and Chhoti, the youngest, to graze in the pine forest nearby. Coaxed out by the recent showers, tender shoots of grass were beginning to poke their heads up between the dry brown pine needles carpeting the forest floor. The monsoon was round the corner and soon there would be plenty of fresh grass for the cows to munch on. They would give more milk, and that would mean more money for her mother and her.

The monsoon would be good for everyone, but things would be terrible in school then, Govindi thought. Rain would pour through the dilapidated old roof, disrupting lessons as the students shifted around, searching for a dry spot. Why couldn't they repair it? Surely the government had enough money for that? Those important people probably felt that this was good enough for village girls like her. If only Sanaa Raz would take up this problem! She would make things happen. Yes, she would grill the minister in charge, mercilessly.

Hmm.... What would she say? Govindi screwed up her thin face and began to think. Then she looked severely at the cows. 'You have promised to build more schools in the villages, Balramji! But do you know about the condition of the ones that exist?' Her voice rang out, as sharp as the anchor's.

Ramli stopped munching to listen, a clump of grass hanging out of the side of her mouth. A rather greedy cow, she never seemed

to have her fill, but strangely, was very attentive to these mock interviews, an almost daily feature. They were a welcome diversion from Govindi's monotonous routine.

'You say you have sanctioned funds?' continued Govindi, her voice echoing in the forest. 'But listen to what our correspondent Bhanu has to report!' Hearing her name, Bhanu, a somewhat timid cow, cocked her head and mooed softly.

Govindi suppressed a giggle, then went on, frowning, 'See, she says the roof of the Government Girls' School in Balta village has not been repaired for the last five years. When it rains, classes are disturbed. Sometimes the school has to close down.'

Bhanu grunted.

'What?' Govindi translated. 'You will distribute free umbrellas? But when will the roof be fixed?'

Chhoti suddenly bellowed. She didn't want to be left out.

'And do you want to hear what one of the students from the school, Chhoti Devi, has to say in response?' Govindi asked authoritatively. 'Unless the roof is fixed soon, the students will march to the nearest town with all the torn umbrellas they can find over their heads.'

Govindi burst out laughing, then turned serious. Maybe that's what they should do. But would everyone cooperate? And would it work?

She sighed. It was not so easy to change things, she knew. But how she loved playing what she called the 'Interview Game', imitating Sanaa Raz, even if she had only the cows as her audience. She could not play all the time, though. There were other things to do—homework to finish and twigs to be gathered for fuel for their evening meal. So, she opened her school bag and took out her books.

When the afternoon sun began to lose its heat, Govindi took the cows home. She had just finished tying them in the shed by the side of their house when someone called out, 'Govindi! Oh, Govindi-i!'

It was their neighbour Suresh. 'Hurry,' he said. 'There's a phone call from Narendra *daju*.'

Overcome with excitement, Govindi scurried up the steep path that led to the main road. She burst into the tiny STD booth that

nestled between a tea-shop and a small grocery. It was rare for her oldest brother to call. Usually it was Amar, her other brother, who telephoned every week to check up on them. He worked as a driver in Delhi. After her father had vanished mysteriously in the big city, Amar had given up his studies to take up a job so that he could take care of Ija and Govindi. It was hard for Narendra to support them all. He had his own family to look after.

'Everything fine?' Narendra asked. 'Is Ija keeping well?' His voice sounded a little stiff but she thought it must be the poor connection.

'We are both fine. And how are all of you? *Bhabhi* and Pinka and Tinu?'

'They're okay,' he said brusquely and a chill of apprehension began to settle around her. 'Uh—listen Govindi...' His sigh was filled with foreboding and his voice dropped so low that she had to strain to hear. 'Amar... is in trouble... with the police...'

'What?' Govindi's heart skipped a beat. 'No, no! It's impossible, Amar *daju* can't have done anything wrong!'

'But... they say he has... he's in jail.'

'No! I can't believe it.' Her tears spilled like a river in full flood. She continued to sob while Narendra told her the whole dismal story: How Amar's employer had told him to drive a clerk from his office to the bank to withdraw fifty lakh rupees and how, when they were returning, the man had suddenly stepped out at a traffic light and vanished into the crowd with the money before Amar could do anything.

'But why are they blaming Amar *daju*? He didn't do it!' she cried out.

'They've held him on suspicion. They think he's involved too,' Narendra said, sighing.

'If he was, wouldn't he have run away too?'

'Child, child, if only the world was as simple as that...' Narendra sighed again. 'I'm trying to find a good lawyer. But they are expensive. It's hard to raise money even for his bail... Govindi, you're a big girl now. You have to tell Ija the best way you can. And take care of her.'

And that was that. 'What was the 'best way' to break such news?' Govindi wondered, returning home on legs that had turned to wood.

She tried. But the moment Ija heard she began to scream, wail and curse. Within minutes, the neighbours gathered and the news flew around the village like a whirlwind.

‘Don’t worry,’ the headman Madan Singh said, his wrinkled face full of sympathy. ‘We have seen Amar since childhood. It’s not possible for him to steal. Soon the truth will be discovered.’

The others nodded and added similar comments. It was little consolation for Govindi’s mother, though. She continued to weep even after the neighbours had melted away. Govindi sat there watching her helplessly and trying not to cry too. She felt dazed, as if someone hit her on the head with a large stone.

Then the sound of a cow bellowing reached her ears. Govindi gave a guilty start. She had forgotten to milk them. Hurriedly, she fetched a pail and ran into the small cowshed.

‘Sorry, Chhoti,’ she muttered into the cow’s warm flank, ‘but you don’t know what a terrible thing has happened!’

Amar *daju* often teased her when he heard her talking to the cows, but it had become a habit with Govindi. Somehow she felt they understood. She drew a long painful breath. How could anyone believe Amar *daju* could do such a terrible thing? He was so straightforward, so honest.

What was going to happen to him? What did it feel like, being in prison? He could bear the hardship, but the shame of it all... that must be killing him. Why didn’t his employer stand up for him? Amar was always full of praise for his *sahib*—how kind he was, how generous. He was very proud of the fact that he was given so much responsibility. But why had his *sahib* not supported him? Oh, if only she wasn’t a poor helpless village girl, if only she was someone who had some influence... someone like Sanaa Raz. She would have found a way to save him, then.

When she awoke the next day, it took her a while to come to terms with the fact that it hadn’t been just a nightmare... Narendra *daju*’s call... Amar *daju* in jail... It was all terribly real. The thought of going to school made her stomach churn. What if people asked her about it? What would she say? And then, maybe she should stay here and keep her mother company. But Ija, who had weathered many a storm, showed unexpected strength today.

‘What has happened has happened. What’s the point of sitting and brooding,’ she said, ‘you go to school.’

So Govindi joined the small group of girls who trekked together to the school in a nearby village. There was kind and cheerful Pushpa, her closest friend, and Shobha and Hira who were not that close.

However, Pushpa was silent today and avoided her eye. Shobha, on the other hand, smiled at her sweetly and said, 'I must say you're very brave.'

Govindi's skin prickled. 'Why?' she frowned.

'Well, not many girls would dare be seen in public if their brother was in jail,' Hira, tall and thick-set, said with a sneer.

'My brother is innocent,' Govindi said furiously. She waited for Pushpa to say something in support, but her friend remained silent. Stunned, Govindi gazed at her, unbelieving. Pushpa flushed and looked away.

It was almost worse than getting the news. Govindi quickened her step and strode ahead, blinking back her tears. She heard Shobha say in her high-pitched voice, 'Shocking, isn't it? But she will never admit it, naturally.'

Govindi went into the school, a ramshackle building with grey stone walls and an unpainted tin roof, with apprehension. How many people knew about Amar *daju's* arrest? How many questions would she have to answer?

Govindi headed blindly for her desk and deliberately shut her ears to the clamour around her. She knew Shobha and Hira must be busy spreading the bad news. Luckily, the teacher came before anyone could pick on her. At break she retreated into a corner so hidden that no one could find her. And somehow the day passed. When the final bell rang, she nearly collapsed with relief.

She scuttled away, not waiting for the others. She walked so fast that she was home in half an hour. Her mother, who was busy weeding the vegetable patch, looked up in surprise. Silently, Govindi tipped out water from the earthen pot and took a long drink.

Then she took out the cows out of their sheds.

'Aren't you going to eat anything?' she heard her mother call out.

'Not hungry, Ija,' Govindi replied. She knew it would upset Ija, but she couldn't bear to swallow a morsel.

Numb with hurt, Govindi followed the cows to the forest. She sprawled under a solitary oak as they grazed. Clouds drifted

aimlessly in the bright blue sky above. A soft breeze stroked her burning cheeks gently. But nothing could heal the big, throbbing ache in her chest. She knew she had to complete her homework, gather fuel as usual, get on with the day...but she couldn't bring herself to do anything. She didn't even have the heart to play the Interview Game. The questions tormented her like pesky flies. Why had they put Amar *daju* in jail? Why hadn't they tried to catch the man who had run away with the money? Was there no justice for people like Amar *daju* and her?

Govindi didn't know how long she had lain there brooding till she heard a loud, insistent moo. It was Ramli. Her large eyes were fixed on Govindi questioningly. Then Govindi noticed that Bhanu and Chhoti stood there too, gazing at her. They were not munching as they usually did. Their jaws were still and they looked... almost grim.



'What's the matter?' she asked, staring back.

Bhanu's gentle, apologetic moo was followed by Chhoti's insistent bellow.

'*Hey Bhagwan!*' Govindi cried, sitting up. 'Are you, are you missing the Interview Game? I think you are, you silly creatures.'

Suddenly her gloom fled, like the startled bird that flew up when she exclaimed. 'But... but what can I discuss today?' she sighed. Her head was hurting so badly that she could barely think. Then her throat grew tight as an idea sprang into her mind.

'Yes, Inspector sahib,' she began, her voice quivering as she looked at Ramli. 'What makes you so sure that Amar was involved in the robbery?' Her voice grew louder as her anger flared. 'Wouldn't he have run away too? Didn't he chase the man? Didn't people see him do that?'

'You say he's pretending to be innocent?' she continued.

'Have you even tried to trace the man who actually took the money?' A thought flashed through her mind. Didn't banks keep a record of the numbers of the notes that had been issued? She remembered the case of a bank robber being caught like that. She'd seen that on television too. 'Have you given out the numbers of the missing notes to the public, in case he tries to spend them?'

She imagined the policeman's confusion. 'No? Then on what ground have you detained Amar? It's obvious you're taking the easy way out! You have detained an innocent man on the basis of mere suspicion? Is that legal? Is there no justice for the poor in our country?'

Moouoo ... it was Chhoti cheering her on. Govindi brushed away a tear. Then the sound of clapping made her freeze.

Who was it? Was somebody else listening to her? Her face burned.

Fearfully, she turned. A smart young woman with short-cropped hair stood there, smiling. Behind her was a bearded man with a video camera and a couple of people from the village. Govindi's head swam. Was she imagining all this? Hastily, she got to her feet.

'Hey, don't run away!' the young woman said. 'What's this all about?'

Govindi stared. This was unbelievable. At last she found her voice, 'Sa-Sanaa Raz? From the...TV... I—I even wrote a letter to you.'

'Well, Govindi, that's why I'm here. In response to your letter!'

Govindi shook her head to clear it. Could such things actually happen?

'But what's all this about?' Sanaa Raz asked her. 'You were speaking so passionately that we couldn't resist shooting some of that.'

‘You shot...’ Govindi gaped, open-mouthed.

And then the whole story spilled out as they listened intently. Finally, Sanaa Raz said, ‘I’m really sorry about your brother. I’m going to take it up right away. Don’t you worry! And we’ll use this footage too.’

After that things happened so fast that it felt like a dream. Govindi appeared on Sanaa Raz’s show, cows and all. Amar’s case was investigated thoroughly, and he was set free. Sometime later the school building got a new roof too!

After the television interview, Sanaa Raz said, ‘You’re a pro! However did you develop that amazing style?’

Govindi laughed. ‘From you. And my cows... playing the Interview Game.’

And so, if you ever happen to pass by Batla village in Uttaranchal one afternoon, do take a few minutes to go into the pine forest, where you might still find Govindi, news-anchor-in-the-making, fearlessly interviewing a panel of Very Important Cows.

—Deepa Agarwal

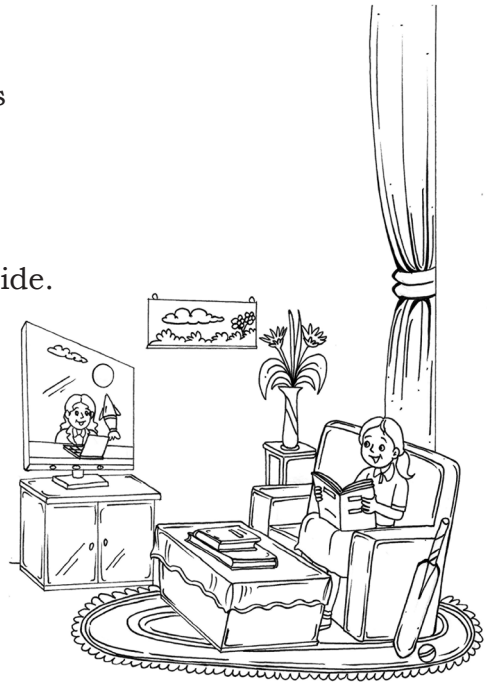
Reflect on

- What are the positive changes that media can bring about in society? Can you think of any changes brought as a result of media coverage?
- Do you think that media coverage can also have a negative impact? Can you give some examples?
- Is there a media personality or anchor that you watch regularly and admire? What are the qualities you admire? What issues does they cover that are of interest to you?
- Do you ever pretend, in secret, that you are on TV and are performing? Does this enhance your self-confidence or improve your mood? Why or why not?
- Have you heard of the term citizen journalist? What are the qualities required of a good citizen and a good journalist? Are they linked?
- What could you do to become a citizen journalist? Do you think of it as empowering activity?

4

HOME

Give me a home
that isn't mine,
where I can slip in and out of rooms
without a trace,
never worrying
about the plumbing,
the colour of the curtains,
the cacophony of books by the bedside.
A home that I can wear lightly,
where the rooms aren't clogged
with yesterday's conversations,
where the self doesn't bloat
to fill in the crevices.
A home, like this body,
so alien when I try to belong,
so hospitable
when I decide I'm just visiting.



—Arundhati Subramaiam

Reflect on

- Does your home give you a sense of comfort and security? Is it also associated with pressures and confinement?
- Have you ever longed to be on your own? Why?

5

VITAMIN-M

I wish,' said Ravi's mother, hurriedly putting some green, red and orange tablets on a saucer, 'that somebody would invent a memory vitamin. Vitamin-M, they could call it, and we could give it to old people to help them improve their memories.'

'Shh, Grandpa'll hear you,' said Ravi, pointing to the frail old figure sitting in the rocking chair, holding the newspaper inches from his nose to read it.

'Don't worry, I doubt that Grandpa can hear me. He doesn't hear too well, or see too well, or even remember too well these days. I'm glad that your holidays have started from today. Now you can look after him. Last month was ...' she stopped and shuddered at the memory.

It was only last month that Ravi's Grandpa had come to live with them because he was getting too old to live on his own. It had been a difficult month with Grandpa having to be admitted to the hospital because he absent-mindedly took a double dose of his medicines, and then gave them several anxious moments when he got lost on the one occasion he went for a walk and forgot the way back home.

Grandpa had got very upset when his daughter, Ravi's mother, insisted that he shouldn't go out alone again. 'I'll have you know, Vidya, my dear,' he had told his daughter with a trace of the firmness that had been a natural part of his job as a lawyer, 'that I've been looking after myself for the better part of my seventy-five years. After your mother died ten years ago, I took over her duties as well and have been cooking, shopping and keeping house too. First you force me to come and live with you in this poky little flat, in this horrible, crowded city and then you think you have the right to forbid me to go out on my own!'

Grandpa hated the noise and bustle of city life and when they were on their own, he often spoke, longingly, of his small brick house in town. 'Such a wonderful place. With that big mango tree in the garden. It is so quiet that at dusk you can even hear a leaf fall!' But then Grandpa had slipped and fallen in the garden late one evening while he was pottering around and lain outside all

night because there was no one at home to help him up. That was a month ago and it made Ravi's mother lock up the tiny brick house and bring Grandpa to live with them.

'Whatever happens, Ravi, you're not to let Grandpa go out on his own. It's too dangerous,' she instructed, adding details of medicines to be given to Grandpa after lunch. Turning to her father she said, 'I'm off to work, Papa, Ravi will be here to look after you. His holidays have begun from today.'

Ravi winced at the over-loud tone his mother used when speaking to Grandpa, as though she were speaking to a child who couldn't hear or understand too well. Grandpa continued to rock gently and gave no sign that he had heard her at all.

'Don't worry, Mamma,' Ravi promised, looking at his mother's anxious face. He felt sorry for her. 'You go to work. Grandpa'll be fine at home with me.'

'Shall we play chess or watch the cricket match on TV, Grandpa?' Ravi asked after his mother left. Grandpa played a great game of chess, very cool and cunning, and Ravi found that his own game had improved greatly ever since Grandpa had come to live with them. 'That's the opening move Karpov made when he played against the computer,' he would tell Ravi as he moved a piece, or, 'You're making the same mistake that Bobby Fischer made in his historic match against Spassky'. How can he remember all those thousands of chess games and still forget the names of people he meets often, Ravi wondered.

'You set out the chessboard', said Grandpa, putting his paper down, 'I'll just walk across to the corner shop to see if the Tamil newspaper has arrived.'

'Papa usually buys you the Tamil paper on his way home! But if you want it immediately, I'll go now and buy it for you,' Ravi offered.

'I hope you're not going to be as tiresome as your mother, Ravi. Treating me like a baby! Has she told you not to let me go out on my own? Told you to keep me a prisoner here, has she?' Grandpa looked suspicious at this thought.

Ravi felt guilty for a moment, then quickly recovered to say loyally, 'Of course not, Grandpa. Mamma would never treat you like a baby. Or a prisoner.'

'Good,' said Grandpa craftily, 'then you'll have no objection to my going out.'

He picked up his beautiful shiny-black mahogany walking stick with a brass handle carved in the shape of an eagle's head, put on his bright-yellow cap and declared, 'I'll be back home before you can set up the board, Ravi.'

Off he went, twirling his walking stick jauntily, leaving Ravi in a dilemma. His grandfather would feel hurt if he insisted on accompanying him and his mother would be furious if she knew Ravi had let him go out on his own.

He heard the elevator door shut as Grandpa went down. Ravi decided he would follow Grandpa secretly, at a safe distance, to make sure he came to no harm.

He ran out of the building just in time to see Grandpa's yellow cap disappearing round the corner. Grandpa's first stop was the children's park where he bought himself a paper-cone of peanuts and settled on a bench, watching the children play. Ravi, feeling very foolish, had to crouch behind a bush trimmed in the shape of an elephant to avoid being seen. He felt even more foolish when a small child came up to him and asked, 'Are you playing hide-and-seek? I can show you a better place to hide.'

'Shhh, shhh,' was all Ravi could say before he felt a shadow fall over him and a loud voice boomed, 'How dare you shoo my child? Who are you?' It was the little boy's mother.

'Shhh, shhh,' Ravi repeated to the massive lady.

'I'll shh you, you rude boy!' said the large lady, picking up her umbrella threateningly. The ultimate humiliation was when Ravi had to crawl out of the park on all fours, ducking behind the benches, creeping behind the bushes, thanking his lucky stars that Grandpa hadn't heard the noise and spotted him.

Grandpa's next stop was the tea stall, and this time Ravi took position behind a big banyan tree to watch him, feeling most embarrassed when the vendors sitting under the tree gave him quizzical looks.

'This area is booked by us,' said one lady who was selling plastic combs, in the same tone she might use were she asked to address a gathering without being given a loudspeaker, 'There's no room for any new vendors.'

'Shhh, Don't talk so loudly. Do I look as though I'm selling anything?' Ravi asked her.

'Who's talking loudly?' said the old lady, raising her voice just enough for Ravi to hear her, were she talking to him from across the city.

'Who are you accusing of talking loudly? And that too from behind the tree. Who are you hiding from?' another vendor selling ribbons and clips asked. She too was one of those lucky ones who would never ever require a megaphone.

'Are you talking about one of us?' asked another vendor. A group of them surrounded Ravi.

'Oh, all right!' Ravi conceded defeat and moved to duck behind a shiny silver car, peering through the windows to keep an eye on his grandfather...Grandpa took his time sipping a sugary cup of tea (he was forbidden sugar at home), then ate two bananas (another banned item), then tucked into an ice cream bought from the cart. (Mother would faint if she saw this!)

Ravi himself felt hot, bothered and close to fainting by the time Grandpa finished his snack. His heart thudded anxiously when he saw Grandpa zigzagging through the traffic as he crossed the road. He shut his eyes in panic when he heard the screech of brakes and opened them just in time to see Grandpa entering the barber shop. Now Grandpa was as bald as a table tennis ball, so Ravi decided that a closer look was in order. He crossed the road, first looking dramatically left and then right and then hurriedly ducked into the shop next to the barber shop ...only to be evicted a moment later amidst a volley of feminine shrieks because it happened to be a Ladies' Hairdressing Salon.

'Just as well I was thrown out,' thought Ravi because he spotted Grandpa making his way briskly towards the bus stop, and—oh no—boarding the first bus that stopped there.

Sprinting for the bus and jumping on to it seconds before it started would have deterred a lesser detective, but not Ravi, who was panting as he struggled for a place in the bus. He could see Grandpa's yellow cap somewhere in the front. It was warm inside the bus so Grandpa took off his cap to reveal ...a full head of grey hair! Ravi was startled. Surely Grandpa couldn't have bought a wig at the barber shop, he thought, pushing his way to the front of the bus to confront the cap-wearer. It was a total stranger! He was wearing a white pyjama and shirt, which was Grandpa's standard attire, and a yellow cap exactly like Grandpa's. But wait, the cap had a coffee-stain on its rim just like Grandpa's!

'Grandpa's cap!' Ravi couldn't help exclaiming. The stranger grinned pleasantly and told Ravi that a kind old gentleman in the

barber shop had insisted that he take his cap because it was such a hot day. That was typical of Grandpa, always generous. But where was Grandpa?

Ravi went back to the barber shop. Grandpa wasn't there. He wasn't at the park either. Ravi was frantic. After all his mother had left him in charge of Grandpa. He tried calling first his mother and then his father from a telephone booth but both numbers were busy. Sick with worry, Ravi went home wondering whether Grandpa would be able to find his way back.

To his great delight and relief, the first thing he heard when he opened the front door was the gentle whirr of Grandpa snoring in his bedroom. He knelt down near the bed and put his cheek against the old man's face. Grandpa's then, wrinkled skin had more creases than lines on a map. Grandpa smelt of eucalyptus ointment and shaving cream. Ravi was suddenly overcome with affection for his grandfather and gave him a hug, but Grandpa only grunted in his sleep. He decided not to question Grandpa because then he would have to reveal that he had been following him.

'What did you both do today?' asked Ravi's mother when she got back from office.

'I had a quiet morning, but I don't know about Ravi. He just disappeared instead of staying at home to look after me like you told him to,' answered Grandpa coolly, while Ravi just looked confused and embarrassed.

Grandpa had another surprise for Ravi. A gift-wrapped parcel!

'But, Papa, Ravi's birthday was three months ago. Have you forgotten?' exclaimed Ravi's mother, impatiently.

'No. But you know I always give a gift to every child in the house on my birthday. Have you forgotten?' countered Grandpa, very seriously. Ravi's mother flushed red and darted a stricken look at



the calendar on which she had, at the beginning of the year circled the date in red and written 'Papa's birthday'. There was a gift for her too, and for Ravi's father as well, for Grandpa still considered them his 'babies'.

Grandpa turned to Ravi's father who had just walked into the room, 'My daughter needs some Vitamin-M, I think. For her memory.' Ravi's mother flushed a darker shade of red and Ravi's father looked confused.

Ravi unwrapped his gift to find a thick, hardcover book. The Best Detective Stories.

'Great stories, Ravi. You can pick up some really good tips on how to be a detective. How to avoid getting fooled when one is trailing a suspect, for instance,' Grandpa said solemnly.

'I don't think he wants to be a detective, do you, Ravi?' asked his father looking even more confused.

'I haven't decided yet,' answered Ravi, because he was too busy trying to decide whether the twinkle in Grandpa's eye was an innocent gleam or a mischievous one.

—Asha Nehemiah

Reflect on

- What are your most memorable moments with your grandparents or an elderly person you know? What have you learnt from their rich experiences? You can write a diary entry or a paragraph.
- Have you ever taken care of an older person? What did you learn about yourself and them from that experience?
- Do you think society discriminates on the basis of age—whether one is young or old? Have you ever faced such discrimination when you and your opinions have been dismissed on the grounds that you are 'just a child'? Do you think similar arguments are used to sideline the elderly?

6

TO THE CHINESE RESTAURANT

We come in here from the long afternoon stretched over the town's sloping roofs, its greasy garages and ice-cream parlours, its melancholic second-hand bookshops with their many missing pages.

Life's not moving.

We sit at a red table, among the dragons, near the curtained-off street-facing windows with their months' old orangeade.

Out in the streets there are schoolboys with their ties askew and the garish fruit-sellers.

We eat more than we need to. We eat so that our boredom's no longer dangerous,



so that from the comfort of soup,
with the minor pleasures of chapsuey,
we can fend off the memory of cities unvisited,
unknown and unknowable affairs,
people with never-fading lipstick and
confident gestures who we will never be.
One day soon we'll be running,
our lives will be like the blur seen from a bus,
and we won't read each other's letters thrice.
But right there we're young, we count
our money carefully, we laugh so hard
and drop our forks.
We are plucked from sadness there
in that little plastic place with the lights
turned low, the waiters stoned from doing nothing,
the smells of ketchup and eternally frying onions.

—Anjum Hasan

Reflect on

- How does cuisine become representative of a country or culture?
- Do you have favourite hang-out places? What draws you to them time and time again?

7 PLUMPIE AND POMMY

A strange thing happened last month. Someone joined our football team, you'll never guess who, and it all began with Plumpie's trophies.

Plumpie Kapoor is our neighbour, a beauty queen. She won the Plump-and-Dimpled contest when she was a year old, so her parents named her Dimple in honour of her first trophy. They call her Plumpie at home.

Plumpie has won many more prizes since. She was such a favourite with judges everywhere, they'd even make up prizes for her. So Plumpie took home Miss Heavy Metal when she was eight with her teeth in braces, and Miss Strawberry Custard for her complexion when she was ten. And now, most recently, the prize for the prettiest twelve-year-old made her Miss Patiala Junior. ('Contestants are eligible to compete for Miss Patiala Senior trophy when they turn eighteen', Mrs Kapoor informs everyone.)

You can't miss the trophies. They stand proudly in an all glass case in the centre of the drawing room of the Kapoors' home. I'm not kidding. It really is in the centre. So you can't sit across from each other and have tea and conversation. The trophies, right in your face, will be the conversation, which, my mom says, is the point.

Okay, so by now you can tell that I'm not good-looking. I'm not even a girl, thank god, or I'd probably have to play with Plumpie and her dolls every afternoon. I play on the street and sometimes in the park next to her house—football and cricket, throwball and *pitthoo*—with the other boys.

But as I said, a strange thing happened last month. It was the third Sunday in June. We were playing cricket. My boy, Rahul, fielded the ball and threw it to Vinay, the bowler. But Vinay missed and the ball flew through the Kapoors' drawing room window. It crashed into the trophy case. Of all things, that. We needed damage control. Fast. So, all of us ran home.

When I reached my porch I realized, panting, that I was alone. My boy, Rahul, hadn't run away at all. I raced back to fetch him, my long ears flying heroically in the wind. I found the idiot still

standing at the window, staring open-mouthed at the beauty queen. She was wearing a short dress. Smiling sweetly, she handed him the ball.

I barked like mad to break her spell. I wanted to nip her; Rahul was behaving so cheesy. Maybe I should have shaken *him*...!

Rahul's spectacles were speckled with dirt and he was trying to wipe them on his dirtier T-shirt. She took them from him and wiped them clean on the lacy white curtains. Suddenly a whirlwind blasted in from the bedroom. 'YOU BAD MUNDA!' It was Plumpie's mother.

Rahul realized what he had done by lingering at the crime scene. He had broken the golden rule of street play: *never claim the ball that breaks!*

I panted with relief when Rahul stumbled away. His lovelorn eyes were unfocussed. Plumpie called, 'Hey, your glasses!' He paused, but I yanked him forward by his shoelaces. As I ran beside Rahul, I crunched up twigs with my big canine teeth and barked up a storm.

There was a grown-ups' meeting at the Kapoors' house that night. Rahul's mother planned to be polite and apologetic, but his dad was fuming at Mrs Kapoor's theatrics. That woman had wept loudly for her silly trophy case and called the entire neighbourhood in to see the damage! That's why we were here now, dressed in our mourning best, to pay our respects to the shattered trophy case and try to set things right.

As we entered I smelt something strange. Was it another animal? But my twitching nostrils were jammed by the flowery smell of room freshener. Muck. Yuck.

'Well, good riddance to bad rubbish,' Papa muttered, when we saw a dark carpet spread sadly where the trophy case had been. I guffawed. Mummy stopped short and looked down at me. 'What are *you* doing here, Jaspal?' she said irritably. 'You'll ruin this meeting; you're no better than Rahul. Go home now. Go!'

I went home and watched *Scooby Doo* while Rahul did his homework. At about 9 pm we began to get impatient for Papa and Mummy to get back (and give us dinner). We went and sat on the veranda. The moon was full, just right for howling. I tried a short

one and cringed. My voice was still embarrassingly soprano. 'You're getting there, Jassi-boy,' Rahul said soothingly. I sat up straight and raised my manly snout to begin again.

Just then the gate clanged. I smelt perfume: the fruity, gift-hamper kind you might win if you were beauty queen. Sure enough, it was Plumpie. Rahul blushed and tried to scrub his unruly hair off his forehead.

She said 'hi' prettily. But I'll skip the sweetie-pie behavior and get straight to her outrageous demand. She wanted to join our all-boys football team. She had asked her mother to request it in exchange for what Rahul had done to the trophy case. Rahul's papa had angrily refused. So, she had come to appeal personally, the witch! I growled ferociously and angled for her ankle, but Rahul headed me off.

'Sure,' he shrugged simply, 'You can play'.

Oh no! My boy was a traitor to bachelors everywhere.

The next day was very rainy. We boys met at the park to play football. Plumpie arrived in a baby-pink tracksuit and new white keds. She was carrying an umbrella in one hand. Struggling under the other arm was a small white Pomeranian. So that's who I'd smelt at her place last evening! She had a pink nose. Typical of a beauty queen's lapdog. I snickered. The pom snarled back.

'Hi-eee, here I am! And this is Pommy!' Plumpie announced, folding her umbrella and hanging it neatly on a tree branch. 'We're ready to play.'

They played, and how! Plumpie fouled and cheated at every turn and Pommy nipped me whenever I was close, and sometimes out of excitement if she thought her team had a chance at the goal. It was terrible. What was worse, they actually ran quite fast and passed quite well. Plumpie scored two goals (cheating) and two (non-cheating). Pommy saved three goals (by biting the scorer's ankle) and two (by not).

At the end of the game, you couldn't tell Plumpie from the rest of us. Her hair and clothes were covered with wet mud. Pommy looked like a bedraggled stray. Even her pretty nose was smeared brown. We shivered with cold and excitement as we sat around talking about the game. Then we bought hot chips from our regular

cycle-chip vendor. We told Plumpie and Pommy about other matches we'd played. Forgetting they were girls, we taught them secret signals like tomato-cool dudes (raise your fist) and sad-lazy boys (thumb down). We called them to play again the following afternoon.

But Plumpie and Pommy didn't come the next day, or the next. We hung around before each game, trying not to show that we were waiting... but for a whole week there was no sign of our new friends. Finally, we settled back into our usual teams. Old rivalries bloomed and it was business as usual for the boys.

Then, on a rare sunny day, Plumpie came to the football field. She was in a tight skirt and shiny green T-shirt. Pommy was pattering beside her like a powder puff on leash. We gathered around them.

'What happened?'

'Where's your tracksuit?'

'Aren't you playing?'

She shook her head. 'Mama didn't like how I looked when I returned home the other day. It's not fitting for a beauty queen to play like boys, is it? So, I've been enrolled in a class that will teach me to 'Bake with Poise'. She began to cry.

Pommy licked her tears off and yapped out choice expletives at the absent Mrs Kapoor. I said, 'Sshhh, Plumpie's already upset,' but it didn't make a whit of a difference to Pink Nose.

Meanwhile, the boys were trying to comfort the girl:

'Hey, Plumpie...'

'No, now don't...'

They lapsed into an awkward silence. Then Vinay had an idea. 'We'll join your baking class. Keep you company.'

'Yup. We'll bake cakes and then throw them at the fan!'

'We'll see who can pound the most cakes. We'll bake them hard like rocks!'

'You wasters! I'll just eat whatever I can grab,' I salivated at the idea of all that raw egg and cream. 'Me too,' dittoed Rahul.

'Please don't join my baking class,' Plumpie laughed, wiping her eyes. 'Pommy and I'll sneak out and play with you whenever we can,' she promised.

However, when Plumpie turned to go, there was a loud squeal. It was Pommy pulling on her leash. She didn't want to Bake with Poise, she wanted to play football!

‘No, Pommy,’ Plumpie pleaded. ‘You heard Mama. No football for us.’

Clearly, Pommy didn’t think much of Mrs Kapoor’s rules. She wriggled her head this way and that, and got free from the leash. Then she was streaking right across the field. Plumpie screamed, ‘Pommy, Pommy!’ She threw her high heels aside and ran after her dog. Pommy, her bright-pink tongue flopping up and down in her muddy face, zigzagged around the field with Plumpie in her short skirt and bare feet chasing after her. Rahul was smiling like he’d just been gifted the latest computer game.

Before you ask, I didn’t bite his bum. I was tongue-tied and jaw-locked at Pink Nose’s speed and spirit. It was as if a small tornado was punching our peaceful Patiala and I was feeling every blow in the furry corners of my chest!

Pommy dodged really well and although Plumpie was no mean runner, she found herself slipping, sliding and empty-handed every time Pommy made a clever turn. Then rrrrip! The seams of Plumpie’s skirt gave way. That made Plumpie give up the chase. Holding the seams of her skirt together, she came over to us.

Now Rahul saw his chance. He offered (in her ear) to let her wind his sports towel around her waist. He also offered to walk her home. He was all worry and concern, my Rahul. It made me snarl. Plumpie, however, said she would be fine. She explained that she was used to the swimsuit round at beauty contests. ‘But thank you, Rahul,’ she smiled, affectionately squeezing his shoulder. Rahul was about to roll over for a belly rub, when I finally gave in to the urge and nipped his ankle. Ire and complaints followed, but I had only given him what any traitorous bachelor deserves, so I sauntered off to Pommy. We exchanged a lick to congratulate each other on recent doings. I was in pink heaven.

Then we watched as, holding her skirt seam together, Plumpie went home, She was mud-splattered and her hair was a mess, but she still walked proudly like the last beauty queen on earth.

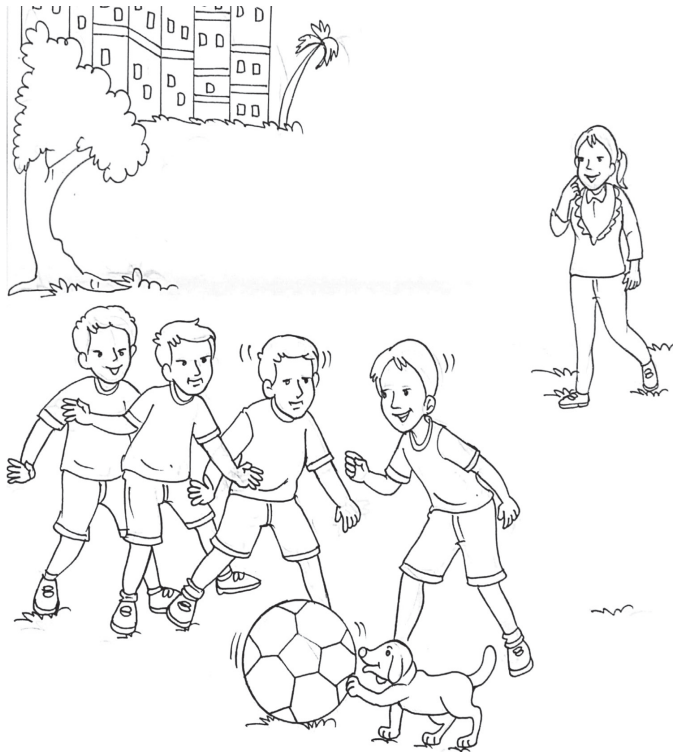
‘*&*&!’ shouted Mrs Kapoor when Pommy got home looking like a pig. We heard her shout way across the boundary wall. Her words were just the challenge Pommy was waiting for. They trumpeted the beginning of war!

A week of fighting, shut-ins and break-outs followed, but the worst damage was inflicted the day Mrs Kapoor refused to let Pommy into the house after practice. Pommy tore up the sunflowers, dug out the tomato plants, bit the garden cat, let herself in through a bedroom window and wet Mrs Kapoor's bed. 'Just to show her who is boss,' she explained coolly, as I stood at her gate open-mouthed at the chaos inside.

No amount of scolding or threats from Mrs. Kapoor could make Pommy a beauty queen's perfect pet. Plumpie always took her side. She didn't allow her mother to ever spank or lock Pommy up for long. So, Pommy coolly continued to play. I must admit Plumpie was nice for a girl, and I was beginning to forgive her for making Rahul's heartbeat louder than the *chowkidar's* stick on his night watch.

Rahul and I told the other boys the latest stories from next door, and how Mrs K was gradually being tamed. What a psycho Pommy is, we said admiringly. Despite the pink nose, she's a real Zidane-with-fur! We

boys decided to make her our team mascot. So, while Plumpie sometimes bunked baking to play, Pommy became a regular member of the football team. And we all played happily (if a bit dangerously) ever after.



—Chatura Rao

Reflect on

- What kind of stereotypes and expectations are associated with boys and girls? How do you feel about them and what would you like to conform to or reject? Why?
- Do you have a pet? Have you ever thought about the world from the point of view of an animal? What do think they would say about you and your world?

8

BRIDGE AND THE TEA PARTY

‘My daughter,’ says Mrs Shah is S.S.C. pass, high Second Class, Headgirl in school, very interested in life, we encourage it—pictures parties shopping visiting active child.’

‘My Ayesha did her Cambridge abroad, scholarship from British Council she’ll be settling in English or the U.S. on a green card.’

‘My Renu is very popular they call her Ren at college, her name came in the papers you know—students’ revolt.’

‘I’ll call Bunty darling sing what teacher taught you sing near aunty.’



—*Beheroze Shroff*

Reflect on

- Do think parents put pressure on their children by comparing them at social gatherings? Why do you think this happens?
- Is the parent’s self-esteem linked to what the child achieves or does not achieve?
- Do children compare parents or teachers when they discuss them? On what grounds?
- Is your sense of self-worth linked to what your parents do, have achieved, are like or own? In what ways?

9

GUILT TRIP

Pratibha, her cousin Shashi and their Tamil friend Indira set off from their hostel in Maharani Arts & Science College to the nearest bus station. They had packed their stuff into one small stroller suitcase for their trip to Srirangapatna, which was a short bus ride from Mysuru. Each one of them had a large backpack into which they stuffed two sets of salwar suits, spare inner wear, head scarves, towels, toilet soap and other essentials such as sandwiches, biscuits, fruits and water bottles. Pratibha, the natural 'leader' had thoughtfully taken three large plastic bags to carry their drenched salwar suits after their bath in the river Kaveri. They couldn't contain their excitement, most of which stemmed from the fact that it was a secret trip, undisclosed to their parents who would have descended on them like a ton of bricks to dissuade them from travelling unescorted. The families knew each other, all the more reason to keep it a secret.

Typically, the families would have assured their girls that they would certainly take them to Srirangapatna at the earliest opportunity, show them around the town, and couldn't they wait please? This is after all, their very first year in Mysuru and they had just started off as first year students of the college. But the girls wanted to go on their own, because they had another undisclosed plan in Srirangapatna, which would have certainly made their families swoop down on them in fury.

The bus wasn't crowded. By the time they settled in their seats, had their sandwiches, bought tea from vendors, they were nearing Srirangapatna. Some passengers looked like they were travelling mainly to see the famous Sri Ranganathaswamy temple. 'See there, you can see the top of the temple *gopuram*,' said Indira, bowing her head in the temple's direction, her hands pressed together.

'You must've been there?' asked Shashi.

'Several times! How can I not visit the temple of Ranganathaswamy? He is our family deity!' replied Indira.

'Of course! More so because you're an Iyengar from Hebbar,' remarked Pratibha. 'Hebbar or not, an Iyengar from anywhere will make it a point to visit! So will Iyers, I bet,' said Indira, bowing

down her head again. The bus stopped at Srirangapatna. The girls hoisted their backpacks, adjusted the straps on their shoulders and took their small suitcase from the luggage rack. They went to a taxi stand. Pratibha spoke to a man in Kannada, 'Take us to the nearest point to river Kaveri from here.'

'Very well, *Ammauware*. Come,' he said, offering to keep the suitcase in the boot.

'No need,' said Pratibha. 'Let it be with us or we'll forget it.' The man got in and said, 'Come on all of you. Say aloud, *Devi Kaveri Amma*, here we come, your devotees!' he urged them. The girls chorused loudly in Kannada, '*Devi Kaveri Amma*, here we come, your daughters and devotees!' He nodded and cheered them, and started the taxi.

The next minute they broke off in English and took a pledge of secrecy that none of them would ever divulge their trip taken specially to bathe in the river Kaveri. On reaching the river bank, they inquired about the area marked off for bathers and walked toward it. Some bathers were already splashing around happily, letting the river water swirl around them. They were revellers who obviously enjoyed the touch of the flowing river wrapping around their bodies. Most of them were shoulder deep in the water, while the braver ones allowed the water to reach up to their neck, scooping it up to splash on their faces. A few devout ones folded their hands in reverence for goddess Kaveri, and prayed with their eyes closed. Indira, the Tamil friend of the two Kannada girls Pratibha and Shashi, recalled how she was brought up to believe that the river Kaveri is a personification of a divine, life-giving mother who nourished the lands of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka and made them fertile. The three young women rolled up the bottom end of their salwars and gingerly stepped into the river. Instantly as it were, they pulled back their feet.

'Brrr! The water is so cold!' Shashi exclaimed. 'And it's also flowing so rapidly, we may be carried away by the strong current. Careful Shashi, step back!' warned her worried cousin, Pratibha. The bathers glanced at the three young women and resumed splashing about happily in the river water. How fearless they looked. Some had ventured deeper inside. Just look at their confidence, thought Indira, staring at them at them enviously.

'It's all our fault,' declared Indira. 'We should've learnt swimming despite our family's objections. That would've made us shed the fear of water.'

‘Yes. And now, I’ve the additional responsibility of looking after Shashi.’ Shashi was younger than Pratibha by a year. ‘Ever since we joined Maharani College, my parents and hers look up to me as her guardian. Hey Shashi, you better listen to me!’ The younger girl grinned and brought her hands to her head in a salute.

‘Both our families are hand in glove with each other to prevent us from going anywhere near the river.’

‘It’s only when we were planning to make this little trip to the river that I realised we have a common factor that binds all of us,’ smiled Indira.

‘And that is?’ Shashi asked.

‘None of us can swim. I was effectively prevented by my family from taking swimming lessons when every second girl I know has learnt swimming,’ said Indira, her face flushing in anger.

‘Never mind,’ said Pratibha. ‘Let’s try to bathe in an area that has shallow waters. When we return home this time, we’ll seriously find out the possibility of enrolling for swimming lessons.’

‘Learn swimming at this age?’ asked Shashi.

‘Why ever not?’ retorted Indira. ‘Let’s google and find out if there are special swimming lessons for young women above 20.’

‘Oh, there must be!’ said Pratibha. ‘You know Indira, in our family it seems there was an unfortunate instance of someone who drowned at the age of 18. That too in a swimming pool. That was his very first day at a club to learn swimming. Our families were so shattered by this tragic happening that they went into an astrology mode! They got his horoscope analysed by three astrologers. All of them declared that he was destined to die by water and went further to say that according to the astrological indication, there could be a danger from water for others in the family too. ‘Please don’t step into any river or ocean. Don’t learn swimming. Do anything else you want to’, the family pleaded. They looked so scared that we complied with their warning. Wish we hadn’t’, she rued, adding, ‘Now, they’ve become intensely hydrophobic.’

‘As for me, I missed every opportunity to learn swimming while at school,’ said Indira. ‘Later, when I tried to enroll for swimming lessons, my family discouraged me saying I’m too old to learn. They argued that the best age to learn is when one is a child. To tell you the truth, even I became diffident. The older I grew, the more scared I got of water. Now all I can boast of is standing on the fringe of the ocean in Marina Beach in Chennai and let the frothy waters of the waves bathe my legs.’ They became aware

of curious eyes looking at them as they stood hesitantly on the dry river bed. It was embarrassing. They looked around to see if anyone could be identified as a local to consult for a safer area for bathing, especially for people who cannot swim. They found a boy in shorts and a faded T-shirt. Pratibha asked him in Kannada if he lived in Srirangapatna. He nodded. When she told him about their requirement, he pointed at a direction and said, 'Walk for about a kilometer from here, and you'll find an open space. Kaveri *Amma* thins out at that place. You can easily bathe in that area without any fear,' he smiled. They trudged in the direction he pointed and reached a place that was at a distance from the adventurous swimmers and bathers. They reached a clearing with an open space under the sky on the left side of the river. At the far end of the clearing a cluster of trees and dense bushes bordered the area and gave them a sense of privacy. The girls felt less shy and there were only a few bathers and swimmers. Like the boy said, the river did seem to be thinner, so it looked less threatening to them. They rolled up their salwars again and stepped into the waters.

'Oh, the water is equally cold here,' said Pratibha, shivering.

'It's river water, after all,' said Shashi.

'The waters in Marina beach are not this cold. In fact, they have a comfortable warmth even in the evening,' said Indira.

'The water is flowing so rapidly... makes me wary of stepping in,' said Pratibha. 'What if it carries away all three of us in its flow? Shashi! Come back at once,' she said, raising her voice.

'Shh! Softly. Even here, some of these bathers are looking at us hesitating and scratching our heads.'

'True. What a shame! They must be laughing at us, a bunch of cowards. Let alone swim, we're not even bathing.'

'I do sense their eyes on us. Let's walk a little farther. They can't see us clearly from there.'

'Yes, there are only a few bathers there. Come, pick up your backpacks and we'll move on to that secluded spot.' Indira pulled the small stroller suitcase. Now this stretch had privacy. They stepped into the water again, gritting their teeth against the cold. They scooped up water in their hands and let it dribble down their neck and shoulders.

'Strange, not one of us thought of bringing mugs to scoop out water and pour it on ourselves.'

‘After the initial shock, we’ll get used to the coldness of the water,’ said Shashi. ‘You’re right! I’m enjoying the cold water now. It looks so clean and clear,’ said Pratibha. They looked at each other and laughed at the way they were bathing their face and arms part by part, instead of immersing themselves in the waters. They washed their face and hands and then stepped on to the shore to look at the gurgling, swirling waters in the serene environment. They dried their feet, ankles and calves and rolled down their salwars. They brushed their hair, tidied up and wrapped scarves around their head against the strong wind that blew around them.

‘The good news is we don’t have to change our salwars,’ said Indira. The girls nodded.

‘Bhagyalakshmi!’ They looked around and then turned their eyes toward the few people who were bathing in the middle of the river. Who called out so loudly? The bathers were calmly splashing about. So, Bhagyalakshmi couldn’t be from their group. Then where is she and who called out in such a booming voice? They peered at the group of bathers who looked unperturbed. Who is this girl, Bhagyalakshmi? The thick foliage of the bushes in the distance rustled a bit. Then it parted to show something grey, flapping its ears. The three friends watched, their eyes transfixed when they saw a baby elephant emerging from the thicket between the trees, with its mahout running behind in hot pursuit.

‘Bhagyalakshmi, stop! Stop this minute!’ said the mahout angrily, cracking the whip in his hand that sliced the air to make a sharp swishing sound. Baby Bhagyalakshmi turned her head once to look at him and shook her head sideways in a frolicsome way. And then she started running toward the three young women. ‘Oh no!’ screamed Pratibha, petrified. ‘This baby elephant is heading straight toward us. Quick, pick up your backpacks. Let’s run!’

‘Bhagya!’ shouted the mahout. ‘Stop running, this minute! Your mother has been looking for you. She would be worried to see you missing,’ he scolded in Kannada. She shook her head again playfully and kept running toward the three women.

‘I say Bhagyalakshmi, stop or else!’ cried the mahout, tossing the switch twice in the air to make a crackling sound. Suddenly, Bhagyalakshmi stopped. She stood for a moment looking at the flowing waters of Kaveri. Abruptly, she changed her direction and ran toward the river.

‘No Bhagya, stop! Listen!’

‘Thank God,’ said Shashi, relieved to see the baby elephant targeting the river instead of running towards them. Bhagyalakshmi plunged into the waters with a big splash. The three of them looked on, fascinated by the way she was sloshing about merrily. She dipped her head inside the river till she was completely immersed, and they could only see a small portion of the curved top of her grey head above the water.

‘Oh god, what has happened? Is she drowning?’ asked Shashi, very alarmed. The mahout stood watching, and this time a broad smile spread over his swarthy face. The few bathers around the waters laughed and carried on fearlessly, not one bit disturbed that a baby elephant had joined them in the waters.

‘Naughty girl! Wait till I report this to your mother. She’ll give you a beating with her long trunk,’ scolded the mahout, still laughing at baby Bhagya’s playful antics in water. The three women relaxed and watched, eyes riveted on the baby elephant. She dipped her head again into the waters and then lifted her head to squirt water in a straight jet directly at the three girls on the river bank. Utterly shocked, the girls stepped back.

‘Hey, Bhagya, what are you doing, you silly girl? I say stop!’ said the mahout, very angry at the way she repeatedly dipped her trunk to suck in water, and then squirt, targeting the girls. Bhagya seemed to be delighted to see the shock on their face. The mahout looked at the girls who stood rooted on the spot, as if they were under some spell and couldn’t move away from Bhagya’s range. Their clothes were completely drenched. Hesitantly, he approached the girls. Pressing his hands together, he apologised in Kannada.

‘*Ammauvre!* I’m so sorry! Very sorry,’ he pleaded. ‘Bhagyalakshmi is such a naughty little girl, very difficult to handle. See, how she doesn’t obey even me? Doesn’t listen to her mother either. Hey Bhagya, wait till I take you to your mother, and then we’ll see,’ he warned, whirling his switch in the air in a circular motion that now echoed with sharp sounds.

‘It’s all right,’ said Shashi. ‘Don’t worry. After all, we came to bathe in the river.’

‘But you’ve already bathed and changed into dry clothes and now, this mischievous girl...Hey Bhagya!’ he turned around to warn her again, then resumed his apology.’

‘*Ammauvre*, see how she is. I tried my best to stop her but she is very willful. Gives me a lot of trouble all day long.’ The mahout stood there, arms folded, the switch tucked into his elbow, as he watched Bhagya, flapping her large ears in the water. She was loath to come out. Snatching this moment, the three girls quickly gathered their backpacks, the suitcase and the damp towels and moved away to a spot from where they could still see Bhagya. At last, she emerged from the water having had her fill of fun and now stood calmly beside her mahout who was showering her with fond endearments.

‘Our little princess. She not only bathed in the sacred waters of Kaveri; she also gave a second bath to the three ladies. They’re so nice, they’ve forgiven you. Mischievous girl!’ She snuggled up close to him, her body brushing his as she walked.

‘My darling little princess. I’ll tell your great mother about your naughty pranks today. Won’t she be proud of her little girl?’ Bhagya shook her head, pointed her trunk upwards and then curled it around his arms. He stroked her back and her face.

‘Come now. Time for you to eat and cuddle up with your mother. I’ve the juiciest sugar cane for both of you,’ said the mahout. Indira smiled at the retreating figure.

‘Bhagya!’ she called, softly.

‘Oh no, don’t call her!’ cautioned Pratibha. ‘She’ll come back running and splash water on us all over again. Come, let’s go back to the bus station and change our damp clothes in the washroom. We’ll stuff them into the big plastic bags’.

‘Hope the taxi driver lets us get in,’ said Indira.

‘We’ll tell him we bathed in the river, Ha, ha! It’s half true, isn’t it? We did have a bath in the river water,’ laughed Shashi.

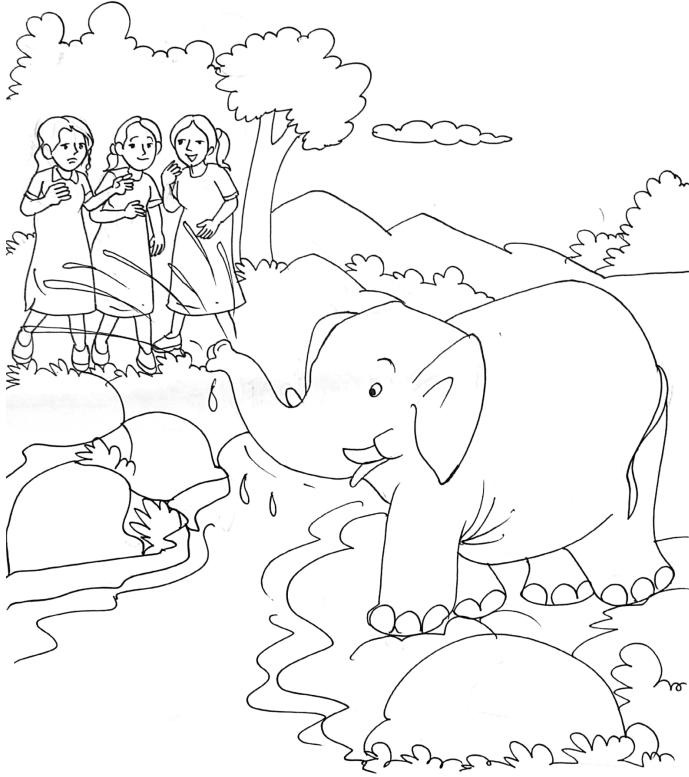
‘We have to thank Bhagya for that. Whew! What an experience!’ said Pratibha.

‘Unforgettable,’ said Indira. ‘But remember our pledge?’ said Pratibha. ‘Not a word to our families!’

‘Of course! If they get to know, we lose their trust, forever,’ said Indira. They laughed as they shivered, turning back to take another look at the silver waters of Kaveri glistening in the sunlight. They looked at the thicket and the foliage of the forested area. It seemed to have closed like a curtain after Bhagya’s splendid performance.

It was a middle-aged driver this time. He opened the door of his taxi, waving aside their apologies for their wet clothes. ‘Never mind.

Had a good bath, with the blessings of Kaveri *Amma*? Never mind. Lots of tourists come to my taxi with wet clothes. It's a *punya sthal*, after all.'



.....
Ammavre: A respectful way of addressing a woman as 'Amma' or mother in Kannada.

Punya sthal: Sacred place.

—Lakshmi Kannan

Reflect on

- Why does the author call it an adventure trip? What are the elements that make a trip an adventure trip?
- Do you think, parents should be aware of our trips with friends? Give reasons why their consent is important.

10

MONSOON MATHEMATICS



I see
Crystal beads
Strung upon a chain...
Telephone wires after rain:
Mute abacus of the wind
Where all plus
Becomes minus
In the
End.

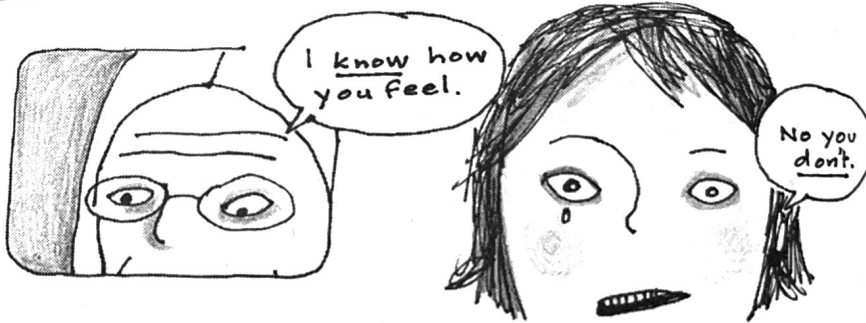
—Mary Ann Sengupta

Reflect on

- Do the visual images in the poem make you think of the monsoon season in a different manner?
- Can you think of creative and unusual images for different seasons?

11

SOMETHING FROM THE MOUNTAIN, SOMETHING FROM THE STREAM



Maggi loved Nani, but she was a little sceptical about things she said. After all, Nani also said things like: 1) rubbing your nails together made hair grow thicker, 2) rolling your eyes too much made them get stuck under eyelids, and 3) swallowing toothpaste made lumps of calcium gather in the pit of your stomach. Maggi, who believed in proof, hadn't seen any results despite trying out all these things.

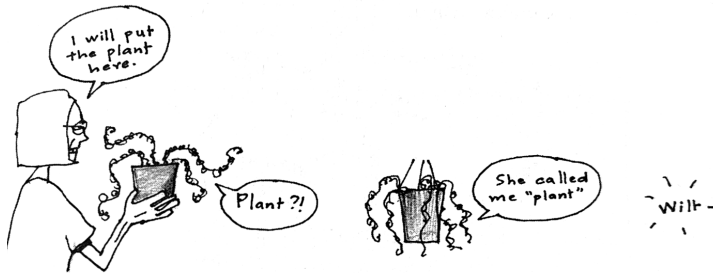


Every morning, when Nani stepped out to soak the sun and catch up with some neighbourhood gossip (the nearest neighbour was halfway up the mountain, so this took some time), and Mamma had left for secret trails and boulders, Maggi woke up to breakfast on the table and a day with cat and the fern, Fernandes.

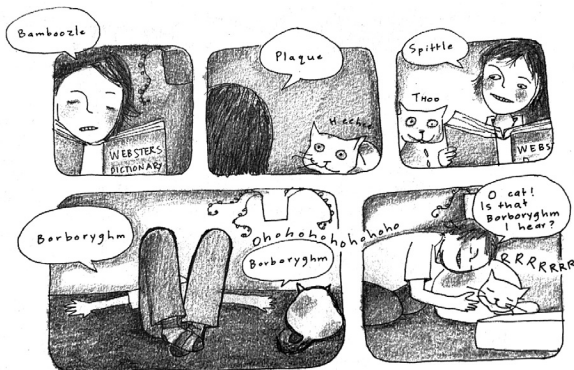
It is essential that a cat have no name at all, or be referred to by different names at different times of the day. The fern was Fernandes at all times. Except in Nani's book. Nani belonged to the school of thought whereby all plants are called 'plant'.



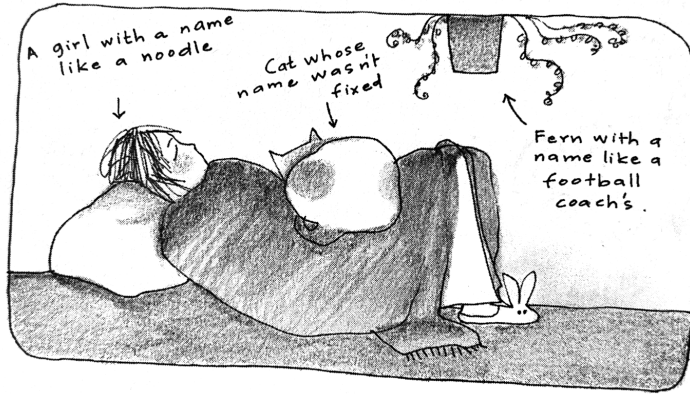
And Fernandes would wilt and shed for a day or two. She would have sulked for longer, but she didn't have such good short-term memory.



There was a dictionary in Nani's bookshelf that Maggi read aloud from. She'd collect funny words and roll around in splits. Cat would bask in wandering patches of sun, and Fernandes would preen because she was a maidenhair fern, the most delicate and exquisite of them all.



And so they spent many a busy afternoon in the red house, oblivious to the world outside. It was happiness, only they did not know its name.



On these afternoons, they made all kind of craft projects for Mamma. Paper-cut cards and origami geese and flowerpots made of jam jars waited to be discovered around the house. But each day came to a close and Mamma still walked into the house late in the evening, smelling like a cloud of smoke, with her arms by her sides and her inner light bulbs flickering on some dangerously low voltage.

Cat : What is the matter?

Maggi : Matter is that Mamma is feeling sad.

Cat : Maybe she needs a pet. Like me.

Fernandes : Or me.

Maggi : She has me.

Fernandes : But you keep wandering away.

Maggi : Can we get a cat? See how soft and malleable he is.

Mother : When I was little, I woke up choking, to find a cat sleeping on my chest. I have had nightmares about it since!

Maggi : Perreira is like a hot-water bottle. See. To which, warm as a gold coin, Mamma smiled her 'No' smile.

Mother : Perreira? Is that what his name is today?

Maggi : What about a potted fern?

Mother : We have four cacti already. And so many croutons!

Nani :Ferns like damp weather. I don't think she would like your apartment.

In her dream, Maggi was wandering about the mountain when she was approached by a dog with a blurb tied around his neck that read,

Dog : Noodle, find Mamma a pet that will not give her an allergy.

The next morning, the mountain stooped down and blew kisses through the window. The sun had crept in from the window and dappled the floor. Maggi wakened early, a plan bounced about in her like a bunny, and she wanted to take a poll to see whether her idea was really as good as it felt in her head.

Maggi :What makes you feel happy?

Nani :Letters! Friends! Having your mama come by to stay.

Maggi :But all these things need other people. What about things that don't need other people?

Nani :I used to follow the smell of the pine resin when I was a little girl! My nose has forgotten how to smell these things now.

The cat had an interesting, poignant thought. When they slit their eyes, they generally do.

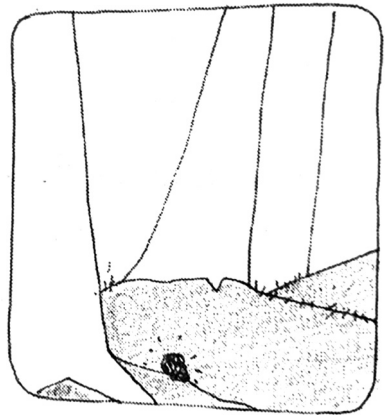
Fernandes :The matter is that she is feeling sad. So it is essential that she feels good.

Cat :She needs to feel something good every time she is sad. Such as me, for example. If you feel me any time of the day, I am soft, warm, and quite wonderful.

Maggi :True.

Cat :And fern here feels pretty good too. I nuzzle against her all the time.

Fernandes :Yes! Only you have to be careful not to pluck my leaves off while caressing backwards.



Her plan was verified by her poll (the results of which were known only to Maggi), she wore a red scarf around her neck for luck and followed the smell of golden resin as it trickled down the bark of a pine tree.

Tree to spider: Roll in this; you'll be part of a very precious amber in one million years.

The spider did not think this was a good plan. Better to be a living spider *now* than a dead spider wrapped in amber one million years later.

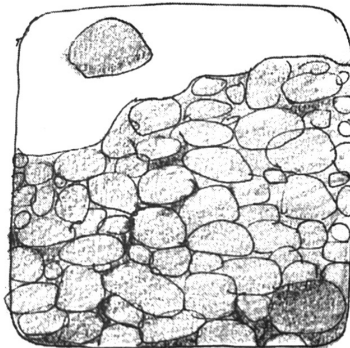
In the roots of the pine tree, Maggi found the first thing she was looking for.

Then she wandered down to the river, where a new rock of pebbles were warming their bellies in the sun. They were of every imaginable colour, but if you held them up, their particles glistened. Sedimentary rocks all, painstakingly made layer by layer, shot through with green or red or brown streaks.

Maggi :I am not taking this one because you haven't finished your work with it.

Unlike rivers in plains that will settle for all sorts of irregular pebbles, a mountain river is very particular about making perfect spheres out of *all* her pebbles. The more they tumble around in her, the more and more spherical they get.

Maggi's hand darted in and out of the water looking for the right pebble. You have to *wait* for the right one; hurriedly collected pebbles look dull and sulky the minute you bring them home and arrange them on your window ledge. It took half an hour and her hand was numb from the cold glacier water, but Maggi found the right pebble.



When she returned home, she left the pebble and pine cone in the base of Mamma's suitcase, amongst the lowest layer of clothes that would never be reached, one in each pocket of Mamma's blue caftan. Of late, Mamma wore whatever came to her hand first, which invariably happened to be the newly washed clothes at the top of her suitcase.

*Dear Mamma,
Please hold these:
Rough pine cone when you feel slippery.
Smooth pebble when you feel crumpled.
I love you most,
Maggi*

Days and nights have a way of passing.
*Nani to Maggi's mother : You have the most sensible companion
you could ask for.*

*Mother : I know.
Cat : You may carry me if you wish.*

Which was a very generous offer indeed, because Perreira hated being carried. Being carried invariably meant being squeezed, especially when you are as gorgeous as Perreira was. It is a good thing Nani didn't have too many visitors because Perreira would surely have had the life breath squeezed out of him.

Soon it was time to go home.

The bus wound its way like a snake from Nani's house to the city. Nani waved, fluttered her hanky and then dabbed her misty eyes. Perreira and her fern looked out from the window with heavy hearts. One day they would meet Maggi with delight again, but until then, their days would be crowded without thoughts of food and sunshine. Blessed are the creatures who have the gift of forgetting.

Maggi sat at the window on their way back home, sleeping with her mouth open (we will not mention the drool). Mamma spent hours examining the sleeping Maggi with the kind of abject admiration only a Mamma looks at her child with. Ready or not, a new life waited for them both. The pebble and the pine cone bided their time in Mamma's blue caftan's pockets.

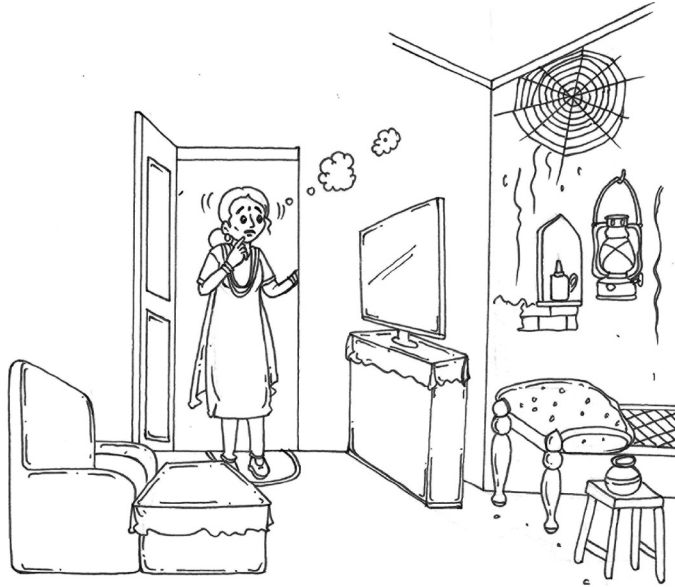
—Amruta Patil

Reflect on

- Have you ever been able to brighten your parent's mood when they have been upset or distressed? How did you achieve this? How did it make you feel? How did your parent respond?
- How do you cope with sadness and loneliness?
- How would you want others to respond to you when you feel low? How do you respond to other's despair or depression?

12

UNLOYAL MEMORY



Each time
I look back,
Open the locks
enter the room
clear the cobwebs
I see more
but
hold something less in my hands.

—Sukrita

Reflect on

- Do you feel that memory is reliable? Can you think of an event for which your memory does not match someone else's?
- Why do you think memories of individuals differ? Is it because as individuals we place emphasis on different things? How do memories create different realities?

13 BRINGING UP AMMA

'Namaste! Namaste, memsaab!'

'Hello, memsaab!'

'Namaste! Hello!' says my mother, her voice as usual going wonky with laughter as she flip flops out of our garage, bends to lock up the door, then flip flops with me past the stinking garbage dump, the stinking rivulet of sewage, the snotty-nosed children. *'Ta-ta!'* she says to them, finally, when we have all trooped almost up to our house.

I grit my teeth. *Amma's* friends! She gives them a sweet each from that ancient cloth bag of hers. She gives them a wide smile when she doesn't have any toffees. The children who live in our garage and in the neighbouring garages of our government colony behave as if they like her smile better.

How can she?

I toss my oiled plaits back as I steal a look at Aunty Asha's balcony. Yes, she is there in her pink hand-embroidered housecoat, sipping tea, smiling down at the scene of *Amma* surrounded by her brats. She never goes cavorting with kids, taking them to the park, teaching them to count and paying for their college. She never went around in a crumpled old saree. She didn't need her daughter to keep saying, *'Oh, my mother is just a housewife.'*

God! I want to slam all the doors in the world. How could there be someone like *Amma* with no ambition for herself?

That day in school, back goes the topic to *'My Mother.'* It all starts with Ashwin (whose father is an editor or some such thing in Indian Express, no less), saying he'd read Malathi's mother's piece in The Times of India.

'My father says, he likes your mother's writing.'

And then, just before maths class, Vinitha asks me, bending her head forward so her short hair swings, catches an unexpected shaft of afternoon sun, gleams before settling on either sides of her face, and she asks if she can spend the weekend at my place. Her mother, none other than Asha Aunty, is going to Bangalore—*'on tour.'*

I'd swap my best kurta-churidar to be able to say a thing like that. Imagine having a mother who writes, goes on tours, who attends meetings. Wow!

I grit my teeth again.

'Meenu, do you think your mother will make masala dosas for me again? Like last time?' Vinitha asks in her shy whispery voice. She puts out a hesitant finger to touch my geometry box, my maths notebook.

I purse my lips. 'What about your father?' I ask.

She twists a strand of her hair and drops her eyelids. 'Dad says he's going to be awfully busy over the weekend because one of his company's directors has come from Canada.'

It's funny how every time Asha Aunty has some work that takes her out of town, Vinitha's father also is frightfully busy. I wonder if it's because she asks him for dosas. She asks for dosas every time she is staying with us and every time *Amma* makes masala dosas for her as if she is there only to please Vinitha and make what she would like to eat. 'Will she, can she?' asks Vinitha again.

'Of course, yaar,' I say, as the teacher walks into class. 'You know she always does most weekends.'

'What are you thinking of Meenu?' asks *Amma* that night at the dinner table while I peck at my food.

Nothing,' I say.

'How was tennis?'

'Okay.'

'Had fun?'

'Hmm.' 'God! I couldn't keep having fun the whole day, my whole life, could I?'

'Vinitha wants to stay with us for a whole Saturday and Sunday,' I burst out.

'Vinitha? Oh, yes, her mother is going to Bangalore, isn't she?'

'How do you know?' I ask.

'Well, I met Asha at the Cottage Industries Emporium. Called her and Vinay Uncle to come and have lunch with us on Sunday so she says she won't be in town. That stupid office of hers has fixed up meetings in Bangalore on Friday and Monday!'

Amma laughs.

'Anyway, Asha Aunty can't waste time like you.'

The words are out before I can stop myself. *Amma* looks at me for a minute.

'Well, she'll have to eat too, wouldn't she?' says *Appa*, 'even if she never bothers to give one decent meal to that child of hers.'

'That's not true. Asha Aunty has a lot of work. She ...'

At the same time, *Amma* says, 'Asha does work hard and she has the aptitude for it. If she didn't it would be another matter. If only Vinay could take on some...' *Amma* stops for a bare second, shifts gear smoothly and she says, 'Did you see the *kurta-churidar* I got you, Meenu? I thought you'd like it. Why don't you try it on after dinner?'

She's awfully good at changing the topic.

'So why don't you get yourself one?' I ask, helping her to change the topic. '*Appa*. Why don't you buy *Amma* a *kurta-churidar*?'

'Come on, Meenu,' says *Amma*, her left eyebrow tilting up in a laugh. 'What'll I do in one?'

'It won't crumple like your *sari*,' I say. 'And...'

'And?' asks *Amma* as I stop.

'And nothing. Just that you'll look nice,' I ad-lib. Lucky I hadn't said what'd almost slipped out of my mouth: 'You'll look more like Asha Aunty.'

God! Doesn't *Amma* have eyes to see? Asha Aunty, that other aunty, what's-her-name in the opposite flat, even Bina's mother who can't speak a word of English, dress better than my mother. And they all do something.

'You can't teach an old dog new tricks,' says *Amma* now in a kind of dreamy voice.

'Oh, *Amma*,' I say, exasperatedly.

At the same time *Appa* says, smiling 'Best thing would be to go get another *Amma*. No, Meenu?' He tweaks my plaits and I look up just in time to catch a smile pass from him to *Amma*.

'Oh, *Appa*!' I shout as I jerk my plait off his fingers and dash out of the room. What can you do with parents like mine? How dare *Appa* treat me like a baby?

Two nights later. A wonderful plan has done a thorough romp inside my head!

‘Parents are for looking after children. And children for looking after parents!’ I tell myself gleefully. Why, it’d been *Amma* who had told me how she had cried and cried her heart out when my father had got his first transfer out of Madras. It was the very first time my mother was going to live away from her parents and she’d cried, she said. I remember. And all because she couldn’t look after her parents—my *Thatha* and *Paati*—who, if you ask me, can look after a whole army of people and some! My grandfather was in the Indian Army, you see. Yet. I see *Amma*’s point.

Parents need looking after. And it takes all of two days before I can put my plan into action.

Saturday is a holiday. I get up real early in the morning and make the starch for *Amma*’s *saris* with the maida that she had. I have just time to take the thing off the stove, and carry it to the bathroom when *Amma* comes into the kitchen.

‘You want something?’ she asks when she sees me with the kitchen cloth in hand.

‘Nothing,’ I say with a little shrug of my shoulders, though I can’t keep my lips from curling up in a secret smile. ‘Why don’t you go and read the newspaper. I’ll make the coffee.’

Amma grins at me. She puts her arms around me and says, ‘*Kanna*, that’ll be good. You’ll remember to make *Appa*’s coffee real strong, right?’

I nod, thinking that I must learn *Amma*’s way of giving subtle hints. Of giving instructions without making it look as if the other person is a dud.

By evening four *saris* are washed and ironed (I took them to the press-wallah who lives and works in one of the garages). *Amma* proudly shows them to *Appa* when he comes back home from office—

‘Feels like I’m back in college! Starched *saris*!’ she says as she runs her fingers over and over them, again and again, as if starched *sarees* are rare and exquisite as soft Kanjeevaram *sarees* or favourite books or cuddly creatures from the moon. Then she carefully puts them into the Godrej.

‘They are for wearing,’ I say pointedly. She smiles.

On Monday I sink all the pocket money I have on matching nail polish and lipstick.

‘Why, why, why?’ asks *Amma*, biting her under lip as if she were trying to keep from crying.

Maybe laughing.
'Just like that,' I say.

On Wednesday I take out the sari that I think *Amma* should wear to take me to the dentist and on Thursday I literally force her to sit down under the fan while I paint her toenails and give her a lecture about growing her finger nails. *Amma* just smiles.

Her patience and smugness is what will get me finally, I tell myself angrily. Why does she have to be so good? On Friday I go for a long chat with Asha Aunty.

She always gets back late from office. 'Exhausted, Meenu,' she says when she sees me. But she anyway asks me to stay and talk to her. Good. For I want her to take me to Shankar Market— as soon as possible,' I finish with a rush. I have to buy a *kurta-churidar* for my mother.

'A birthday surprise?' asks Asha Aunty, pushing herself up in her chair, a look of guilt prancing quickly through her eyes. She seems to almost disappear into herself. So small she is.

'No, I just wanted to buy her something. I...'

Asha Aunty closes her eyes and heaves a huge sigh. She smiles at me, a sudden smile that curves up as if it would touch and enclose her small, sharp nose. 'Thank God! For a minute there, I thought I had forgotten Kamala's birthday,' she says, pushing her hair out of her eyes. 'I am such a disorganized person. I wonder I still have friends!'

She looks tired, I see.

'Shall I make you some coffee, Asha Aunty?' I ask.

'You?' she asks, looking up at me, abruptly, her eyes widening. 'Can you?'

I nod. I leave her to go make the coffee, but soon she is behind me, fussing, asking me whether I want the sugar (Of course I do!), handing me the spoon from the rack (as if I can't see) and doing everything except literally mixing the coffee herself.

'Wow, Meenu! You are becoming a big girl, aren't you? Your mother has brought you up very well, I must say!' she says when finally we are back in her drawing room. Whew!

I shake my head. Smile foolishly. I don't know what to say. I stare at a lone eagle framed by Asha Aunty's window and the burst of pastel flowers on her curtains.

I think it is the long silence that makes Asha Aunty say the things she does.

'You are lucky, very lucky, Meenu,' she says, her fingers playing with the tassels of her *dupatta*, her eyes not really meeting mine. If it had been anyone else but chic Asha Aunty, I'd have thought she was on the verge of breaking into tears. 'I wish I could be a little like your mother, but ... it's not easy. And, all the time I keep wondering if I am not being selfish,' she says, bleakly.

'You? Selfish?' I blurt out. 'But Asha Aunty!'

She looks straight at me. 'But I am, Meena,' she says with a watery smile. 'When I took up this job, we needed the extra money. Uncle Vinay's sister had to be married off and we had to pitch in and help. Then I enjoyed my job so much that I said ... Uncle said there is no need to give it all up, is there? But, I don't know ... I thought I needed challenges ...'

'But you are so good in your job,' I start to say.

'Of course I am,' says Asha Aunty. 'The problem is of choice,' she says, grimacing dramatically.

I can't resist saying, 'But I thought you wanted to work!'

She laughs. 'I do. I don't! Can you understand that?' she asks.

As if for want of something to do, she picks up her empty coffee mug and drains it into her mouth, waiting till a lazy sugary drop of coffee drips from it... Then, 'Anyway,' she says, briskly. 'It is neither here nor there as my grandmother would say,' she says in Tamil, quoting a proverb that even I am familiar with. 'All of us have to do what we have to do, right? Now, when do you want to go for that *kurta-churidar* for your mother?'

'Any day,' I tell her, rushing to add that my *kurta-churidar* buying is a secret and could she please, please not tell my mother about it, please?

We fix up to go Saturday morning. When I leave Asha Aunty's place I am wondering what excuse I can cook up for *Amma*. I am wondering also about Asha Aunty. I must admit I am kind of disappointed with her.

Saturday night, and *Amma* has not worn but one of the starched and ironed *saris* I'd got ready for her.

The Shankar Market find still lies in its packet, and the lipstick

sits on her dressing table, untouched, next to the jar of Charmis cream and the *kumkum* that she uses every day.

I groan. 'I want to have a talk with you,' I say.

'Problems in school, *Kanna?*' she asks as she moves a little, making space for me in the sofa.

I go and sit on the rocking chair opposite her.

I want to tell her that I don't want her to be just a housewife. I want her to do something that no one else does. But how do you say such things to your mother without hurting her?

Amma waits patiently. I look at *Amma's* face with its strong chin and the tiny lines that are beginning to creep on either sides of the *tikka* on her forehead. I look at her fingers that have a little turmeric colouring the insides of the nails, the familiar dents on the tips of the first two fingers of her left hand—lines dug into her flesh by the *veena* strings. She used to play the *veena* for something like eight hours a day before she got married. I know it is my grandmother's greatest regret that my mother gave up playing the *veena* after she got married. The lines are dark and calloused, like tiny, dirt-laden valleys between miniscule fold mountains.

I look up and smile. I bend forward and touch her left hand fingers. 'It must have hurt once,' I say.

'They hurt terrible,' she says, smiling at me. 'I remember I stopped playing for three whole weeks before my board exams and, when I went back to the *veena*, the strings bit into my scarred flesh. The pain was so bad that I thought, 'This is it, I will never be able to get the courage to bear this pain, I'll never be able to play the *veena* again ...'

'Didn't you feel sad?'

'Sad, yes, but nothing could keep me for long from the *veena*. I don't think it even pained much!'

'You don't miss not playing it now?' I ask. 'I would hate it if I had to give up my tennis.'

Amma looks at me in a considering way.

'Meenu,' she says, finally, 'As women, we have to decide what we want for ourselves. What we want to be. You know what I mean? Like, what we want to do. What will make us feel good about ourselves.'

'But you need challenges,' I say, heatedly, unconsciously repeating *Asha Aunty's* words.

‘What’ll you do after I’ve taken up a job and *Appa* is busy with his office and everything?’ I ask, using the argument that Ruma said her elder sister had used with their mother. ‘You can’t sit twiddling your thumbs. Or saying *namastes* and doling out...’

‘And why not?’

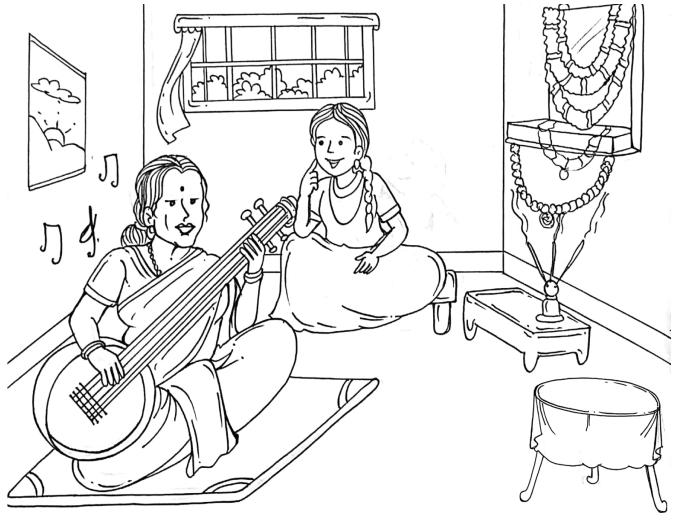
‘Or cooking ten different curries a day for *Appa*. Or sleeping. Or...’

‘Well, that’s not a bad idea,’ says *Amma* in her maddeningly considerate voice.

GRRRrrrr

Weeks speed by. My gang gets a new girl, Zarina, from Hyderabad and, believe it or not, she is a whiz kid for new ideas. Every day almost she bounces into school with a ‘Hey! Let’s...’ and off we go careening into another zany idea of hers. One day it is round-robin table tennis—which is the most tiring thing you can do during a lunch break. One weekend it is biking off with her parents and

friends to the Deer Park—zillions of miles away it seems to me, though Zarina laughs and says my calf muscles are lazy! Since she lives so close to home, I get into maniacal cooking sessions with her or competitions in quadratic equations—quadratic, can you beat it!—and logic puzzles and what have you.



Then one day I get home by 3:30 or so in the afternoon. From inside floats music.

Inside is *Amma*, in our tiny *puja* room, playing her *veena*. Her back is to me. She doesn’t hear me come in, see me sitting down, listening to her. I close my eyes and listen to Carnatic music for practically the first time in my life.

Suddenly our clock chimes. The magic is broken.

‘Oh!’ says *Amma* as she sees me.

At the same time I breathe out a ‘Oh... it was beautiful!’

Amma is sliding the *veena* off her left lap. She runs the fingers of her left hand firmly through her hair, looks at them to see if the oil she has put on them, to help them glide over the strings smoothly, has been removed. She closes the little box with the wad of oil-soaked cotton in it. At last she says, a funny smile touching the tips of her lips, ‘I was playing *Sivaranjani*. It used to be my favourite *raga* and...’

The words tumble out of her mouth as though she’s been caught stealing sweets from her own storeroom. ‘I have been playing the *veena* ever since that day we had that serious discussion. Remember?’

I nod. I want to say, ‘You should be on stage. You should be playing solo concerts and going off to take part in the Festival of India or some such thing!’ excitedly, building castles for her in the air. But I don’t even start to say anything. I know suddenly what *Amma* would do when I finally get through school and college and get that fabulous job as a scientist I’ve been conjuring up for myself.

Left to herself, *Amma*’d play her music to herself, sitting in this or a similar *puja* room, and she’d teach those garage brats of hers and take them to the park once in a while. I bet you anything she’d be happy. She won’t need much to keep her happy.

I suppose if I can go for what I want, *Amma* should be free to go for what she wants, too. I feel things are falling into place for me, finally. I think I sort of understand what Auntie Asha was saying the other day. About choice.

I see and don’t somehow see *Amma*’s crumpled cotton *saree* with its patches of dirt—paw marks of that little puppy, I bet! I see and don’t see her plump ordinary face with its smudged *tikka* and the lips that are just ready to break into its usual laughter. I see but don’t care about the short-nailed fingers, the callus and dirt on the heels of her feet. In one fluid movement, I see myself get up, rush to her and fling my arms clumsily around her and her *veena*.

—Geeta Dharmarajan

Reflect on

- Comparisons can be odious. Have you ever been compared by your parents or adults to a peer? What were your reactions and how did you deal with it?
- Have you ever admired a friend's parent for their appearance, attitude or ideas and wanted to change your own parent drastically? What are your thoughts on that now?

14

THE MIDDLE AGE



Middle age, is when your children are
no longer friends but critics,
stern of face and severe with their tongue.
It's the time when like pupae they burst their cocoons
and emerge in harsh adult glory,
and they no longer need you except for
serving tea and for pressing clothes.
But you need them all the same and badly too,
so that when left alone
you touch their books and things,
and weep a little secretly.
Middle age is when your son,
to whom you had sent once upon a time,
the squirrel's invitation to their jungle feast
writing in golden ink and posting it at night,
turns around in disgust crying,
'you have lived in a dream world all your life,'
it's time to wake up, Mother,
you are no longer so young you know!

—Kamala Das

Reflect on

- How is middle age defined in this poem?
- Are categories like 'child', 'teenager' 'young' middle-aged' and 'old' about actual age or about the way one perceives one's self and the way one is perceived by others within social frameworks? What examples would you use to back your answer?
- What figure of speech is 'like pupae they burst their cocoons'? Explain the image. Think of another image you could use to express the same idea.
- This poem gives you the experience of a mother. Would the experience of a father be any different? Would it make a difference if the mother had a job and was not as involved in the life of her children?

15 CAN YOU HEAR SILENCE?

We've been sitting here watching the road since the morning. When I woke up, I knew, even without opening my eyes, that it was not like every day. The noises were different. Splashing sounds on the road. A car starting, sputtering, and dying away. A funny lap-lap sound as if the sea had come close to us. And, above all this, a loud drumming sound. I opened my eyes, and it seemed dark. And there was Papa reading the newspaper instead of rushing about getting ready. Then I knew what it was.

'Is it raining, Papa? Is the road flooded?' 'Go and have a look,' he said, his eyes still on his paper.

It was flooded. You couldn't see even the tops of the drums they put round the new trees to protect them. I rushed back in. 'Rashmi, *hey* Rashmi,' I shook her. It's flooded, no school today.'

'Good,' she said and promptly went back to sleep. It is still raining, but not as heavily as it was in the morning. The water on the road has gone down. At the edge of the pavement, there is a crooked line of rubbish left by it. All kinds of trash, even—ugh!—a dead rat. A crow is pecking at it daintily, as if choosing the tastiest bits. Rashmi shudders when I say that and makes a vomiting sound and face.

'Lunch,' Mummy announces.

'Mummy, you're not going to work!' Chhaya says accusingly, seeing Mummy dressed to go out.

'I have to. But after you've had your lunch.'

'You promised you wouldn't', Chhaya says, half-angry, half-cry.

'No, I didn't. I said if it kept on raining and if the roads were still flooded, I wouldn't go. I don't have any leave, Chhayu,' Mummy says coaxingly.

But Chhaya doesn't relent, she picks at her lunch. I can't eat much, either. I think of the crow and the rat.

As soon as we've finished eating, we rush back to watch the road. The door bangs. Mummy has left. She waves to us from the pavement. She looks very small from up here. In a moment, she's lost among all the umbrellas.

With Mummy out of sight. I'm suddenly bored with looking at the road. 'Come, let's go out and play,' I say to Rashmi.

'No, we can't. We have to wait until Tarabai finishes the clothes.'

Tarabai came late today and in a worse mood than usual. It was almost like the band we hear in the park sometimes, the way she clanged the pots and pans. Mummy hates it, but she doesn't say a word. She's a bit scared of Tarabai, we guess. Now Tarabai is banging away at the clothes. *Thwack, thwack*—the sounds come from the bathroom. In a while, she comes out muttering angrily to herself and begins pulling yesterday's clothes off the line. She throws them at us. 'Here, do something about them,' she says. They're still damp. Rashmi and I look at them helplessly. Where do we put them? Tarabai is draping the wet clothes everywhere, wherever she gets some place, shoving us rudely out of here way as she walks about.

'Tarabai, what about these?' we ask.

'Hang them round your necks,' she says rudely. I want to retort angrily, but Rashmi stops me. And I remember Mummy's, 'Now, don't fight with her, girls. I need her.'

'Tarabai, why are you so angry?' Chhaya asks.

'What do you want me to do? Sing and dance?' she retorts, but not so angrily. She's fond of Chhaya. They have long conversations and Chhaya knows all Tarabai's problems—her drunken husband,... 'can you really sing and dance?' Chhaya asks curiously, while Tarabai goes on mumbling, 'No sleep the whole night, the rain kept pouring in, and I have to start making the chapattis at four...' She goes on and on, while we chivvy her, asking her to hurry up, for we want to go out and play.

When she has gone, the room looks most peculiar. The curtain which divides the room into two has been pushed aside; instead, there is a curtain made of towels, petticoats and pyjamas. The fan flaps them into strange, exciting shapes. I would like to watch them, but Chhaya says, 'Oooh, I'm feeling cold,' and Rashmi hustles us out.

It's like a Sunday with the corridor full of playing children. Games are already in full swing. Once or twice the dustbin lid falls off with a loud clang; as one of us runs round the corner at full speed and bangs into a dustbin. If you don't put the lid back, you

get a terrible stink, a mixture of stinks really—rotting vegetables, fish and all kinds of queer things. In a while, heads pop out of doors, calling children home for tea. Sometimes Panna's mother calls us in and asks us to have tea with Panna. We always refuse, but I feel left out when the others go in not for the food, really, though, to be honest, sometimes it's also the food. Like the days they were frying onion *bhajias* in Vidya's house. I almost died.

Now we go in, have our milk and biscuits—they're so soggy Chhaya refuses to eat them, the spoilt baby—and then go back to play. We're playing hide-and-seek when Mummy comes home. I'm sitting on the floor, my eyes tightly closed, my back against the wall, counting in tens, when I hear Chhaya scream 'Mummy'. I open my eyes—I'll have to start counting all over again now—and there she is looking angry and sad. But she only says, 'Why are you sitting in that filth, Megha? Come on, get up.'

'Auntie, she's the den. Megha, you're cheating, you opened your eyes. Count again.'

'No that's enough of games. Come in now.'

As soon as she opens the door, she sees the clothes flapping. 'Oh God!' she says. And then, 'Who hung them up?' 'Tarabai...'

'Did she expect you to stay in this?'

'No, Mummy we went out to play as soon as she went.' She looks at her watch, tightens her lops and says, 'Five hours?'

In a rush, she takes off her slippers, flings her bag away, washes her feet and begins rearranging the clothes. Chhaya gets excited and makes a game of it, hiding behind something and saying babyishly, 'Where am I?' Her hands are grimy, and she leaves a dirty mark on Papa's pyjamas. Mummy sees it and gives Chhaya a slap. A little one really. She can't slap properly, like Papa does. Sometimes. For, of course, Papa is rarely home long enough to punish any of us. There are days when Chhaya doesn't even see him. He goes to work before she wakes up and she's asleep by the time he returns.

There was a time when he used to come home much earlier. But then he had a job. 'Now it's my own business,' he told Rashmi and me once. 'And I have to work very hard for a few years. Once I get going, I'll be able to spend more time with you children.'

'By which time,' Mummy had said with a smile that was not really a smile, 'the girls will wonder who you are when they meet

you.’ Strangely, soon after this, we met Papa on the road and Chhaya didn’t recognize him. ‘There’s Papa,’ Rashmi had said. ‘Where?’ Chhaya asked. ‘On the other side of the road, you silly.’ But Chhaya kept saying, ‘Where?’ until he came right up to us.

We laughed at her and told Mummy about it. But she didn’t laugh. That night, I heard her speaking angrily to Papa and Papa saying, ‘But it’s for them. We’ve got to struggle for some time.’ And I heard Mummy say, ‘How long? My God, how long?’

Now Chhaya cries until Mummy babies her and soothes her. Finally, they both lie in mummy’s bed, Chhaya with her thumb in her mouth. Mummy pulls it out—it comes out with a pop—but in it goes again. I look about for Mummy’s plastic-netted bag, the one she carries in her handbag when she goes to work. She always brings home something in it—vegetables, of course, but also biscuits, *samosas* maybe, or some cakes. Today it’s empty.

‘Mummy, I’m hungry.’ It seems hours since we drank our milk.

‘Didn’t you get anything for us?’ Rashmi asks accusingly.

Mummy opens her eyes slowly, as if she’s too tired even to do that. ‘I forgot,’ she says. We stare silently at her. ‘I was too tired,’ she adds. We stand glum. Suddenly she smiles—and when she smiles, she looks like Chhaya does when she knows she’s done wrong and is trying to mollify you—and says, ‘Why don’t you go to the corner shop and get something for yourselves? Take some money from my purse.’

Rashmi points out some cakes to the boy—she’s so bossy, she never gives me a chance to choose—and a man waiting for his change smiles at me. The huge man behind the counter pushes some coins and notes across the glass top. The man pushed back a note and says, ‘A bar of chocolate.’ The boy brings our cakes and goes for the chocolate. I stand on tiptoe and watch the squiggly figures as the man makes our bill. The boy brings the chocolate for the man and Rashmi carefully counts out the money. ‘Here, baby, for you,’ the man says to me. I’m too surprised to do anything but take the chocolate from him. But Rashmi, picking up our change, turns round instantly, snatches the chocolate from my hand, plonks it on the counter and drags me out of the shop. She walks fast, without a word, until we reach the crossing. As we wait to cross, I look back. The man is going in the other direction.

‘He’s gone,’ I say.

Rashmi relaxes her hold on me. The lights turn green. When we're across, she says angrily, 'Why did you take chocolates from him? Don't you know better than that?'

I do. Mummy has told us long back—don't talk to strangers, don't take anything from them, don't go anywhere with them.

'I didn't take it,' I say defensively. 'I was just going to give it back when you...'

'Taking things from a man!' Rashmi hisses at me. 'Don't you know what men do to girls?'

'Of course, I do,' I say with dignity. 'I know everything.'

I know the word, anyway. And I also know it's the most dreadful thing that can happen to a girl.

Rashmi speaks in a more friendly tone now. 'Now, don't go and tell Mummy about it. You know how she fusses. She won't ever let us go anywhere alone.'

I promise. But somehow, I blurt it out, after all. We've eaten our cakes and sorted out our books for tomorrow. Mummy has put the cooker on for our dinner and sits with us for our usual chat. Then I tell her about the man.

She says nothing, only pats

Rashmi approvingly. But I know she's going to talk it over with Papa when he comes home. She's waiting for him now; we all are. It's time for him to be home.

But he doesn't come. He is very late today. It's funny how, when you're waiting for someone, the tick-tock of the clock becomes louder than usual. That, and the sounds of other people's footsteps. Each time we hear footsteps outside the door, Mummy sits



up and listens intently. But the footsteps go on and she droops again. At last she says, 'Let's talk of something.'

'Mummy, tell us about when you were a girl,' Rashmi and I coax her.

We love to hear stories of her school, her friends and her teachers. But today she talks of her home.

'I had a beautiful home,' she says and looks at us with that 'oh, you poor children' expression on her face. 'It had a tiled roof. Do you know how friendly the rain sounds when it falls on a tiled roof? And how gently it slides off from it on to the ground? It's a steady drip that can put you to sleep. Once, I remember, a bird, came in, sheltering from the rain. It sat in the rafters the whole night. Once or twice, I heard it ruffling its feathers. Otherwise, it was absolutely silent. And outside, when it rained, the waters ran whoosh-whoosh in the gutters. We used to wade in them. The water was never dirty—nothing in it but twigs, leaves and mud.'

'Sometimes, in summer, we slept in the courtyard. We could lie in the dark and watch the stars come out. And everything was so quiet that when we spoke the words came out soft, as if we were afraid of hurting the silence. The only sounds were the sounds of birds going to bed, or those insects that go on tik-tik all night. Sometimes, after it rained, we could hear the frogs. Croaking. You can't imagine how—how soothing that sound is. Otherwise...' she pauses as a bus screeches angrily to a stop, starts with a roar and goes on, '... there was just silence. I wonder whether I'll ever hear silence again,' she says sadly.

'Hear silence? How can you hear silence?' Rashmi challenges.

'You'll know some day—if you ever get out of this place.'

'Sounds silly to me, hearing silence,' Rashmi says scornfully. Rashmi has to be rude to Mummy these days. And if Papa says, 'Now, Rashmi, that's not the way to talk to your mother,' she bursts out with, 'You hate me, you're all against me,' and stamps out. And Papa says with a sigh, 'Growing pains.' And Mummy says, 'It pains me too.' And Papa Laughs.

But it's true Rashmi is growing. She won't let Mummy help her wash her hair, she acts funny with Ravi next door. And she's either sulking or in a temper. Except with her friends, of course. With them she's—oh, so jolly!

'You don't even know what silence is, do you?' Mummy says

pityingly to her. And I think of how our friends yell for us—RASHMI-MEGHA. And we yell back—COMING.

All this while, we've been listening to the footsteps, hoping to hear Papa's among them. There are fewer now. Chhaya is almost asleep. Mummy suddenly rouses herself and says, 'Have your dinner, girls. Chhaya, wake up.'

We finish our dinner but still no Papa. Chhaya goes to bed. Rashmi and I argue about whose turn it is to sleep on the 'camel'. That's Papa's word for the hard, slippery sofa on which we have to sleep on alternate nights. It's my turn today. Rashmi goes off to her place near Chhaya, grumbling about how much space she's taken up. I try to make myself comfortable on the 'camel', but the pillow keeps slipping away from my head. I can't sleep, anyway. Why is Papa so late? I can see Mummy is worried. She snaps at Rashmi who's still grumbling. Rashmi pulls her blanket over herself and turns her back on Mummy; even her back looks angry. But Mummy doesn't notice.

Why is Papa so late? I am now sure he has had some accident. Suppose he's dead? I imagine all of it and what we'll do and how sorry everyone will be for us. My tummy feels funny as if I have to go to the toilet. I envy Rashmi and Chhaya for being so peacefully asleep. I wish I could go to sleep too and wake up in the morning to find Papa shaving at the small mirror propped in the corner of the window.

Finally, when I've given up all hope, I hear his key in the lock, Mummy gets up instantly. I hear Mummy asking him something as he takes off his shoes and puts away his umbrella. He replies softly as if he's afraid of waking us, but when Mummy goes on, his voice gets louder. I close my eyes tight; I feel cold. Don't make him angry, Mummy, I plead. It's terrible when he is angry. He doesn't see us, he doesn't look at us, he goes about as if we're all ghosts. And Mummy does look like a ghost—an angry ghost, that is. As the angry words go on, I pray—let it be the kind of quarrel that doesn't last. Sometimes, it doesn't. I wake up in the morning after a quarrel and for a moment there's nothing; then there's me and the day, and I'm happy. Then I remember the quarrel and the happy feeling goes away.

But when I get out of bed, it's peaceful. There's Papa shaving squinting at himself in the mirror, whistling when he finishes and going off to wash his shaving things. And Mummy's in the

kitchen, looking young in her nightdress, her hair in two plaits. She's rushing about, but I can see that it's a kind of happy rushing about, not an angry, holding herself in kind of thing. But some days it goes on and on and I feel as if the house is too small. I want to run away...

I wished I had a room of my very own. Does Rashmi feel this way too? Is that why one day she said, 'I'm going to sleep in the gallery from today.'

'Can you sleep standing up?' Papa had teased her. The gallery has room only for brooms, brushes, old tins and other junk. But Rashmi had kept on and on and Papa had said, 'Maybe one day, when we get out of here, you can have your own room...'

And Mummy had asked, in the funny voice I don't like, 'Will we?' And that night I had heard them arguing once again, with Mummy saying, 'No, no.'

I wake up with a start to find that my pillow has fallen down, and my neck is feeling stiff. I grope for the pillow and lie down on it, wondering—is it time to wake up? Then I hear the sounds of running water and I know it's still night. We get water in the taps only at night and Mummy and Papa have to store it up then. They work in silence. Only occasionally I hear them say something in a husky, middle-of-the-night voice. Soon the sounds cease. The lights are switched off. And there is silence.

But only inside our house. Outside I can hear the trucks rumbling past. From a distance comes the hoot of a train. Soon the milk vans will start. The tramp-tramp of factory wonders going to work. People going for milk. The screech of buses. These sounds don't trouble me, though. I'm used to them. They tell me I'm at home, in my own bed. And it feels good and comfortable even if I'm on the 'camel', with a stiff neck because my pillow keeps falling down.

But just as I'm drifting back into sleep, I see a picture before my closed eyes. A house with a tiled roof. The rain falling on it with a soft patter. A bird sitting silent and still, I am huddled up because it's cold. And I think of Mummy's words and wonder, like Rashmi had done—Can you hear silence? Will I hear it one day?

—*Shashi Deshpande*

Reflect on

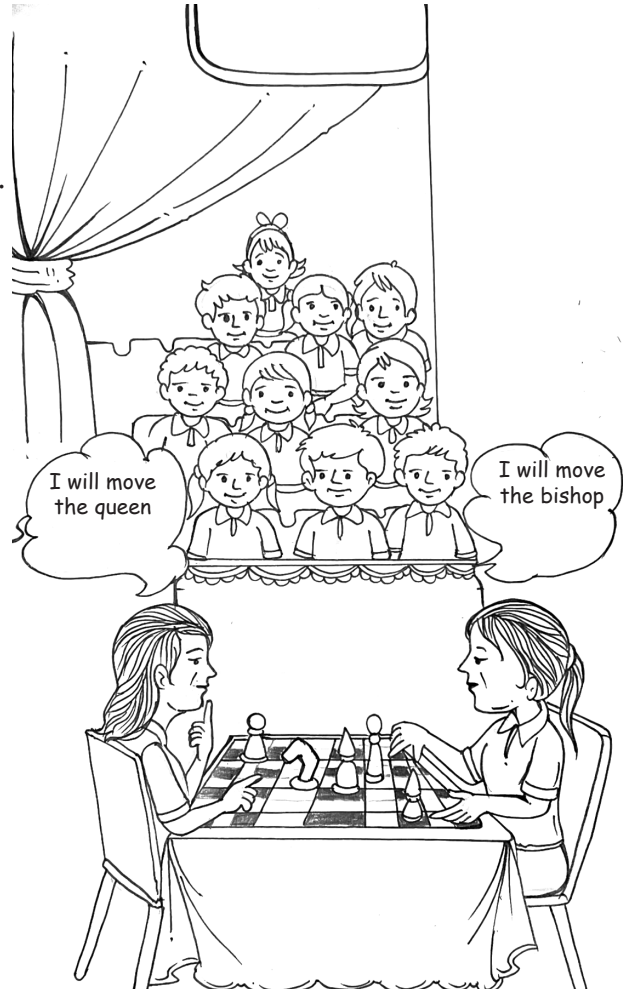
- Do you sometimes yearn for silence? Why?
- Does silence have different qualities? Have you ever found silence comfortable or uncomfortable?
- Does silence help you think more clearly, or do you avoid it because it makes you think of things you would rather ignore?
- Can there be sound in silence? Critically analyse this statement.

16

TWO CAN PLAY SILENCE?

Two can play silence.
Silence for two players.
The time it takes to play silence.
We seize the silence together,
own it separately.
You plant a silent minefield.
I walk on it—
flashes of meaning
exploding
in my head.

—Mani Rao



Reflect on

- Do you think silence can be as powerful as words? In what kind of situations?
- Can silence have different meanings? Support your position with examples.

17 ENID BLYTON IN RAJASTHAN

Now that you are in the sixth standard, you will have to devote a lot of time to essay writing, Miss Priscilla said. She told me to stop fidgeting when I tried to sit like her in the narrow space between the desk and the chair. ‘Geetika Mehendiratta, what are you doing?’ I flinched; what an awfully long name I had! Why couldn’t I have been called Mini or Rini or something more modern?

‘The best way to improve your language,’ she continued, ‘is to read good books, not *Chandamama*, etc., but good books like Enid Blyton’s novels.’

I had been reading Blyton for over a year. But it would be dreadful if all the girls in class started reading Enid Blyton. I would no longer get the highest marks for ‘the most interesting essay’—the way I had in class five for the only essay assignment that the teacher had given us. Trust Miss Priscilla to give away the secret. And why does she think that *Chandamama* is not a good magazine? Because it is in Hindi? Mummy, who teaches Hindi in a college, would say that this is an example of the arrogance of English speakers in India. Although

Papa, who teaches English, also in a college, would probably agree with Miss Priscilla. He often reads a line or two from Hindi magazines and points out errors to irritate Mummy. Or he says: why do they have to use such difficult words? Why do they make everything so boring in Hindi? Mummy either glares at him or replies sharply that the quality of Hindi books and magazines will improve only



if more and more highly educated people start to use Hindi. But that sounds truly boring to me! Why should I read *Chandamama* to improve it for others?

Now your essay assignment for tomorrow is to write two pages on Weekend at a Farm. Now what does 'weekend' mean? Who will tell me? Put up your hands,' Miss Priscilla was asking.

I told her what weekend meant. 'Yes, that's right,' she said. 'And also think of a name for the farm.'

The only name I could think of, while going back in the school bus, was 'Green Meadows'. But if other girls also read Blyton, they would know where the name was from. My farm should be different from everybody else's. It ought to be better than everybody else's. After all, I read so much more than the others.

I loved Enid Blyton's mystery novels about the *Five Find Outers* and the *Secret Seven*, also the school series, *St Clare's*. My favourite was *Claudine at St. Clare's*, where the quaint French girl Claudine comes in contact with the tomboyish English school girls. The French were very different from the English. They preferred needlework to sports. I was myself quite a tomboy, I had got my hair cut very short. I had even asked my mother to get me a pair of shorts. All the naughty girls in Blyton wore shorts. My mother said she didn't know what they were but I could explain to the tailor what I wanted. The first time I tried to explain what shorts are to Sukhdev, our old tailor, he pretended not to understand. Ultimately, I took a novel of Blyton's to him. The *Five Find Outers* were all wearing shorts and standing on a hill on the cover of the book. The dog was also there, wagging his tail. Sukhdev said they were all wearing 'knickers' and girls don't wear 'knickers', was I mad? I knew he was using the word incorrectly because he did not know English; knickers are actually undergarments. But I told him to make 'knickers' for me anyway for me because I liked dressing up like a boy.

A week later, after returning from the market, Mummy said to me, Sukhdev has stitched your shorts. Excitedly, I tried them on. They were loose and baggy. They flopped down to my knees. My brother said I looked like a student from Sainik School. Even my father laughed at that. I felt tearful because didn't want to look like an Indian boy. I wanted to look like an English tomboy. Mummy asked me why I wanted to dress so queerly. 'Why can't you wear pretty dresses like Kiran?'

I said I was different, that's why. Kiran didn't read as much as I did, she didn't even come first in her class. Mummy said I was a difficult child, God alone knew why I was always crying, and what was the need to get strange clothes stitched that I would never wear.

I couldn't wear pretty dresses like Kiran. Anyway, only stuffy, snobbish girls in Blyton wore pretty dresses. Kiran was the girl next-door. She had rosy cheeks and a round face. My face was long. I had a beautiful red dress that I had worn to her birthday. My uncle had bought it from Japan. It is a wonder that he remembered us, my mother had said when we received the packet. Kiran liked the dress very much but it didn't suit me, she had said. Even her mother had said I was too thin. The sleeveless dress hung on me. My liver is bad, that's why, I told her. Kiran asked me whether I felt very weak. Next day, she told me her mother had said I must have a lot of sugarcane juice, since cane juice is good for the liver. I told Mummy that but she only smiled and said that my liver was fine.

My bus stop had come. Should I write about an Indian farm? Nobody would think of writing about an Indian farm in English. But I had never been to a village. Perhaps I should ask Mummy since she did social work in villages, supervising schools for rural children.

Mummy said farms around Desertvadi grew *jawar* and *bajra*, but how could I spend a weekend in a place like that? I asked her whether cows and pigs lived on these farms. She said how could they live on farms, what would they eat, only bullocks who pulled the plough lived there and there was never enough to feed them. Anyway, why should there be pigs, what use were they? Mummy had never read Enid Blyton. In fact, she had read very few English books. When my parents were young, girls learnt Hindi and a bit of English, and boys learnt English and Urdu. This was in the Punjab which was now a part of Pakistan. Mummy spoke English hesitatingly. I felt very embarrassed when she spoke English.

My father said, 'Rajasthan is so poor, perhaps you should write about the Punjab where there are tractors and wheat is grown.' I didn't want to write about the Green Revolution, though Papa said it was very important.

Ultimately, I wrote an essay about a farm called Honeydew, where there were honey bees, a cow called Daisy, a hollow oak in

which I could hide; cheese was made on that farm and I slept in my shorts—I was having so much fun.

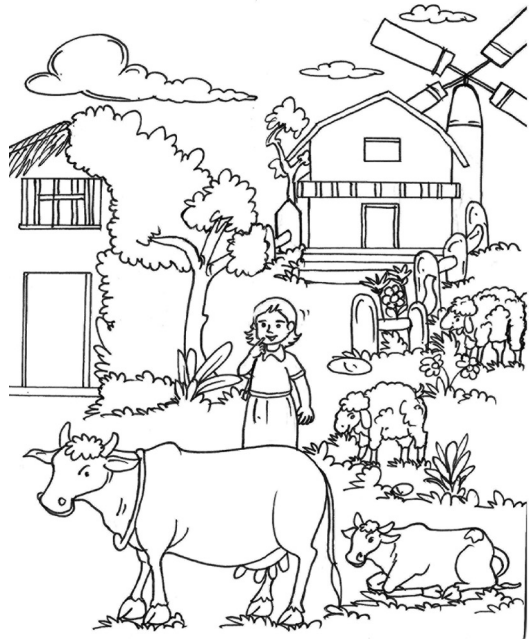
Miss Priscilla said my essay was good, very good. She said that I had a knack of making everything sound very interesting and I should think of becoming a writer when I grew up. But I would have to pay more attention to my punctuation, she added.

I felt quite happy returning home in the bus that afternoon; I was quite excited about becoming a writer. I would write like Enid Blyton and everyone would love my books. They would be so much fun.

But I had a niggling doubt. My parents often said that good writing comes from observation and experience. How would I experience a farm like Green Meadows? I would have to go to England to find a hollow oak as there were no oaks growing in Rajasthan; nor was there any plump cow called Daisy. All the cows here were so thin and bony.

Could I visit an Indian farm that grows *jawar* and *bajra* and where there was never enough to eat for livestock and make it fun in my writing?

—Anuradha Marwah



Reflect on

- What languages do you read in for fun and why? What languages would you write in if you were a writer and why?
- If you were a writer, what kinds of things would you want to write about and why?
- Do you feel you are more exposed to foreign culture through books and visual media than you are to Indian realities? How do you feel about that?

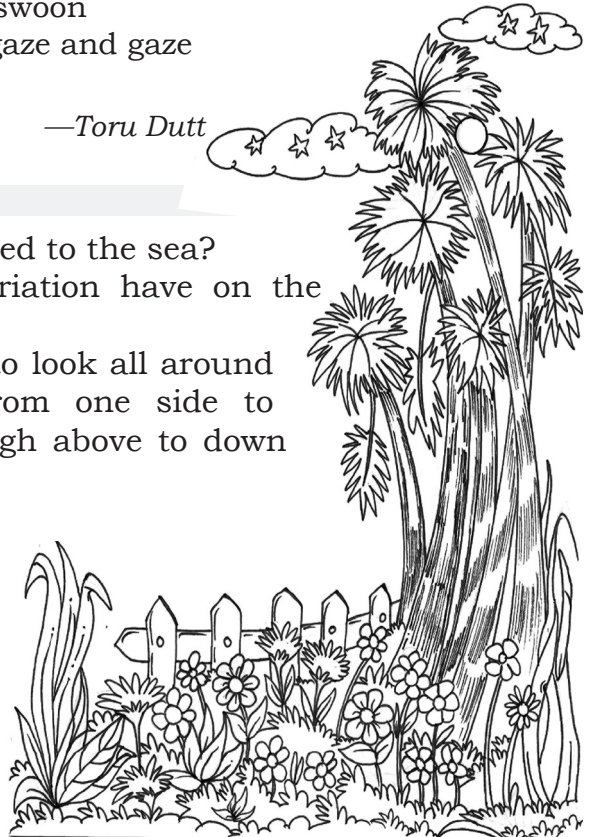
18 A SEA OF FOLIAGE GIRDS OUR GARDEN ROUND

A sea of foliage girds our garden round,
But not a sea of dull unvaried green,
Sharp contrasts of all colours here are seen;
The light-green graceful tamarinds abound
Amid the mango clumps of green profound,
And palms arise, like pillars gray, between;
And o'er the quiet pools the seemuls lean,
Red-red, and startling like a trumpet's sound.
But nothing can be lovelier than the ranges
Of bamboos to the eastward, when the moon
Looks through their gaps, and the white lotus changes
Into a cup of silver. One might swoon
Drunken with beauty then, or gaze and gaze
On a primeval Eden, in amaze.

—Toru Dutt

Reflect on

- Why is the foliage compared to the sea?
- What effect does the variation have on the garden and the reader?
- Why does the poet asks to look all around the garden—not only from one side to another but also from high above to down below?



19 DOING WHAT YOU LIKE IS FREEDOM

One day, I was travelling by train from Bangalore to Belgaum. It is an overnight train and the only rail link between Bangalore and north Karnataka. I was travelling by second class as that's where one can meet lots of people who are eager to talk. I have noticed, the more expensive the ticket, the lesser the co-travellers speak.

As I settled down in my seat, I glanced at the opposite berth. There was a small family of husband, wife and son. The son was about eighteen or nineteen years old and probably going to college. The family was obviously quite well-off. I sat and watched them. The parents were giving numerous instructions to their son.

'It is very cold, why don't you wear a sweater?'

'Are you hungry? Shall I serve food?'

'We have got three berths, lower, middle and upper, which one would you want to take?'

'Have you brought your bathroom slippers? If you are going to the bathroom please use them...' and so on.

The young boy looked ill at ease at all their attention, particularly in front of a stranger, but was obeying and answering them reluctantly.

Then the father asked the mother, 'Did you bring some old cloth? I want to clean these seats. They look dirty.'

The mother answered, 'How many times have I told you to make reservations early. But you never listen to me. If you had booked the tickets earlier, we could have gone by first class or second AC. People like us travel in those compartments and they are maintained better, not like this second class where every Tom, Dick and Harry travels.'

The father bowed his head and answered, 'Nowadays there's so much rush for tickets for the higher classes. I did not realize that. Normally we travel by air, so I underestimated the situation. Unfortunately, this Belgaum does not have an air connection.'

By now, since I knew they were also travelling up to Belgaum and we were going to be together till eight o'clock the next morning,

I struck up a conversation with them.

‘Are you going to Belgaum for the first time?’

They looked at me with some surprise, but the woman was eager to talk.

‘Yes, we have never gone there before. My son has got admission in the Belgaum Medical College. We have heard it is a good college. Do you know anything about it?’

‘Yes, it is a good college.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Because I belong to that area.’

After this they were eager to talk to me as they wanted to know more about the town.

The man introduced himself. ‘I am Rao. I am a CA in Bangalore. This is my wife Ragini. She is an MA in Home Science. That’s my son Puneet, who is going to be a medical student.’ He gave me his card.

By now the train had started moving. Even before it left Bangalore city, they had opened their dinner box. It was a huge tiffin carrier and many items were placed in it. The mother laid table mats on the berth and placed steel plates. It was as if she was serving dinner at home. There were two *subjis*, two kinds of *dal*, *roti*, rice and a dessert. It was an eight-course meal! I watched them in amazement. The son sat down quietly for his meal but before he could touch his plate his mother said, ‘Take the Dettol soap, wear your bathroom slippers, carry this towel, wash your hands and come for dinner.’

When he left, his father explained to me, ‘Puneet is our only son. We have brought him up very well. We wanted him to study medicine in some college in Bangalore but unfortunately he got admission in Belgaum. We have never sent him alone anywhere. This is the first time we are leaving him. We were thinking if the hostel does not suit him my wife will shift to Belgaum and we will rent a small house there for the next five years. I will stay in Bangalore and meet them once a week. For children’s sake parents have to make sacrifices.’ His voice broke and I could see tears in the lady’s eyes.

I could understand their pain at their only son leaving home. It is always a difficult time for parents, but it is also inevitable. How long can you keep birds in cages when their wings are strong and

they are ready to fly? We can give our children only two things in life which are essential. Strong roots and powerful wings. Then they may fly anywhere and live independently. Of all the luxuries in life, the greatest luxury is getting freedom of the right kind.

Now the mother joined in. They were clearly very upset and worried. They wanted to share their grief with somebody, even though I was unknown to them.

‘Our son is very dear to us. I was a lecturer in a college, but I left my job after his birth. Many of my colleagues have become Principals in other colleges but I was determined to bring up my son very well.’

The husband said, ‘I had a good practice in Tumkur district and I own plenty of land there but I decided to shift to Bangalore for Puneet’s studies. I visit my farm once in a while. I bought an apartment next to his school. I don’t go anywhere without my family.’

‘I take his lunch to school every day. Then I talk to his teacher regarding his performance. I have also enrolled him in different evening classes. He learns chess as it is good for the brain, karate to protect himself and cricket which is a well-respected game.’

I could not control my laughter. I felt pity for the child. I asked, ‘What about music, general knowledge, debating?’

‘Oh, we don’t require all these. When he was born we decided he should become a doctor.’

‘What is his choice?’

‘Our choice is his choice. He is only a child. What does he know about the outside world?’

By that time the ‘child’ came and they started eating their dinner. After finishing, the parents decided he should sleep on the lower berth. Immediately a bed was made by the father. He spread a snow white bedsheet, an air pillow and the boy was made to lie down and covered with a Kashmiri shawl.

‘I hope you don’t mind, we want to switch off the lights. My son cannot sleep with the lights on.’

The gentleman switched off the light without even waiting for my reply. I was left sitting alone without dinner and not feeling in the least sleepy.

I was wondering what Puneet’s mother will do when he gets married. They seemed to have forgotten that he was an independent

person who could take his own decisions with some love and guidance. Instead, they were bombarding him with their own ideas and opinions. Too much of affection can become a golden noose around the neck. Puneet will never be a confident person.

It was only ten in the night. I never sleep that early. Even in the partial darkness I spotted an old friend walking down the passage. We were delighted to meet each other so unexpectedly.

‘Come on, why are you sitting in the dark?’ she asked. ‘Are you planning to steal somebody’s purse? How can you sleep at ten o’clock? Come to my compartment. It is the next one. Let us talk for some time. It is very hard to catch you in Bangalore.’ She started laughing loudly at her own joke.

A quiet conversation in north Karnataka would mean a high-pitched talk in sophisticated society.

‘I have reservation only for this compartment.’

‘Don’t worry, we will tell the ticket collector. In my compartment one berth is vacant.’ My loyalty switched immediately and I followed her.

There was loud laughter and joking going on in the other compartment. My other friends were also there. We sat and remembered our college days and made fun of each other.

In the midst of us middle-aged people there was a young boy sitting. He too was very jolly with enormous energy. When all of us opened our tiffin boxes, the boy offered everyone bananas from his bag. Though he did not know any of us he looked confident and happy.

I asked him, ‘What is your name? Where are you going?’

‘My name is Sharad. I am going to Belgaum.’

‘Why are you going there?’

‘I have got a seat in the medical college there and I am going to join my class.’

‘Are you going for the first time? Do you have anybody with you?’

‘Yes, I am going for the first time and I am alone.’

I forgot my tiffin box. Suddenly I thought of Puneet who was of the same age as this boy.

‘Where are your parents?’

‘My father is a postman and my mother is a school teacher. I come from a village near Kolar.’

'How many siblings do you have?'

'I am the only child.'

'Did you never get lonely?'

'No. Since both my parents were working I knew all the neighbours. After school I would visit one house every day. All those children I used to visit became like my brothers and sisters.'

I wanted to know what all subjects he studied in school.

'My father being a postman, I learnt cycling at a very young age. In the evenings I did some extra curricular activities. My father always told me 'in life extremes are bad'. It is better if one takes the middle path so one should know a little bit of music, sports, social activities. This helped me a lot. Now I can travel anywhere without a problem because I know four languages: English, Kannada, Hindi and Telugu. I can swim, sing. I was in NCC so I travelled to many places with my batch.'

'How did you do in your exam?'

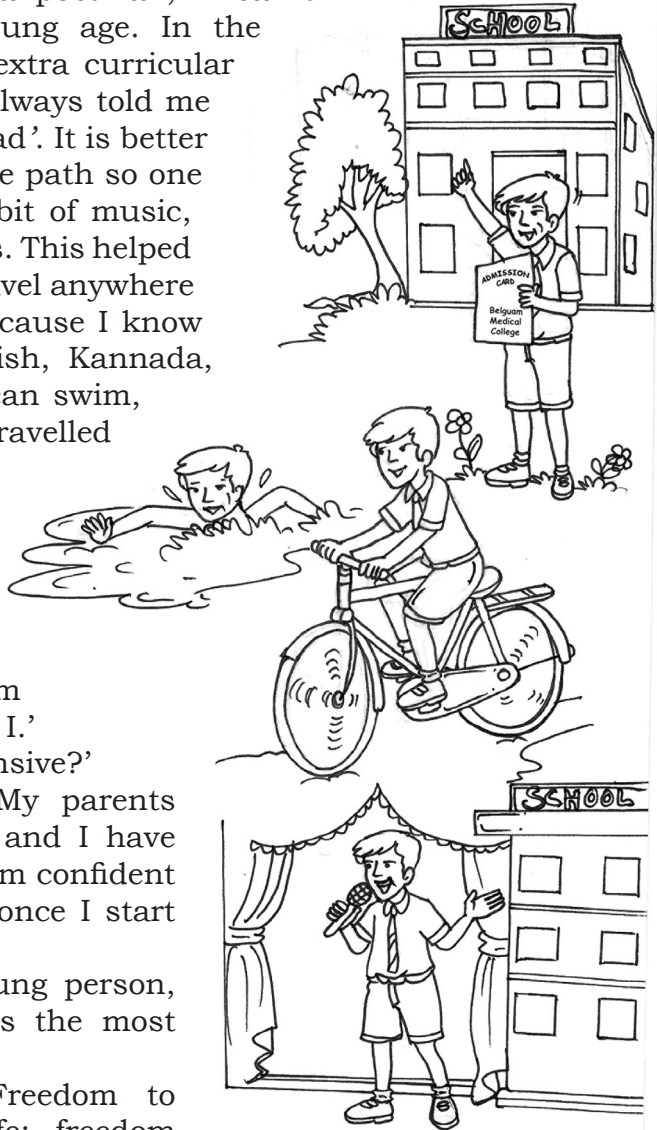
'I think I did fairly well. I got a seat in Belgaum Medical College didn't I.'

'Is it not very expensive?'

'It is expensive. My parents have sacrificed a lot and I have taken a bank loan. I am confident I will repay the loan once I start working.'

'Tell me, for a young person, what do you think is the most important thing?'

'It is freedom. Freedom to choose your own life; freedom



to pursue your own interest; freedom to enjoy your own likes, provided they are not harmful to you and the society. I feel I was very fortunate to grow up with so much of freedom, like a tree in the forest.'

Somehow, I felt I had seen a stunted bonsai plant in the previous compartment.

—*Sudha Murty*

Reflect on

- Do you think that excessive parental protection is a hindrance in the development of a confident and independent child?
- How much support or protection do you expect your parents to provide and why? Is it scary being responsible for yourself?
- They say that one is never too old to learn. Do you think this is true or not? Why?

20

HARVEST HYMN

Men's Voices:

LORD of the lotus, lord of the harvest,
Bright and munificent lord of the morn!
Thine is the bounty that prospered our sowing,
Thine is the bounty that nurtured our corn.
We bring thee our songs and our garlands for tribute,
The gold of our fields and the gold of our fruit;
O giver of mellowing radiance, we hail thee,
We praise thee, *O Surya*, with cymbal and flute.

Lord of the rainbow, lord of the harvest,
Great and beneficent lord of the main!
Thine is the mercy that cherished our furrows,
Thine is the mercy that fostered our grain.
We bring thee our thanks and our garlands for tribute,
The wealth of our valleys, new-garnered and ripe;
O sender of rain and the dewfall, we hail thee,
We praise thee, *Varuna*, with cymbal and pipe.



Women's Voices:

Queen of the gourd-flower, queen of the harvest,
Sweet and omnipotent mother, O Earth!
Thine is the plentiful bosom that feeds us,
Thine is the womb where our riches have birth.
We bring thee our love and our garlands for tribute,
With gifts of thy opulent giving we come;
O source of our manifold gladness, we hail thee,
We praise thee, *O Prithvi*, with cymbal and drum.

All Voices:

Lord of the Universe, Lord of our being,
Father eternal, ineffable Om!
Thou art the Seed and the Scythe of our harvests,
Thou art our Hands and our Heart and our Home.
We bring thee our lives and our labours for tribute,
Grant us thy succour, thy counsel, thy care.
O Life of all life and all blessing, we hail thee,
We praise thee, *O Bramha*, with cymbal and prayer

—*Sarojini Naidu*

Reflect on

- 'We owe a debt to nature', why do you think so?
- How important do you think are farmers for us?

21

THE COWARD

Ariba was arrested the day Noah returned to work.

They came for her early that morning, just after the children had left for school. She was surprised to see the two Elite Guards, in silver and black uniform similar to hers, but theirs had a thin silver stripe on the lapel.

‘*Halvard*, you are being taken into custody under the Classified Information Law for conspiracy against the High Council,’ said the male Elite, who was small and delicate-featured, an amusing contrast to his taller and heftier female companion.

‘Are you *insane*?’ asked Ariba incredulously. They had called her *Halvard*. The title that granted her a particular status in society, gave her special powers. But it didn’t stop her from being taken and questioned like a common thief. It was just a word.

‘How would you feel about defending a fellow *Halvard* charged for conspiracy against the High Council?’ said Nira.

‘Who are we talking about?’ Noah asked, staring vacantly out of the window. The gloomy, overcast day was like his mind—dark and hopeless.

Sometimes it was so hopeless he couldn’t even feel pain.

‘Ariba Anhel.’

That made Noah turn. ‘*What?*’

Nira gave him a quick summary.

‘I don’t believe this!’ Noah said. ‘It’s a joke, right? Oh, I’m sorry, you don’t do jokes.’

‘No joke,’ said Nira grimly. ‘But it’s just the sort of half-witted thing the Elites would do! Would a real conspirator and an intelligent person like Ariba—leave credit transaction trails and CCTV footage that could incriminate her? Honestly!’

‘You mean someone has framed her? But why?’

‘The Elites are under a lot of pressure now. While you were, indisposed, anti-Sadir sentiments have been getting stronger around the world. And there are whispers of uprisings. They need a scapegoat. Ariba is convenient—when she was a young *Halvard* back during the Civil War, her husband was known to be a rebel sympathizer—in other words, against whatever the High Council stood for...’

‘Are you seriously suggesting that the Elites set her up?’ Noah asked disbelievingly. ‘Nira, I know I have been away for a long time, but my brain isn’t completely addled yet.’

‘Then prove it to me!’ shot back Nira. ‘Find evidence that her credit account has been hacked and the security cameras tampered with.’

Noah stared at her. A spark of barely remembered excitement wired in his stomach. He was an expert in networking systems and online security. They had been working on developing a special data network called the EXtended—TRAcEable NETwork EXTRANET—when his six-year-old daughter’s death had taken some long months out of his life.

‘I should tell you,’ said Nira slowly, ‘that the EXTRANET project is on, and I have been asked to head it, with you as my assistant. We’ll be moving to the headquarters in Kirnara if you agree to do it. Meanwhile, the EXTRANET is officially offline...but...’ she paused tantalizingly, ‘the access codes are here.’

She pointed to her eyes.

‘But what is it that I have done?’ asked Ariba. ‘You have quoted laws at me, asked me hundreds of questions, gone through my personnel and financial records, my movements over the past week. But what is it that I have supposed to have done really?’

‘You know what you have done,’ said the Elite, leaning back on his revolving chair, tapping his stylus on an electronic pad in front of him.

‘No, I do not,’ said Ariba tersely. ‘And I have had enough of your games. You cannot arrest me without telling me why.’

‘The Classified Information Law denies me the right to speak to you of the matter.’

That almost made her laugh. ‘This is ridiculous!’

‘Tell me, *Halvard*,’ said the Elite, ignoring her, ‘is it true your late husband sided with the rebels in Kendark during the Civil War?’

‘That is irrelevant,’ said Ariba.

‘Nothing is irrelevant when it comes to conspiracy,’ the other Elite questioning her said. ‘Please answer the question, *Halvard*’

‘He didn’t side with the—he didn’t actively participate in the

activities. He just thought their point of view might be worth considering.'

'Is that a yes or a no?' the Elite said.

Before she could frame a suitable answer, the other Elite leaned forward. 'Security-camera footage places you at the crime scene during the incident.'

'What incident?' asked Ariba, frustrated.

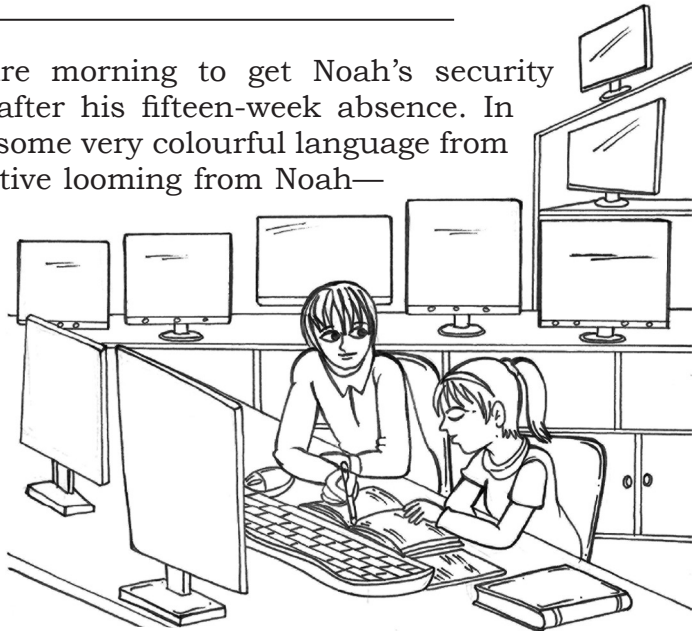
'The incident that led to a suspicious transaction in your credit account.'

Ariba shook her head. She stood. 'Look, I have been very patient and have answered all your ridiculous questions. But I think now I have had enough of this. Either tell me why I am being detained or let me go. You're not the only one who can quote laws. I should remind you that I am not obliged to sit here and be questioned unless you tell me why I am here.'

'Then you should also know,' said one of the Elites, 'that violation of the Classified Information Law results in all personal privileges being revoked. You may not leave this facility till our investigation is over. You may not contact *anyone* till then. You will be provided comfortable accommodation, food of your choice and entertainment. Technically, you're not under arrest. Yet.'

It took the entire morning to get Noah's security clearance renewed after his fifteen-week absence. In the end, it required some very colourful language from Nira and some effective looming from Noah—making good use of his 201-centimetre frame. It made the young *Halvard* at the clearance office scurry to get a Councillor to look at it, who immediately approved Noah.

Nira led him to their old computer lab. The red bar on



the electronically locked door hissed and turned green when Nira stuck her face into the retinal scanner. She pushed it open and motioned to Noah to enter. The door hissed shut behind them, and Nira nodded.

‘We can talk safely here.’

Noah smiled to himself when he saw the array of special computers they had configured and networked using protocols developed from scratch to create a sort of network completely different from the usual data network or even the Internet. He was home.

‘There is one question that bothers me,’ he said, leaning down to slide his fingers into a series of slots that would check his fingerprints and then automatically boot his personal terminal at the far end of the room. ‘How did you get to know about Ariba? It doesn’t seem to be common knowledge.’

‘It isn’t,’ she said. ‘It was chance—albeit a fortunate one. I was testing the interlinking between the regular data network and our EXTRANET, when I accidentally accessed the Elites’ classified network. Before I figured out what it was, I had read her arrest order.’

Noah knew she was lying about the last bit—knowing Nira, she had probably done a thorough job of reading all the Elites’ mails for the week!

‘That’s why I brought you here, Noah. The EXTRANET is at a very nascent stage, and no one is interested in it right now. Because no one knows of its existence, it can go places where others can’t. And despite its name, at the moment it is completely *untraceable* because nobody knows exactly what to trace! Do you think the Elites’ network is insecure? Of course not. It’s like they have the toughest wall in the world, one that can withstand any attack. But what if suddenly a ghost appears who can walk through walls?’

‘I see,’ said Noah. ‘So we are going to use our ghost to find evidence that Ariba has been framed.’

‘Precisely. Nira looked at her watch. ‘I have an appointment with Commander Arjun of the Elite Guards in about ten minutes. You get to work. Start with her bank account. There’s just one precaution you need to take this is very important. While you can access other networks, be careful not to change or move any data.’

Noah was rather offended. ‘Do you really take me for a bank robber?’

‘Oh, don’t be silly. Just don’t do anything that might register on their logs, or you will be caught and tried as one!’

By the time Noah had Ariba’s bank records, Nira was back.

‘Electricity bill, Network bill—paid by automatic clearing,’ said Noah, running his eyes down the list. ‘Subscription to the Triangles Association, subscription to the Junior Astronomy Club—must be for her kids. These are supermarket transactions. Ah, here we are—this must be it. Transfer of funds into the personal account of one Kyron Varya. His account is in Kendark. I’ll just do a trace-route on this transaction. That will show us if it is authentic.’

‘That name sounds vaguely familiar,’ said Nira, frowning ‘Wait—I’ll run a profile check on him.’

‘Got it!’ she said in a while. ‘He is Ariba’s brother-in-law. I know why he rang a bell. He was also a rebel supporter during the Civil War. We had compiled a list. Why would Ariba pay him so much money? Is he hard up?’

‘Not that I can see. Seems to earn a regular, handsome salary. This is a legitimate transaction, Nira. The trace-route is clean.’

‘He must be on the Elites’ list of suspicious folks, and a transaction into his account from a Defender set off some sort of alarm,’ said Nira. ‘There could, of course, be an entirely innocent explanation. He’s family, after all. Have you looked at the security-camera footage?’

‘No. It’s not linked to the data network, and I can’t figure out how to get into the system from here. Couldn’t your friend Commander Arjun give you a copy?’

‘Well, I asked, but he says the CCTV video format cannot be copied. A security feature. By the way, he wasn’t pleased that I volunteered us to defend Ariba, but there’s nothing he can do. And he wanted to know how I knew about her arrest!’

‘What did you say?’

‘That I have my birdies. Now go get us some lunch while I hack into the security cameras.’

Though Noah himself hadn’t managed it, he had no doubt Nira would get into the security cameras. He was right. He came back

with sandwiches and bottles of water for both of them to find Nira looking grim.

‘The evidence,’ she said, after Noah had watched the footage in silence half a dozen times, ‘is pretty damning.’

Noah pressed his lips together.

‘There’s one thing we don’t know yet,’ he said. ‘What classified information has she been involved with? And what has she done with it? How exactly has she conspired? Giving money to your brother-in-law is hardly criminal. Not yet, at least.’

Arjun wouldn’t tell me. ‘Kept quoting laws...’

Noah shook his head. ‘Nira, you *know* her. She wouldn’t do anything to compromise her reputation. And what about her kids? What will happen to them? She’s a single parent.’

‘Maybe she didn’t bank on getting caught,’ said Nira quietly as Noah watched the security camera footage yet again, showing Ariba entering and then leaving the section of the R&D unit called the Quantum Lab.

‘What exactly happens at the Quantum Lab?’ Noah asked.

‘What do you think? Salsa classes? Research on quantum computing, of course. It’s top secret. A-level.’

‘Could you get in?’ asked Noah. ‘You have A-level access.’

‘I would still need a good reason.’

‘Ariba started working there three weeks ago,’ said Noah, thinking aloud. ‘Perhaps she found something. Perhaps something happened... Nira, we need to know what’s going on there. I think the answer lies there.’

‘Whatever it is, it seems Ariba did it...’ Nira put up her hands. ‘All right. All right. I shall see if I can call in some favours and get inside.’

But Noah had a better idea. He waited till Nira left and got to work. In minutes he was totally engrossed and had no idea how much time had passed, and Nira’s voice behind him made him leap many inches into the air.

‘What the *hell* do you think you’re doing?’

She had a habit of creeping up quietly behind you that scared the living daylights out of most normal people. She couldn’t do that to Noah usually, but he had been completely absorbed.

'I got into the Quantum Lab's documentation.'

Nira neatly took the stylus out of his hands. 'You never mess with the people who build computers!'

Noah looked up, trying to look agreeable and innocent. Which was difficult at the best of times.

'Did you have any luck?' he asked Nira.

'No. In fact, the Quantum Lab's authorisation has just gone up to Z-level. Which I don't have.'

'Do you want to know what's happening there?' said Noah, with a little smile.

'Tell me then,' Nira said, perching herself at the edge of the table, fixing her dark beady eyes on Noah. She was a tiny woman, barely five feet, to Noah's six-feet-seven-and-then-some. But she could always make him squirm. 'It had better be something really good, Noah, because I am *this* close to sacking you from the EXTRANET team.'

'Take a look at these notes I filched from their system.'

'You what!' cried Nira. 'Oh you half-brained ****! What did I tell you about leaving traces on logs?'

'No way,' said Noah smugly. He brought up a window filled with neat rows of programming script. 'That's why I took the trouble of writing *this* first. It's a stealth program. Made up of a masking script that lays a false trail. It shows anyone who wants to look that I am somewhere else. For instance, right now, I'm shopping for chocolates!'

Nira bent forward to study Noah's script. She shook her head.

'Sometimes I think I taught you too well. Now show me what you found.'



Noah waited till Nira had calmed down and he had stopped blushing from some of the language she had used.

‘Could you elaborate?’ he asked meekly, ‘I’m fine with software, but don’t know much about hardware.’

‘Well, our computers currently process information in bits, right? Each bit can take on a value of 0 or 1. A combination of those 1s and 0s makes up the data.’

‘Of course—the light-switch analogy. It can be off or on,’ said Noah helpfully.

‘Yes. Similarly, the quantum bit can also take the possible values of either 0 or 1. But the difference here is, it can also take on the value of both 0 and 1 simultaneously.’

Noah blinked. ‘Wow... that would mean much faster computers.’

‘Yes. Only...’

‘Only what?’ Noah asked.

‘That although they have a prototype for a quantum chip that is compatible with any present-day computer running Windows, Mac OS and certain Linux versions, it is still very unstable. Looking at the architecture, I can say this will generate so much heat that it will sizzle! It could blow up microchips, hard drives, the computer—and the person using it. And it’s rolling out for testing in less than a week!’

‘Wait a minute,’ said Noah. ‘You said it’s unstable and dangerous. So why would they spend money on building samples to give out for testing?’

‘Think about it, Noah. This is the breakthrough we have been waiting decades for. This will totally change the way computers work. Imagine the opportunities, the money in it for those who crack this first. We, *Halvard*, are not the only people working on this. That’s why the unholy hurry. Why waste precious time and money setting up testing systems when you have a world full of guinea pigs at your disposal?’

‘Oh my god—they intend to introduce it into the computers of ordinary people?’

‘Do you think they would be allowed to test their chip in its current state? Subterfuge is only way it can be done.’

‘But thousands of innocent people could get killed! This is murder! Massacre, actually.’

‘If it works, some people could get very rich. If it fails, microchip manufacturers would have to take the fall for it. It’s the perfect plan. Greed overcomes all obstacles.’ Nira looked disgusted. Then she sighed. ‘I think Ariba found out about this and did something to cripple the experiment.’

‘So she gets to be tried—and probably executed—for conspiracy against the High Council, while those conspiring against the whole human race go free?’ said Noah angrily. ‘What sort of justice is this?’

Noah slammed his fist into the wall. He was in a towering rage—fuelled by a feeling of total helplessness.

It. Was. Not. FAIR!

He paced his room for a while, forcing himself to calm down. Then he sat at his desk and booted his computer.

‘They don’t call me Mr Spock for nothing,’ he said aloud.

It took him just a few minutes to replicate the method Nira had used to get into the security cameras. She had been adamant about not leaving traces in their logs, but he didn’t have to worry. His stealth program masked him perfectly. No one would know he was here.

He watched the incriminating footage again, and then looked at the timeline. Footage of the still, empty corridor stretched for long hours between Ariba’s entering and leaving the Quantum Lab.

He measured the time Ariba first appeared on the scene and when she finally left. Then he made a copy of empty corridor footage for that length of time.

Noah paused for a moment to think what would happen if he was discovered. It would mean the end of his career. He shrugged. He had precious little in his life to look forward to.

He selected the Ariba portion of the film and pressed Delete. Then he pasted the copied footage over the empty space.

It was a seamless integration.

‘I don’t know how to thank you,’ said Ariba.

Noah gave a ghost of a smile. ‘I’m glad I could help.’

‘Are you taking the Kirnara job?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ said Noah.

‘And what about your wife? Is she going with you?’

Noah hesitated. ‘No. She got an offer.... got an offer... elsewhere.’

Ariba studied her hands. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Thank you.’ He rose to go but stopped. ‘Out of curiosity,’ he asked,

‘why did you transfer money to Kyron? If I may ask.’

‘He was making... arrangements. He was going to look after Aizel and Ailea—my children—after I was sentenced.’

‘You took a terrible risk, Ariba.’

‘It was necessary. They didn’t care about the consequences. No one would have listened to me and I am not brave enough to take them head-on. I did what I was able to. I destroyed a part of the code.’

Noah didn’t reply.

‘I know that I’m a coward,’ said Ariba at last.

‘Perhaps that’s why I’m honoured to have you as a friend.’

—*Payal Dhar*

Reflect on

- If you were in the place of Noah whom would you like to support?
- Normally we trust photographs or video footage as truthful. Did this story make you reassess or rethink your faith in the media?

22

JAZZ

Till late in the night
The musicians played jazz in the restaurant
In the trembling gentle light
They continued to play their
instruments
My unfulfilled desire spread all
around
For long did my mind linger
Still-melancholic
Not wanting to rise in the morning
Though others were leaving
The singers had sung, the players
had finished
Instruments packed in their boxes
What remained within me
Was Jazz for me now
I was myself to sing my songs
My heart itself was now the instrument.



—Savita Singh
(Translated by Sukrita Paul)

Reflect on

- Do think that music has a language? Do you relate to any particular kind of music?
- What kinds of music do you like to listen to? Do you associate different moods with different kinds of music?

23

CENTRE STAGE

There were always those who were going to be centre stage. There was no doubt about it. Those whose talents were formidable, above question. Those who could do splits like banana, hang upside down like bats and cartwheel like, well, like cart wheels, I guess. And then there were others who could barely manage a handful of the moves. They were the ones who were further back. The *janta*. The specks who didn't count. And then, there were Malati Fotedar and I. We could do most of the cartwheeling, hanging, hand-standing. Though not the fantastic splits atop impossibly narrow beams. But then that was the prerogative of the Chosen Few. Those who'd already and had always been the centre stage *walas*. But there was one thing that neither of us could do, Malati Fotedar and I. And that was a head-stand. Both of us could do exactly the same things, but neither of us could do the head-stand. She'd tremble. I'd shake. She'd topple, I'd collapse. And there was just one spot left to complete the central formation. The one that would hold centre stage. The one that was going to be right below the chief guest's dais.

Our Gymnastics teacher, Mrs Rodericks called the two of us after we'd had yet another toppling/collapsing session. It was a Friday afternoon, and sports day was just a week away. 'Look', she said, a flicker of desperation in her eye, 'there's just one spot left in the centre stage group,' as if we weren't acutely aware of this fact already, 'but I need someone who can who can at least do the head-stand.' At least, as if the head-stand was an at least, it was just such a difficult thing. 'Let her show us then,' I muttered in my heart, although of course I had on my puppy dog pleading eyes to try and persuade her to pick me. But she was a teacher, so obviously made of harder stuff. 'So,' she continued, ignoring the 'pick me pick me' expression I was beaming at her, 'I'm going to give both of you till Monday. Whoever can do the head-stand, will be centre stage. The one who cannot, well, she'll go right to the back as the middle groups are already decided...'

'And what if neither of us can?' asked Malati Fotedar, she was like that, blurting things out without thinking. Actually so was

I, as those who know me will confirm, but I held my tongue for the moment, while she blurted. I held my breath, may be Mrs. Rodericks would say that then she was going to pick me. I had the edge, surely. Surely?

'Then I'm going to reduce the centre stage group to four and cut both of you out,' was her curt reply. Whoooooo! Not good news, my friends, not good news at all.

It may seem that I'm making a very big deal out of a very small thing. But in our school, back then, it was a big deal. Even though we teenagers did the dutiful teenage thing and were as casual and complacent and blasé as any teenager could be, this one thing was a big deal. What the hell, some things are. It was a big deal to be in the display, a HUGE thing to be in the central formation of our giant mass gymnastics display. And it was a huge deal for me. I really, really wanted to be centre stage. I wanted to be a star. I wanted my parents to be sitting in the audience with their cameras and taking a picture of me, not the massed display with me as an unidentifiable dot on the horizon. I wanted to be in THE group and I wanted to be there badly.

I was going to spend the weekend practising standing on my head. I was determined to be proficient at being upside down by Monday.

But I suppose Malati Fotedar was going to do the same. Now that it was down to just the two of us, each one of us had to be the one selected. There was going to be just one winner here. And one loser. I didn't want to be the loser. My head was going to serve just one purpose this weekend, it was going to do what my feet had been doing all my life. Getting me to stand on them it, whatever.

I got home, told mum that I had homework to do. I wasn't lying either. I locked myself into my room and after a very light lunch, I started straightaway. Cushion on floor, shoved into a corner so that I would have two wall supports at first, I got down on all fours. Just as I'd seen Dorothy and Bela do, I placed my head on the cushion. Supporting my weight on the flats on my hands, I 'walked' my feet till my butt was reaching for the ceiling and I was on my toes, then, I lifted one leg up and made for the wall, then the other. Then I collapsed. Never mind, it's just the first try. Start again. Head on cushion, hands flat, butt to ceiling, up on toes, one leg up. Follow with the other. Then I collapsed. Don't worry, it'll come. Breathe in, breathe out. Out, in.

Concentrate, you know the routine, head and hands down. Butt and toes up. One leg, now the other. Then I collapsed. Maybe I'm going too slow. Maybe you've got to cheat gravity by going fast. So headhandsbuttoesonelegotherleg. Then I collapsed. Go go go. And then I collapsed. Again. Then I collapsed. And again. Collapse. Collapse. Collapse. ARGHHHHH!!!! Collapsecollapsecollapse.

I lay there on the cool floor. This was truly terrible. This was never going to work. It was going to be Malati Fotedar after all. And me the speck at the back, at best. Maybe I was tired, maybe I just needed to rest and get some energy back. I went to the medicine cabinet and got some glucose. Bit lumpy from age, but doesn't matter. I mixed three big lumps into a glass of cool water and drank slowly, imagining what it was going to be like if I actually succeeded. And what it was going to be like if I didn't. If I was going to be a speck, I'd definitely tell my parents not to come. It wasn't worth it. Better yet, I wouldn't go. No one was going to miss the extreme right speck. I'd make some excuse and just not land up. That'd be best. Cowardly, poor loser best. I suppose that's how all the backies felt, but it was how I felt and that's all that mattered to me right now.

So back to practising again the same routine, the same collapsing. This wasn't going to work. Then, as I lay, defeated and disheartened on my back, I conjured up... alright, alright, I'll come right out and say it. I've never admitted it to anyone ever, ever before.

I have a made-up friend.

There's this girl. She's my very, very best friend. She knows more about me than anybody else does. I guess she'd have to, she's me after all. But in a way, I think she knows more about me than I know about myself. I don't know how that is, but she really does. She's perfect in every way, she's really good looking, she's very talented, sings, plays the guitar, dances, is pretty good at studies, is a long jumper and hurdler. Let's just say that she's everything that I'm not. She is the best friend anyone could ever dream of having. Except that I've dreamt her up. Yep, her only, only fault is that, well, that she doesn't even exist!

Okay, so back to that infamous head-stand. As I lay there, defeated and disheartened, on my back, I conjured up my make-believe friend. She came and stood over me, laughing, asking why

I was lying there like that. I told her my sorry story. Told her that Mrs. Rodericks had given us just this weekend. It was Sunday evening now and I'd come no closer to standing on my head. It was as distant as my climbing Mt. Everest. In the 'it's never going to happen' category of feats.

She smiled and I asked her whether she could headstand. Of course she could, she would, she could do everything. She asked me to move over. I sat up. She positioned herself in front of the cushion. She went through the routine that I'd been at the whole weekend. You know how it goes—head and hands down, toes and butt up. One leg, the other leg. And she was up. The second leg meekly followed the first. And she was smiling an upsidedown smile at me and telling me that it was easy. You just had to breathe evenly and easily and picture yourself upside down.

Okay, so I tried it again. But yet again, collapse. She adjusted my hands so that they were pointing slightly outwards, she held up the second leg. But I couldn't, I just collapsed all over again. So she demonstrated once more, me watching closely from the side. And up she went, smooth as a flag on a flagpole. Incredible. She was so good. She stood there on her head as though it were the most natural thing in all the world. And I watched, a bit awestricken at how easy she made it look.

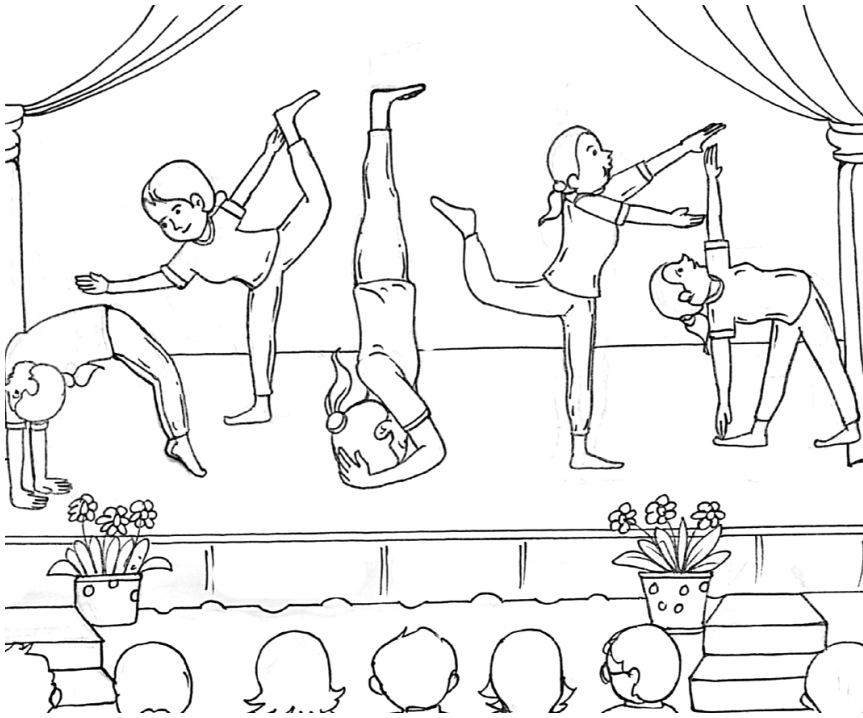
And as she stood there, upside down, legs pointing skywards, it struck me. It wasn't her, it was me. Just me!

There was no friend who was so brilliant she could do everything. She didn't exist at all.

It was me. Just me! Just ME who was standing on MY head! I could do it, I didn't need anyone. I watched my room upside down, the red and yellow bedcover, the tree outside the window. It was me watching my upside down room. It was me, just me who was upside down. And then, I was laughing so hard that I collapsed in a heap on the floor. I could do it. I could, couldn't I? after all, it was me who'd done it just now, no one else. Suddenly I was consumed by doubt again. Could I, by myself, as myself, do it-again?

I steeled myself to believe in myself. I breathed in-out. I went through the routine, holding my leg, my spine steady. I breathed evenly, just as my 'friend' had taught me.

And I was up. Steady as a rock I was standing on my head. I could do it, I could do it. I tried it again, then again, without the cushion. Then yet again, without the support of the walls. I could do it. It was me, no one else. I could stand on my head.



Yes, I did, I did get to be centre stage. Malati Fotedar didn't, I'm sure she hated me for it. But I couldn't even begin to tell her how I'd managed to do it. My parents came. There are photographs to prove it. That I was centre stage, standing proudly on my head and grinning at my secret friend who sat on the front seats, just on the right of the chief guest. She smiled and waved and then, after the display was over, she was gone. She never came back again. She didn't need to.

—Paro Anand

Reflect on

- In order to achieve what seems to be an unattainable goal what are the personal qualities and resources that you draw upon?
- When has your inner strength helped you realise a dream or goal?
- Is the competitive spirit something that can help push you to attain a goal or does it create stress?

24

MAKING PEACE A SONG FOR CHILDREN EVERYWHERE

I want to fashion the largest ear
So the leaders of the world will listen!

I want to mould the keenest eye
So each one of us has vision!

I want to tell the smallest child
That she is our biggest mission

I want to form the swiftest feet
To reach our destination!

I want to shape the softest hands
To heal the wounds of nations!

I want to tell each lonely child
That there is always consolation

I want to forge the sharpest nose
To sniff out hate and annihilation

I want to find the biggest mouth
To voice my affirmation

And I want to tell the children of the world
That peace is not a fiction!



—Rukmini Bhaya Nair

Reflect on

- How can we contribute to bring peace in the world?
- How can we contribute to have peace with the environment?

25

THE POT MAKER

Ever since she became old enough to accompany her mother to the fields and forests, she began to dream of becoming a pot maker like her mother and grandmother. Her mother tried to make her learn weaving, a skill highly valued as an asset in any girl but she only wanted to make pots, and lots of them of various sizes and shapes. On days when she managed to stay at home while her parents and other elders went to the fields, she sought out the women who were expert potters and asked to be taught the skill. They were at first amused by the little girl's insistence; they thought that she would soon outgrow her childish passion for the craft. They told her that it was back-breaking and often frustrating work, especially when a sudden shower ruined weeks of labour, and the pots drying in the sun were destroyed by the rain. Some batches might be completely ruined if the firing in the makeshift kiln was not done properly. Out of a hundred pots, they told her, only fifty or so would turn out well enough to fetch a good price. The rest would either have to be used at home for various purposes or given away. They asked her, had she not heard her mother or grandmother ever complain of these difficulties? She said yes, but she wanted to be a better pot maker than anyone in the village and when she made pots, she told them, she would sell every single one of them. The earthen pots made in this village were famous all over the region and people from far off villages, and even from other tribes, came to either buy or barter the pots with produce from their fields. The little girl had seen her mother exchange pots for chillies, dried fish, and a wooden stool and at one time even a *dao* for her father in exchange for the biggest pot that she had made.

The reason why the little girl did not disclose her fascination with pot making at home was a conversation between her parents one night that she had overheard. The mother was complaining to the father about their daughter's indifference to weaving. She said, 'I don't know what will happen to our daughter when she grows up, she seems so reluctant to learn the craft, she won't even pass the yarn bowl properly when I am at the loom. She will grow up to be a useless girl and no man will want to marry her.' The

father kept quiet, while the mother went on in this vein for quite some time. Eventually, he answered, 'She can learn pottery from you or your mother, can't she?' 'Never', the mother's voice rang out, 'I shall not teach her this craft which has brought no joy to me and only a pittance for my troubles. Do you know how far that wretched place is from the village? Sixteen kilometers and a sheer drop to the riverbank; still we have to climb down because it is only there that you get both the grey and red clay required for making pots. You do not know how difficult it is to dig the clay from the hillside because you have never come there to help me saying that no man can be seen meddling in anything to do with pot making. It is woman's work. I cannot even begin to tell you how your back aches from carrying the heavy load uphill all the way to the village, and then pounding the stubborn clay inside bamboo cylinders to soften it. You have not felt how your left hand goes numb from holding it inside the moist clay while the right one wielding the spatula screams in pain with every tap on the clay. Do you know how many times I've dropped the mould out of sheer exhaustion and have had to start all over again to make one single measly pot? It takes months to bring out a batch after so much labour. And the reward? A few rupees. But if she learns weaving, she can make much more money besides providing enough cloth for the family. No, I shall not condemn her to a fate such as mine.' When the husband reminded her that they too need pots for their own use, she countered. 'Do you know how many pots we can get in exchange for a single shawl? Five, if they are big and six, if small. How many pots do you think we need, only three or four, which will last us for at least a few years.' Anticipating another rejoinder from her husband, she quickly added, 'Yes, I do admit that even weaving demands a lot of hard labour; your back aches and your eyes get strained. But you need not climb any hill and be out of doors in all kinds of weather. Weaving is not messy like pot making and can be done indoors in all seasons. Also the time spent on weaving one shawl is much less and the return is handsome. So be warned, our daughter shall not learn this thankless craft from me during my lifetime. I shall not pass on this burden to her.'

So, the little girl, whose name was Sentila, started going to these old women in another part of the village to watch them at work. To see how the clay was mixed with water and pounded, how

careful they were when they pushed their left hand into a lump of the softened clay and how deftly they rotated the lump as they started giving shape to the rotating clay with a spatula held in the right hand. The regular tap, tap of the spatula on the clay was music to her ears as she watched in fascination the pot emerges out of a shapeless lump of clay right in front of her eyes. When the pot maker was satisfied with the shape, she would gently lower the newly made pot on to a spot in her work-place and pull her hand out of the narrow mouth of the pot carefully so as not to distort it because the clay was still soft. It would take time to become firm enough to retain its shape. After two or three days, again the pots would be given a final touch up in order to retain the required shape and to test the consistency of the still moist clay. Only then would the pots be taken out to dry in the sun. After that they would be loaded on to a kiln in a uniform pattern on a bed of hay and dried bamboo and covered with another layer of the same materials, and then the kiln would be fired. The required temperature had to be maintained throughout the firing process. Therefore, one had to tend the fire carefully; over firing or under firing would ruin the entire batch.

As it happens in any small community where everyone knows everyone else, the little girl's obsession with pottery became known and soon the mother came to hear of her daughter's visits to these pot makers. She did not say anything to the girl at first; she decided to wait and see how serious the girl was about this. She pretended that she did not know where she went on the days that she was left in the village to look after her younger brother. When Sentila visited the old women, the baby, who was ten months old, would be strapped to her back with a cloth and she would labour up the steep hill to reach their work shed. She would carry some cooked rice in a leaf packet with her on these trips. When her baby brother became hungry, she would chew some of it and, once it was soft, she would feed it to the baby. Then she would sing a lullaby to put him to sleep while she watched the women work intently. One of the old women sang beautiful folk songs while working but when something went wrong, she would substitute the words of the songs to suit her anger and frustration, which made everyone laugh. Sentila enjoyed being there but by late afternoon she had to leave them. So she would gently pick up her brother from where

he slept, and deftly swinging him on to her back, would walk home quickly so that when her mother reached home from the fields, she would be there.

Sentila's regular visits to the old pot makers' shed became a topic of village gossip. People started asking why she had to go to these other women to learn pot making when her own mother and grandmother were renowned pot makers themselves. Why was the mother, called Arenla, refusing to teach her daughter the skill, which was her birthright? If all pot makers followed suit, then there would be no expert potters to take their place and the village would lose its status as the only village whose pots were coveted by all. Didn't Arenla know that in the days of head-hunting, this village was spared many times because of their skilled pot makers? As days went by, the gossip became open debate and finally, one day, Sentila's father, whose name was Mesoba, was summoned by the village council and asked to explain what was happening in his household, why his daughter was making these regular trips to the old pot makers' shed to learn the craft and most important of all, why was Arenla refusing to pass on the skill to her daughter. Mesoba was caught in a dangerous situation; if he told them what his wife had said about pot making and why she wanted their daughter to learn another craft like weaving, they would find fault with her and an immediate fine would be imposed on her for going against 'tradition'. On the other hand, if he pretended to know nothing about his daughter's clandestine activity, they would not believe him and he would be ridiculed as an incompetent husband and father and not only that, he too would be fined. He pondered over their query for a while and replied in a humble tone, 'Uncles and elder brothers, I admit that we have all along known about Sentila's visits to the old ladies and why she loves going there. She told us that a particular lady sings beautiful lullabies and gives her sweet potatoes every time she sings with her. Her mother has never said that she will not teach her pot making; it is only that we wanted her to grow a little bigger and stronger after her illness before we took her to Lithu (the riverbank) to dig the clay. In fact, I have ordered a small digging *dao* for Sentila at the blacksmith's just yesterday. So, what has been circulated by idle mouths is not really true. You will soon see that Sentila will start making the best pots in the village.' What Mesoba blurted out to the elders

was impromptu; it was a desperate attempt to avert their ire. But luckily for him, what he said did have a ring of truth; there indeed was a noted folksinger among the old pot makers who sang while she worked and who gave a sweet potato to the little girl one day. Sentila had indeed fallen sick just recently and he had indeed placed an order for a small *dao* meant, not for Sentila of course, but for his wife to use in the kitchen garden. After listening to Mesoba's explanation, the elders decided that there was no cause to take any drastic action against him yet and so they let him go, cautioning him to remind his wife that it was her duty to teach her daughter the skill that was handed down from generation to generation for the good of the entire village. They also told him that skills such as pot making, which not only catered to the needs of the people but also symbolised the tradition and history of the people did not 'belong' to any individual. And experts were obliged to pass on their skills not only to their own children but also to anyone who wished to learn. 'Think of the teaching that goes on in the *morungs*, the dormitories for young men which is our way of educating our youngsters in the requisite skills for survival. In the same way mothers are to educate their daughters in the skills meant for women. Your wife should be willing to pass on the gift to her daughter.' And ominously they added, 'Anyone refusing to do so will be considered an enemy of the village.'

That evening, Mesoba went home with a heavy heart because of the rude reminder of how things were with them in the tightly knit community of the village. His wife's arguments did make practical sense but he could not ignore the logic of the village council, which always put the collective good above individual interests. And if he wished to continue living peacefully in that community he, or rather Arenla, had to set her personal objections aside and do what was expected of her. They chatted late into the night and decided that from now on, Sentila would not be left in the village to baby-sit her brother but would accompany them to the fields.

In the following year, Sentila was taken by her mother to Lithu where the grey and red clay was available. She was taught how to dig the clay with her implement, how to load it on to her carrying basket and how to soak it in the trough in the workshed before stuffing it into the bamboo cylinder in the right proportion and how to pound it. She was a quick learner and she did not mind working

hard to achieve the right consistency and colour in the clay to form a sort of malleable dough. But when she tried her hand at the actual shaping of the lump into a pot, she came up against a lot of difficulties. She could not hold the lump of dough on her thigh properly; her moistened hand kept slipping as she tried to plunge it inside to hold it firm before the spatula in the right hand could start tapping the dough into the shape of a pot. The first attempts were disastrous and Sentila cried her heart out at her incompetence. But she persisted and would not admit defeat. The mother simply sat in a corner and watched the girl try again and again to transform the clay into a pot. Even if Sentila was doing something wrong in the process, her mother kept her counsel. Sentila would send appealing looks towards her mother who remained unmoved. The whole process seemed to have become a contest where the mother's will seemed to thwart every attempt of the despairing daughter to create even the semblance of a pot out of the recalcitrant clay. While Sentila hung her head in shame and frustration, the mother would push her daughter from the low stool and take over the job, wielding the spatula expertly over the clay held firmly on her thigh and gloat when the lump was transformed into a beautiful pot. 'Do you think that you can ever make anything like this?' she would spitefully ask her distraught daughter. These sessions continued for almost a year but throughout this period, the daughter was made to feel so inadequate before not only the mother's expertise but also her open disdain, that she was unable to learn anything from her. It appeared to Sentila that her mother's antipathy to her learning the art was putting a jinx on every lump of clay that she touched. Instead of her dream pots, she could produce only misshapen parodies.

The next year Sentila attained puberty and was required, according to custom, to spend the nights in one of the girls' dormitories. This particular dormitory was supervised by a kind, middle-aged widow. Like everyone else in the village, she too had heard of the discord in Sentila's family concerning her attempts at pot making. Also, the latest situation between the mother and daughter had become public knowledge. The older woman took to this serious young girl immediately and resolved to help her in every possible way so that the girl could fulfill her dream of becoming a good pot maker. She began to look for an opportunity to be alone

with Sentila so that they could talk freely. But, in a dormitory housing almost twenty girls every night, this was not easy to do. However, an opportunity soon presented itself. One evening it was announced that a renowned singer was coming with his choir to sing for the entire village in the village common. Learning that the lead singer was a handsome man with many other young men in his group, every girl from the dormitory eagerly sought permission from Onula or Aunty to go and listen to them sing. Only Sentila said that she would stay back because she was not feeling well. Actually she had been looking for an opportunity to practice her art alone and had smuggled some clay from her mother's work shed for this purpose. It was as if heaven had manipulated events to allow these two women to come together for a pre-ordained purpose.

After all the girls had left, Sentila quietly took out the clay and the implements from her basket and sat down in a darkened corner to try once again to make a pot. At first she wielded the spatula tentatively, for fear of waking Onula who she thought was asleep in her room at the rear of the dormitory. On the contrary, the older woman was watching the young girls' clumsy efforts with sympathy. She decided to wait for some time before intervening. She noticed that Sentila was too tense, the left hand held inside the damp clay was too stiff and her right hand was not moving fast enough with the spatula on the outside of the lump. As a result, the rhythm between the two was all wrong and the clay seemed unable or unwilling to yield the right shape. When Sentila wearily let the misshapen lump fall flat on the ground, the older woman came out of her room and gently asked the frightened girl what she was doing with the clay. She said nothing but bending her head she began to cry silently. Onula went to her, and putting her arms around her said, 'Don't worry, little one, I shall teach you how to make a perfect pot. Come, watch how I sit on the stool, holding my thigh muscles taut and make sure to use sacking to cover the thigh so that the lump does not slip. When you dip your hand in water before slipping it into the clay, make sure it is not too wet. Hold the spatula toward your body and tap gently like this. But most important of all, make sure that the tapping is in rhythm with your left hand rotating inside the clay.' Sentila watched in amazement as Onula fashioned a beautiful pot right in front of her eyes and asked her to try again. She took another lump of clay and with a

confidence she had never felt before, she started the process all over again following the instructions she had just received from the sympathetic woman. As she rotated the lump in her left hand and began tapping on the clay as instructed, she felt exhilarated beyond words. She was creating a beautiful pot! When it was done, she sat there admiring her work. But she was soon jolted out of her euphoria when Onula said, 'The mouth of the pot is all wrong.' Sentila looked and saw that indeed where there should have been a gradual tapering of the mould to form a neck-like opening, her pot ended in a wide chasm. She looked at Onula in frustration who only smiled and said, 'Enough for the evening. The others will soon be back and we must not let anyone know what we have been doing here tonight. When you work with your mother next time, watch her carefully when she is shaping the mouth of the pot. You are a quick learner and you will do well, but do not bring this work here anymore. It is not from me that you should receive this knowledge. It is your mother who has to pass it on to you. Remember, the village has ruled.' Sentila looked at Onula in a puzzled way but without saying anything, collected her tools and the pot that she had made that night and hid them in her basket. The next morning, before anyone else was awake she hoisted the basket on to her head and started for home. But before reaching the house, she veered off into the path leading to the village well and hid her pot in a clump of bushes growing nearby.

During the next pot making session, she observed how her mother held the left hand and the spatula, how she slackened the rhythm when fashioning the mouth of the pots and how a strip of elongated dough was added to the mouth to make the rim. She also noticed that her mother was giving her quizzical looks when she caught her paying so much attention to detail. Then, on a bright sunny day, the mother told Sentila that they should try to make as many pots as they could, otherwise they would not have enough days of sunshine to dry them. So they went to the shed quite early and began the process. As usual, the mother completed a batch quickly and asked Sentila to take over. Complaining that she had a headache and that her back was hurting, she went out to the shed after telling the daughter to try and make as many pots as she could. Sentila was surprised at her mother's assumption that she could make any decent pot at all and found it odd that her



mother did not stay back to gloat over yet another debacle. With these confused feelings, she reluctantly slid on to the wooden stool and taking a lump of the clay dough, positioned it firmly on her sack-covered thigh. She dipped her left hand in water and carefully inserted it into the clay. Thus positioned, she took hold of the spatula and lifted it to start beating the dough to give it the required shape. As she lifted the implement for the first tap, she felt as if another pair of hands took over and was directing her movements. As though in a trance, she began to beat the dough in perfect co-ordination with her rotating left hand. The clay seemed to transform itself into another shape and before long she realized that the pot was ready. She sat there transfixed at her own creation, wondering at the dexterity with which her hands had moved as if in unison with her quickening heartbeat. The moment was almost

epiphanic. She, Sentila who had suffered so much humiliation in her mother's presence for failing to master a simple craft, had now created a miracle. After a while she gently lowered the pot and started giving the finishing touches to the neck. When it was completed, she set it aside, separate from the ones her mother had made. She started on the next one, and like a sprinter who had suddenly found his momentum, she continued making pot after pot with the same speed and dexterity that she had noticed in her mother's hands. Finally, when she looked at her row of pots, she saw that she had made just one short of her mother's tally.

She realized that it was almost mid-day, and being exhausted from the labour she continued to sit on the stool and wait for her mother's return. She sat there for a long time, past the hour of the mid-day meal. She was beginning to feel very hungry, so she decided to go into the house and ask her mother to eat with her so that she would get an opportunity to tell her about what had happened earlier in the day. But when she reached the threshold of the outer room where, as in every house, the firewood was stacked and where rice was husked and where the chickens slept at night, a terrible scene awaited her. She found her mother slumped over the low barrier separating this room from the main one as if she was still trying to cross over. Her mother's *supeti* (*lungi*) had come unstuck in the fall and a white thigh was visible even from the street door. Sentila quickly ran forward and carefully retied the *supeti* to hide her mother's nakedness; only after that she bent low near her mother's mouth to see whether she was breathing. She was not. Instead there was a dried streak where the saliva had dripped. Her mouth was agape as if she was trying to call out. Straightening up, Sentila ran towards the village common where she knew that the day's sentries would be seated around a fire smoking and drinking black tea. When they heard her news, they all raced to the house, carried the inert body inside and laid it on the pallet beside the fireplace. One of the sentries was hurriedly dispatched to carry the news to Mesoba and to summon all the relatives from their fields. Sentila crouched in a corner, dry-eyed and speechless. Throughout the wake that night she was seated by her mother's body, muttering to herself. She stayed like that all night, refusing food or drink and not going out even once to obey nature's call. When the body was being carried out of the house the next morning, she ran after it shouting, 'Mother, I did

not wish it to happen this way; it simply came to me. Please forgive me.’ Those who heard her speak, did not understand what she meant, they simply thought that she was so distraught with grief that she did not know what she was saying. But there was one among the mourners who understood: Onula. Though she did not know exactly what had happened the day before, she intuitively sensed that something momentous had transformed both mother and daughter at life’s appointed hour on that fateful day.

On her way back to her own house, she noticed that the door to the work shed was slightly ajar. Out of curiosity, she stepped inside and abruptly stopped in her tracks; two neat rows of newly-made pots stood side by side. Moving closer, she tried to distinguish one batch from the other to determine if it was the handiwork of just one or if a second pair of hands rotated the clay dough and swayed the spatula to create the two separate batches. She could find nothing to tell one batch from the other. She tried hard to reconstruct what might have happened; it could not be the mother’s work alone because Sentila said that she went back to the house much before the mid-day hour, and it could not be Sentila’s work alone because she was too young and inexperienced yet to accomplish so much even in two days. But if both mother and daughter were involved in turning out these pots, was it possible to differentiate between the two batches? Onula stood there for a long time as if trying to absorb a new phenomenon. When she came out of the shed, she had a dazed look on her face and seemed to falter in her gait. Slowly she walked away from this place of wonder, as she considered it to be, because she believed that she had just witnessed a profound revelation in the two batches of still moist pots, standing side by side in perfect symmetry inside the shed.

A new pot maker was born.

—*Temsula Ao*

Reflect on

- What appears to be a child’s play in the beginning actually involves a lot of skill. Have you had a similar experience with a hobby or interest that you have wanted to develop?
- What kind of art and craft forms are you familiar with? Which ones do you think should be preserved? Why and how?

- Developing a talent or area of interest is not always lucrative or a source of livelihood. However, do you think it enriches the individual or society in ways that cannot always be measured in terms of money?
- How would you deal with it if you had an interest that others did not approve of or support?
- Learning experiences may vary from person to person. What have been your personal experiences of learning – be it a subject in school or any art or skill?

BIO-NOTES

(Bio-notes have been given as references in alphabetical order)

Agarwal, Deepa

Deepa Agarwal is an author, poet and translator with over sixty books for children and adults. A frequent contributor to magazines and journals in India and abroad, she has curated several anthologies. Her work has been translated into several Indian and foreign languages. Deepa's writing focuses on themes of gender equality, social injustice and environmental preservation. She has received many accolades and awards, including the N.C.E.R.T. National Award for Children's Literature for her picture book *Ashok's New Friends* while her historical fiction *Caravan to Tibet* was on the IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) Honour List. Her non-fiction *Journey to the Forbidden City* featured on the Parag Honour List and was a finalist for the Neev Book Award; short story collection *Kashmir! Kashmir!* on the Parag Honour List and a finalist for the Publishing Next Best Children's Book of the Year award. Her poetry collection *Forgotten Kaleidoscopes* was also a finalist for the PVLFF Best Poetry Award. She has received a senior fellowship from the Ministry of Culture, presented many scholarly papers at seminars and conferences in India and abroad and participated in several literary festivals including the prestigious Jaipur Literature Festival, Sahitya Akademi Festival of Letters and the Times LitFest.

Anand, Paro

Paro Anand has authored over 20 books for children and young adults, including plays, short stories, novellas and novels. She won the Bal Sahitya Puraskar in 2017. She is a performance storyteller and has performed her stories in many parts of India and Europe. Her acclaimed novels and short story collections include *No Guns at My Son's Funeral*, *School Ahead* and *I'm Not Butter Chicken and Other Stories for a Teenager*. She has also been published in several anthologies and has written extensively on children's literature

in the country. She headed the National Centre for Children's Literature, The National Book Trust in India. She is a World Record Holder, for helping over 3000 children make the World's Longest Newspaper (850 meters long) in 11 Indian states in 13 languages. The concept behind the project was to give a voice to those children who do not have a platform and to empower young people to create their own literature.

Ao, Temsula

Temsula Ao, an Indian poet, short story writer, and ethnographer who wrote in English. She was one of Nagaland's most eminent contemporary folklorists, academics, poets, and one of the finest authors of the country. She was awarded the Padma Shri in 2007 and the Nagaland Governor's Award for Distinction in Literature in 2009. For her collection of short stories *Laburnum for My Head*, Temsula Ao received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2013. She was also the recipient of the Kusumagraj National Literature Award for Poetry in 2015. She was a Fulbright Fellow at the University of Minnesota during 1985-86. Temsula Ao has 14 books to her name and her works have been translated into German, French, Assamese, Bengali, Kannada and Hindi. Many of her poems and short stories are on the syllabi of colleges and universities around the country, including Nagaland University, Kohima. M.Phils and Ph.D dissertations are being done on her works. Temsula Ao has an entry on Folklore of Nagaland, in the Greenwood Encyclopedia of World Folklore and Folk Life, 2006, Vol.No.2, Westport, Connecticut, U.S.A. Her latest book of short stories *The Tombstone in My Garden* was published by Speaking Tiger in January 2022. Prof. Temsula Ao was the First Naga woman to obtain Ph.D. (1983) and also the First Naga to become a Professor in a Central University (1989). Temsula Ao travelled to many foreign countries as a Member of Sahitya Akademi Delegations; represented India and participated in the IXth International Poetry Festival at Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2014. She was also invited to Switzerland as a member of the Naga Delegation sponsored by Panos South Asia in 2009, visiting Basle and Zurich universities and having interactive sessions with the faculty members and students on culture and folk literature.

Das, Kamala

Kamala Das, a revolutionary in her own right, is popular for both her poetry and short stories. Kamala Das's literary journey began when she was just a teenager. Her debut collection of poems, *Summer in Calcutta* published in 1965, immediately caught the attention of readers and critics alike. In her other works she has utilized her mother-tongue Malyalam under the pen-name Madhavikutty. Her poems such as 'My Grandmother's House' explore childhood, nostalgia and memories. Das, through her poetry and prose, encouraged young readers to fearlessly pave the way for a more inclusive and empathetic world.

Dasgupta, Mary Ann

Mary Ann Dasgupta has been a teacher from nursery to college level, Principal of several schools, writer, art collector, actress and social worker. She came to India from the United States in 1963. Her M.Ed. degree is from the University of Calcutta. She has written three books of poems and edited poetry anthologies. Her collection of poems, such as *The Peacock Smiles* serves as an inspiration for young readers, encouraging them to explore the rich tapestry of language and culture through poetry. The themes of her poems focus on the elements of nature and how they influence our thoughts and lives. She has published books such as *Low-cost, No-cost Teaching Aids* for teachers. She is also the author of several series of English textbooks as well as storybooks. She has acted in Bengali films and T.V. serials. She is the Managing Trustee of Sharehouse Charitable Foundation which supports the education of needy students.

Deshpande, Shashi

Shashi Deshpande an eminent Indian novelist, well-known as a short story writer, has several volumes of her short stories in print. She was awarded the Padma Shri 2009. Celebrated for her contemporary fiction, her works have been translated in various regional languages of India and have also been adapted to the big screen. She has also authored four books for young adults—*A Summer Adventure*, *The Hidden Treasure*, *The Only Witness* and *The Narayanpur Incident*, and six novels, of which *The Dark Holds No*

Terrors and *That Long Silence* won the Sahitya Akademi award in 2009, are the best known among many of her works. Her novel *Shadow Play* was qualified for The Hindu Literary Prize in 2014.

Dharamrajan, Geeta

Geeta Dharmarajan has significantly contributed in the field of arts and education. She was awarded the prestigious national award, the Padma Shri by the Government of India in 2012. She is a prolific writer, editor, educator and the Executive Director of Katha, a non-profit organisation that she founded in 1988. Her work focuses on education, especially of children from poor families. She regularly contributes to newspapers and magazines. She conceived of and edited a children's magazine called *Tamasha*. She was earlier one of the editors of *Target*, a magazine for children, and *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, the magazine of the Ivy League University of Pennsylvania. She is a prolific writer who has over 18 books and 400 published pieces to her credit.

Dhar, Payal

Payal Dhar (she/they) writes books for middle-grade and young-adult readers. She is a freelance journalist enraptured by society, science and technology, explores the relation between these three and writes wonderful tales about AI, robotics, space, and other shiny new technologies to regale the hearts of young readers. While working in the journalism sector she has also dabbled in content development as well as web development. Apart from fiction she also writes on sports and IT issues. She has written four books: *A Shadow in Eternity*, *The Key of Chaos*, *The Timeless Land* and *Satin – A Stitch in Time*, along with many short stories and numerous articles on technology, books and other subjects.

Dutt, Toru

Toru Dutt hailed from a culturally rich and progressive Bengali family. Toru Dutt was a remarkable Indian writer whose literary contributions left a profound mark on the landscape of Indian literature during the 19th century. One of Dutt's most incredible qualities was her proficiency in multiple languages. In 1876 she published a book of French poetry, translated in English titled *Sita*,

A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields which is one her most celebrated works as a linguist. Her writings, primarily in English and French, reflected her deep appreciation for Indian culture and her mastery of European literary traditions.

Hasan, Anjum

Anjum Hasan's latest novel is *History's Angel*. She is the author of the fiction titles, *The Cosmopolitans; Neti, Neti; Lunatic in my Head*, and *Difficult Pleasures* which have been shortlisted for the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Hindu Literary Prize, and the Crossword Fiction Award. *A Day in the Life* won the Valley of Words Fiction Award 2019. She has also published a book of poems called *Street on the Hill*. She has been a Homi Bhabha Fellow, a Charles Wallace Writer-in-Residence, and is currently a New India Foundation Fellow. Her essays, short stories and poems are widely published including in *New York Review of Books*, *Granta*, *The Paris Review*, *Baffler*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Wasafiri*, *Asia Literary Review*, and *Caravan*. She is the co-editor of the recent anthology *Future Library: Contemporary Indian Writing*.

Kannan, Lakshmi

Lakshmi Kannan is a bilingual writer in English and Tamil and uses the pen-name 'Kaaveri' for her writings in Tamil. A poet, novelist, short story writer and critic, she has published twenty-eight books till date that include translations. *Guilt Trip and Other Stories* (Niyogi Books, 2023) is her latest collection of short fiction written originally in English. Her debut novel in English, *The Glass Bead Curtain* (Vitasta, 2020, 2015) is a historical fiction based on Madras Presidency during British Rule. It addresses child marriage, education for the girl child. Her five poetry collections in English include *Unquiet Waters* with *In That Sense You Touched it* by Ketaki Kushari Dyson (2012, 2005), edited by Keki N. Daruwala for Sahitya Akademi's Golden Jubilee Celebrations, and *Sipping the Jasmine Moon* (Authors Press, 2019) with an introduction by the late Jayanta Mahapatra. As 'Kaaveri', she has four collections of short fiction and a novel *Aathukku Poganam* that was recently published in its 4th imprint in 2023.

Lakshmi was a Resident Writer for the International Writing

Program, Iowa, USA; Charles Wallace Writer with the University of Kent at Canterbury, UK; Fellow, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, and Resident Writer, Sahitya Akademi, Delhi.

Kumar, Sukrita Paul

Sukrita Paul Kumar is a poet, critic and an academician. She held the prestigious Aruna Asaf Ali Chair at the University of Delhi. Her latest collections of poems are *Salt & Pepper*, *Vanishing Words* and *Dream Catcher*. She has authored many books, including *The New Story*, *Conversations on Modernism*, *Narrating Partition* and *Man, Woman and Androgyny*. A recipient of a number of prestigious grants and fellowships, she has been invited for several residencies as a creative writer. An Honorary Fellow of Cambridge Seminars, Fellow of the International Writing Program, University of Iowa (2002), as also of Hong Kong Baptist University (2004), she has been on the jury for many literary awards. She is a former Fellow of Indian Institute of Advanced Study and supervises research projects at doctoral as well as post-doctoral levels. Currently she is co-editor of the series, “Writer in Context”, being published by Routledge UK. She is Guest editor for *Indian Literature* at Sahitya Akademi. Her special academic interests are: World Literature, Partition Literature, Gender Studies, Translation.

Marwah, Anuradha

Anuradha Marwah is the author of four novels—*The Higher Education of Geetika Mehendiratta* (1992, 2022), *Idol Love* (1999) *Dirty Picture* (2007) and *Aunties of Vasant Kunj* (forthcoming) and five plays. Her published novels are part of courses in American and Indian Universities. Her short story entitled ‘Womanscape in Tis Hazari’ is part of the ICSE text book *Treasure Chest* for classes IX & X. Her plays have had several public performances and *Ismat’s Love Stories*—a play about the literary association between Saadat Hasan Manto and Ismat Chughtai—was shortlisted for the Hindu Playwright Award 2016. In 2019 she directed *Medea* (Hindustani) that had fifteen successful performances and was selected for India’s first community-curated theatre festival at Shadipur. She has co-authored the textbooks on creative writing prescribed in

Delhi University and in the CBSE, and has published several academic papers. Her most recent publication of note is 'Raging in Delhi and Rajasthan: Post-show Audience Discussion of *Medea* in the *New Theatre Quarterly*, London: CUP. She is recipient of the Charles Wallace Writer's Residency (2001) to three universities in the UK and Fulbright-Nehru Academic and Professional Excellence (FNAPE) fellowship to the University of Minnesota—Twin Cities (2017).

Murty, Sudha

Sudha Murty is a well-known writer, educator, and social worker. She was awarded the Padma Shri, the fourth highest civilian award in India, for social work by the Government of India in 2006. Later in 2023, she was awarded the Padma Bhushan, the third highest civilian award in India. She qualified as an engineer and was also the first woman engineer to be selected in Telco. Today she is known for her philanthropic work through the Infosys Foundation. In 1996, Sudha Murty founded a Public Charitable Trust. She has a vision of a library for each school and has so far set up 70,000 libraries. Her organization has so far built 16,000 public toilets. She has also initiated a move to provide all government schools in Karnataka with computer and library facilities. She writes for adults as well as for children. Prominent works include her collection *How I Taught my Grandmother to Read and Other Stories* as well as her novels *Wise and Otherwise* and *Dollar Sose (Dollar daughter-in-law)*. The latter was originally written in Kannada and was translated into English as *Dollar Bahu* and adapted as a television serial in 2001.

Naidu, Sarojini

Sarojini Naidu was a writer, poet, political activist, and freedom fighter who made significant contributions to both literature and the struggle for India's independence. Naidu employed British Romanticism in her lyric poetry to make a vivid picture appear in the minds of her readers. Her imagery of Indian society, topography and nature earned her the title of 'Indian Yeats'. Her work represents the beauty and sublimity of India therefore, she was also called

Bharat Kokila or the 'Nightingale of India'. Sarojini Naidu was a prolific poet whose volumes of poetry include *The Golden Threshold*, *The Bird of Time*, and her collected poems published as *The Sceptred Flute* and *The Feather of the Dawn*.

Nair, Rukmini Bhaya

Rukmini Bhaya Nair is Honorary Professor of Linguistics and English at the India Institute of Technology Delhi (IITD) and Global Professorial Fellow in the Department of Language, Linguistics and Film at Queen Mary University of London (QMUL). She received her Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge and was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Antwerp for her contributions to narrative theory. Author of 10 books and around 200 articles, her academic books include the following three: *Lying on the Postcolonial Couch: The Idea of Indifference; Narrative Gravity: Conversation, Cognition, Culture and Poetry in a Time of Terror* (Oxford University Press, 2002, 2003, 2009). Her most recent book is the reference volume (co-edited with Peter de Souza) *Keywords for India: A Conceptual Lexicon for the 21st Century* (Bloomsbury Academic, UK, 2020). In addition, she is an award-winning poet who has published three volumes of poetry with Penguin (*The Hyoid Bone*, *The Ayodhya Cantos* and *Yellow Hibiscus*). *The Oxford Companion to Modern Poetry* (2015) writes that her work "widely admired... for its postmodern approach to lyrical meaning and feminine identity". Her writings, creative and critical, have been included on the syllabi of Chicago, Delhi, Harvard, Kent, Toronto and other universities.

Nehemiah , Asha

Asha Nehemiah writes books with the idea of helping children fall in love with books and reading. Her books feature characters who make you smile getting into hilarious and wacky adventures. She has written for children ages 3 years to 12 years and her published work spans picture books, early literacy books, books for emerging readers, chapter books, middle-grade fiction and short stories. Her stories have won not just the hearts of many young readers of the country but also multiple awards and honours including Best in Indian Children's Writing (BICW) Contemporary Award as well as Parag Honour List 2022 (English). Her short stories and articles have

appeared in children's magazines and the children's supplements of newspapers like *The Hindu's Young World* and *Deccan Herald's Open Sesame*. *Sir Lawley's Ghost and other stories* (2004) was her first published book. *Rajah's Moustache* (2005) and *Mystery of the Secret Hair Oil Formula* (2006) followed soon after.

Her books are well loved by children, parents and educators for their exciting plots and zany humour. Her fiction also incorporates issues such as the need for inclusion, diversity and gender parity.

Patil, Amruta

Amruta Patil is a graphic novelist and creative writer. She was awarded by the Ministry of Women and Child Development *Nari Shakti Puraskar* in March 2017, by the President of India for 'unusual work that breaks boundaries' in art and literature. Amruta has a Masters in Fine Arts from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. She uses a combination of acrylics, watercolours, charcoal drawings and collages. Patil is the author of four graphic novels, *Kari* (2008), the *Parva* duology which includes *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* (2012) and *Sauptik: Blood and Flower* (2016), and *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest* (2019). She also co-edits *Mindfields*, a quarterly journal about alternative ideas for education in India.

Rao, Chatura

Chatura Rao is a children and adult fiction author and a journalist. She graduated in English Literature from Sophia College for Women in Mumbai and completed a Design in Education master's degree from the Srishti-Manipal Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Bangalore. She is a visiting faculty at the latter. Her journalistic writing centres around community practices and gender, and has won regional and national awards for gender-sensitive reporting. Her children's picture book, *Gone Grandmother*, won a Hindu Young World-Goodbooks award in 2017. Her *The Sweet Shop Wars* was shortlisted for a Neev Book Award, 2023. She enjoys writing stories for alternative education spaces, for children from pastoral, tribal, and artisan communities. She develops these through research and co-creation with community members. Chatura has served as the Festival Director of the Chandigarh Children's Literature Festival since 2014.

Rao, Mani

Mani Rao is the author of eleven poetry books and three books in translation including *Bhagavad Gita*, *Kalidasa*, and *Saundarya Lahari*. After studying literature in the early 80's in Chennai, she worked for two decades in advertising and television in Mumbai and Hong Kong, and then returned to higher studies—an MFA from UNLV, USA, and a PhD in Religious Studies from Duke University, USA. Her research into *mantra* experience is now an academic book: *Living Mantra: Mantra, Deities and Visionary Experience* (Cham Springer, 2019). She has held writing residencies including at the *Iowa International Writing Program*, taught creative writing in the USA, and served on the jury of several national and international literary awards.

Singh, Savita

Savita Singh is a distinguished poet and Creative Critical Theorist. She writes in Hindi and English. She has published four collections of poetry in Hindi. Her work is translated into many languages of the world including French, German and Spanish and English. She has won many awards for poetry including Hindi Academy Award, The Raza Foundation Award, Mahadevi Verma Award, Eunice de Souza Award and Kedar Samman. Her bilingual collection of poems (Hindi and English) with Sukrita Paul Kumar entitled *Rowing Together* appeared in 2008 and also the other bilingual collection (French and Hindi) *je suis la maison des`etoiles* in 2008. A poetry collection of seven women poets of five continents, *Seven Leaves, One Autumn*, appeared in 2010, and a collection of *Fifty Representative Poems* for the New Century. She has also published her short stories of which *Alas! Lebanon*, in particular, received critical notice. Currently she is working on her collection of short stories and three manuscripts of meditative and explorative prose.

She teaches at the School of Gender and Development Studies, IGNOU. Singh's literary journey reminds us of the power of words to illuminate the human experience. Her poetry and stories encourage young readers to engage with literature as a means of self-reflection and empathy.

Shroff, Beheroze F.

Beheroze F. Shroff is a documentary filmmaker from Bombay who teaches Asian American studies at the University of California, Irvine. Shroff has made several films that range from issues of diaspora to issues of gender. Shroff's most recent work, *We're Indian and African: Voices of the Sidis* and *Voices of the Sidis: Ancestral Links*, focuses on the African presence in India, which goes back to the thirteenth century. Her documentaries have been shown at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, the Max Planck Institute in Germany, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, in New York, and at the Nairobi and Zanzibar International Arts and Music Festivals, among others.

Subramaniam, Arundhati

Arundhati Subramaniam is a leading Indian poet and author of thirteen books of poetry and prose, most recent publication is *Love Without a Story* (2019). She has been widely anthologized and translated into several languages, including Hindi, Tamil, Italian, German, Spanish, French and Romanian. Shortlisted for the TS Eliot Prize 2015, she is the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award 2020, the inaugural Khushwant Singh Prize, the Raza Award for Poetry, the Il Ceppo Award in Italy, the Mystic Kalinga Award, the Zee Women's Award for Literature, and the Homi Bhabha and Charles Wallace fellowships, among others. She has been described as 'one of the finest poets writing in India today' (The Hindu, 2010), and as 'a unique poet of our times... in a league all by herself' (Indian Literature, 2021). Recent books include a book of essays and poems, *Women Who Wear Only Themselves*, and an acclaimed *Penguin Anthology of Indian Sacred Poetry*. She has worked over the years as critic and performing arts curator, and was poetry editor of the India domain of the Poetry International Web, an online journal grew into a significant archive of contemporary Indian poetry.

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