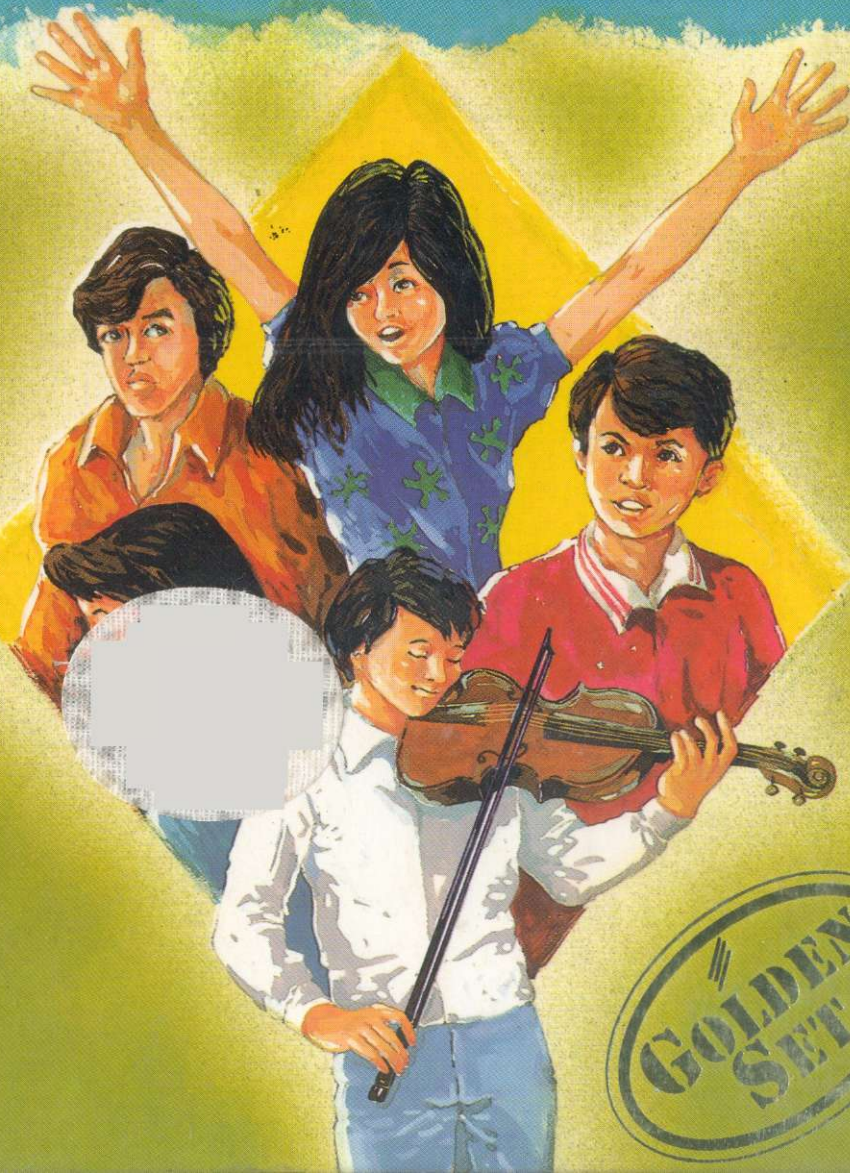




A CBT PUBLICATION

# TEENAGE STORIES







# TEENAGE STORIES

Illustrated by  
Ajanta Guhathakurta



**Children's Book Trust, New Delhi**

**The stories are prizewinning entries in the  
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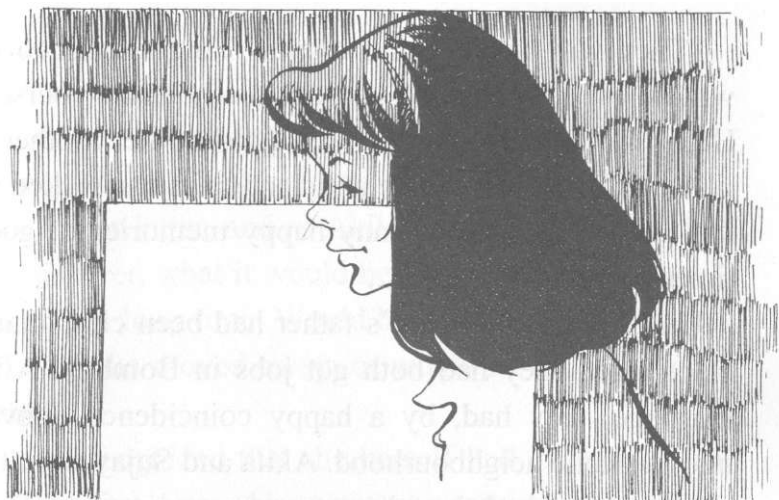
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## **A Spot of Bother**

*Santhini Govindan*

Akila's mother broke the news over breakfast. "We are going to have some guests staying with us during the Diwali holidays," she announced brightly. "And, Akila, guess who they are?"

"Mmm," murmured Akila munching her toast absent-mindedly, as she craned her neck to see the back page of her father's newspaper. She wondered which of their many aunts, uncles, or cousins were descending on them this time.

"It is Uncle Arun and Auntie Brinda from Houston," said her mother. After a dramatic pause, she added, "Sujay is coming with them too! Just think how nice it will be for you to see your old friend after all this time..."

Akila sat bolt upright in her chair, and her eyes shone with excitement. "When are they expected?" she asked, completely aroused from her morning lethargy.

"They will be here in a month! Your examinations will be over by then, so you can really enjoy yourself. Here is Aunt Brinda's letter," finished her mother.

Akila smiled happily in anticipation as she picked up the letter. She had so many happy memories of good times shared with Sujay...

Uncle Aran and Akila's father had been class-mates in college. They had both got jobs in Bombay. After marriage, they had, by a happy coincidence, moved into the same neighbourhood. Akila and Sujay were the same age, and had shared many common interests. They loved outdoor sports and animals, and had often gone swimming and played tennis together. Both of them had desperately wanted to keep pets at home, but had had little luck in coaxing their reluctant parents to agree. The hopeful pair had never given up, and had, over the years, tried several times to adopt a stray cat, a mongrel puppy, or a wounded bird that they found on the streets. They had shared homework assignments, comic books, and stickers, and had enjoyed each other's birthday parties too. They had argued and fought, sometimes rather violently; yet they had remained the best of friends.

Then, when Akila and Sujay were about eleven years old, Uncle Aran had got the chance to migrate to the United States. Akila remembered how utterly surprised and disbelieving she had been when Sujay had broken the news to her. Things had moved fast, and within six months Sujay and his family had moved away to Houston. That had been five years ago. The families



had kept in touch, of course, through letters and the occasional card at Christmas, but it was just not the same as being neighbours.

Aunty Brinda had not written many details about Sujay in her letter, and as Akila folded it thoughtfully, she wondered what it would be like to meet him again after such a long time. Would he still like the things he did before he moved away, or would he be a changed person?

Akila recognized that she herself had changed a lot in the last five years. Along with the comics and stickers, she had outgrown her pigtails and braces, and she was now an aspiring journalist. She still loved animals, and worked part-time at an animal shelter. Whereas she had once been a tomboy, careless of her appearance, she was now very careful to turn out smartly, and be well groomed. And now, more than ever, she wanted so much to make a good impression on her old friend...

During the next fortnight, Akila was busy studying. She planned to get her hair cut, and to shop for some new clothes as soon as the examinations were over.

On the last day of her examinations, when she looked into the mirror, she found that a pimple had erupted on her nose. It was not a big pimple, as far as pimples go. In fact, it was just a small, faintly visible dot, but Akila who had never had a pimple in her life, was aghast! This had not been on her agenda!

She stared at it despondently, and then washed her face several times, working up a rich lather with the soap each time. But alas! This harsh scrubbing did the



pimple no good. Instead of being 'cleaned out', as Akila had naively hoped, it became redder and more noticeable. During the day, the pimple was never far from her mind. Even when she was writing her examination, Akila's fingers strayed to the pimple several times. She rubbed it gingerly, and by evening, she found that it had swollen in size. It was a large, angry red pustule, and was very evident indeed!

An anxious Akila consulted several knowledgeable friends about the pimple, and had been offered lots of advice on how to get rid of it, using home remedies! Toothpaste, *besan*, turmeric powder—these were some of the 'magic' solutions she had been told to apply lavishly on the pimple! Though Akila faithfully smeared large amounts of these pastes on it, there was no improvement. In fact, the pimple seemed to feed on the potions. It grew and spawned a cluster of tiny pimples that were scattered all over Akila's nose.

Akila looked at this new crop of pimples in utter horror and disbelief. One pimple had been bad, but this was an unmitigated disaster! Akila was convinced that she looked frightful and unattractive, and she was very upset. It was depressing that this had to happen, especially when she wanted so desperately to look her best for her friend who was visiting. She was unenthusiastic about getting her hair done, or shopping for new clothes. When her mother found her moping around the house with a woebegone expression, she gave her a pep talk.

"Pimples are not the end of the world," she said

fit firmly. "No one even notices them! Don't get so worked up, Akila. Cheer up! A few pimples don't change the way you look!"

It was no use. Akila could not get the pimples off her mind. They dominated her thoughts at every waking hour. She spent hours staring at them in the mirror. When she went out, she was terribly self-conscious, and felt that everyone was staring at her. Finally, in despair, her mother took her to a dermatologist.

The doctor listened sympathetically when the problem was explained to him, and examined Akila's pimply nose gravely.

"Akila is over reacting," said her mother angrily. "This is not a medical problem, but I thought it best to bring her along to you so that you can give her some sensible advice!"

The doctor smiled at Akila's expression of misery.

"Yours is a common problem," he said. "Acne is part of growing up! And yours is a mild case..."

"You call this mild?" spluttered Akila, rubbing her nose hard.

"Aaah! There is the main cause of your problem," said the doctor promptly. "Don't touch the pimples! It infects them, and makes them worse! I am going to give you a strict regime to follow! Drink lots of water. Eat green, leafy vegetables, and fruit. Cut out the fried stuff, and sweets..."

Akila groaned. She loved *samosas* and potato chips, and spicy *chaat*, but she was ready to give them up if it meant getting rid of the pimples.

"I am also giving you an acne cream," said the doctor. "Apply it on your face every night before you go to bed..."

"And when will my pimples vanish?" asked Akila artlessly. "It can't take more than a week! You see, we are getting guests..."

The doctor chuckled. "Let us wait and see..." he said. "And don't worry! Worry makes pimples increase...!"

For the next week, Akila followed the doctor's instructions faithfully. She ate raw salads and spinach when her friends were feasting on Coke; applied the cream regularly, and did not touch her face once! She tried not to worry about her pimples too, but this was the most difficult of the doctor's instructions to follow. The thought of meeting Sujay soon was filling her with excitement, and she worried that her pimples would mar the occasion.

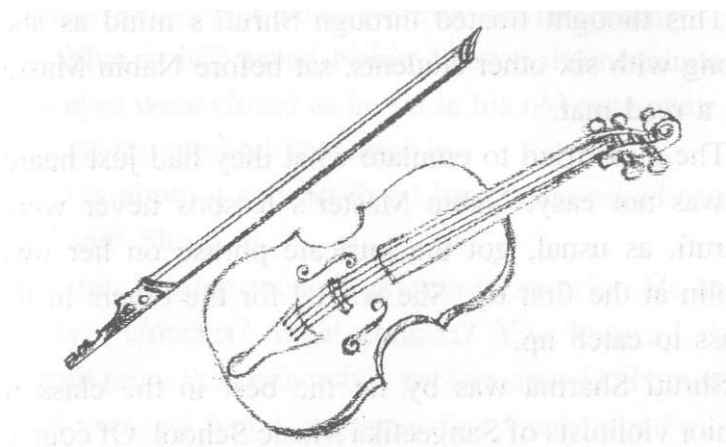
The week fairly flew by, and there were just a couple of days left before the guests arrived. The spots on Akila's face, despite the stiff regime, were very much there. And Akila had to face up stoically to the fact that they were going to be there when Sujay arrived!

Finally, the big day arrived. Akila was going to the airport with her father to meet their guests. She dressed up meticulously, and made up her face carefully, trying to camouflage her pimples as best as she could. A final look in the mirror reassured her that she did not look so bad after all...

At the airport, Akila immediately recognized the familiar figures of Uncle Arun and Aunt Brinda. But

the tall, broad shouldered stranger alongside them...could this possibly be Sujay? He walked straight up to his old friend and held out his hand. And as a self-conscious Akila took it, and looked into his laughing eyes, she drew in an incredulous breath. For sprinkled lavishly on his nose and cheeks, was a magnificent crop of PIMPLES!





## Twin Melodies

*Mitra Phukan*

From three in the afternoon to about eight-thirty every evening, and in the mornings on Saturdays and Sundays, the rooms of the Sangeetika Music School resounded with a variety of melodies. *Raga* after *raga* played on the sitars in one room, sarods in another, or expressed through a multitude of voices lifted in unison in a third, wafted over every nook and corner of the old building in waves of beautiful, soul-stirring sound.

On this day, Guru Nabin Sharma, the Principal of the school, was sitting on the raised wooden platform at one end of the room.

As he now played a dexterous *alankaar* in *Raga Behaag* on the violin for the class in front of him to learn, one would never have guessed that the violin was originally anything other than a local Indian instrument.

This thought floated through Shruti's mind as she, along with six other students, sat before Nabin Master on a reed mat.

The class tried to emulate what they had just heard. It was not easy. Nabin Master's lessons never were. Shruti, as usual, got the intricate phrase on her own violin at the first try. She waited for the others in the class to catch up.

Shruti Sharma was by far the best in the class of senior violinists of Sangeetika Music School". Of course, she had an advantage over the others, for she was Nabin Master's daughter.

Music was in Shruti's blood. "Melody runs in her veins," the reviewer of the *Parbatpuri Daily Clarion* had commented after one of her stage performances. From the time her father had placed a baby violin in her hands at the age of six, Shruti had taken to the instrument as a bird takes to the air. Now, just nine years later, she was already improving with a confidence that left her listeners wanting more.

'Tonight,' decided Shruti as she watched her father spinning out yet another breathtaking melody with effortless ease, 'I will tell him tonight after dinner.'

The family of three ate dinner as they listened to a rendition of *Raga Jhinjhoti* on the santoor that was being broadcast on the radio.

As Leela Devi, Shruti's mother, cleared away the stainless steel plates and *katories* from the table, Shruti took a deep breath and said, "Father, I have something to say to you. I mean...I would like to ask your



permission..." Her voice petered out uncertainly.

"What is it?" asked Nabin Master absent-mindedly. His eyes were closed as he sat in his old cane chair. He looked remote and inaccessible.

"It is about a concert that I have been asked to play in," said Shruti.

Nabin Master opened his eyes in surprise. He asked softly, "Concert? What concert? You know, I don't permit more than one public performance in six months. And you just had a concert a few weeks ago."

Shruti began to wish that she had not ventured into the whole thing.

"Well, I am waiting. What concert?"

"It is not a solo programme. I am to be part of a group," said Shruti trying to break the news as delicately as possible.

"What? An orchestra?" Nabin Master looked astonished. "But you are such an individualistic player. How will you play in a group?"

"It is a fusion group, Father. With Avinash and Peter and Iqbal and Manpreet and..." She stopped abruptly.

Fusion. In this house of *raga*, *alaap* and *taan*, the very word 'fusion' had acquired sinister overtones. Nabin Master was a person who believed in keeping the tradition of classical music as pure as possible. He looked at his daughter thunderously.

"The concert is next week," said Shruti brightly.

"And if I say no, you can't play fusion, what will you do?" asked Nabin Master. His fingers were drumming ominously on the arm of his chair.

Shruti had lain awake for many nights in the last month, wondering how she would tell her father the dreadful truth and what she would do if he forbade her.

It was Avinash, the tabla player, who had first approached her with the idea of playing in a fusion band. He himself was a percussionist in the group called 'Harmony'. They needed an instrumentalist, someone who was proficient in *ragas* and who could also blend with Peter on the keyboards.

Shruti had attended the practice sessions secretly, going straight to Manpreet's house from school, pretending to her mother that she was taking extra coaching from the Science teacher after class. She loved the creativity of playing *ragas* within the framework of a Western melody. She was enchanted when Peter's tunes on the keyboards meshed with her own *ragas* on the violin in a seamless fabric.

The concert was next week. It had taken her all this time to face her father and *guru* finally and ask him for permission. If he said no now, what would she do?

"I asked you a question," said her father. "I am waiting for a reply."

"I hope you won't say no," said Shruti in a soft voice. "The group is depending on me for the concert next week."

"You know my views on fusion, don't you? I have voiced them often enough in this house."

Indeed, Nabin Master's dislike for what he derogatorily called 'Phoo' music was no secret. He believed firmly that Indian classical music should never

mingle with other types of music. And here was his own daughter wanting to play 'fusion-wusion' in some band!

"Father," Shruti took a deep breath and continued, "I know and respect your views. But it is not what you think. It is, I mean...well, why don't you come and listen to us at practice tomorrow?"

"Practice, hah!" muttered Nabin Master. He got up and left the room angrily, leaving unresolved the question of whether Shruti could play in the band or not.

"What was that about?" asked Leela Devi. She had come into the room only in time to catch Nabin Master's uncharacteristic outburst.

Shruti told her the whole story.

"So that is what those extra classes were about!" said her mother when Shruti had finished.

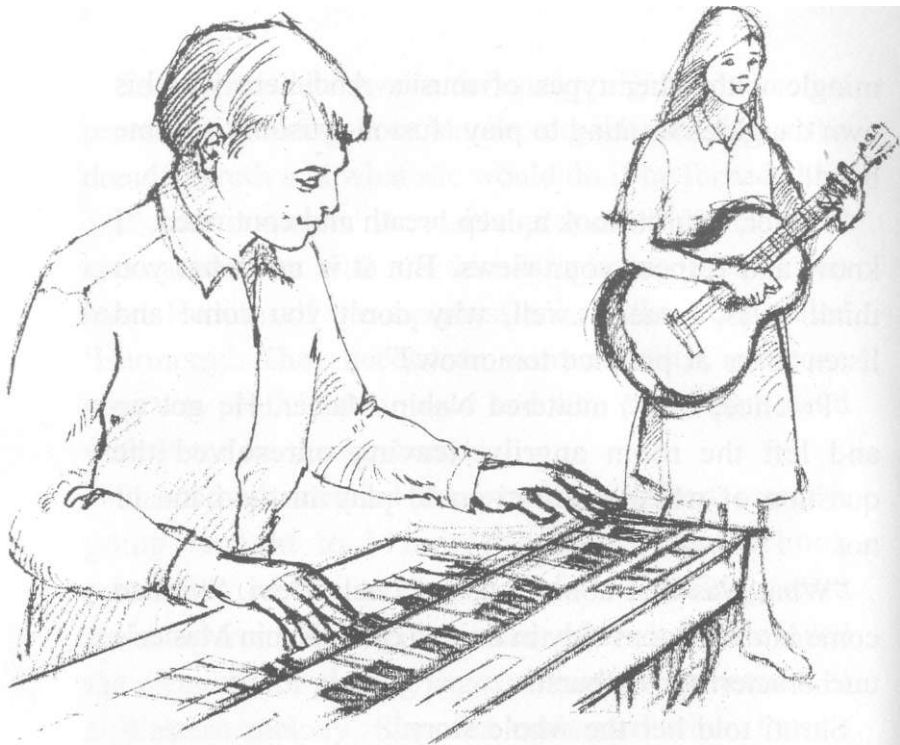
"I am sorry about the deception, Ma," said Shruti contritely. "I was afraid."

"It seems to me that you should have got your *guru's* permission before committing yourself," said Leela Devi.

"I know," said Shruti miserably, "I should have asked earlier. If I am not allowed to play, I can't think what the band will do."

Leela Devi looked at her only child. Her usually calm and pretty, brown face with its pointed chin and sensitive mouth looked harassed.

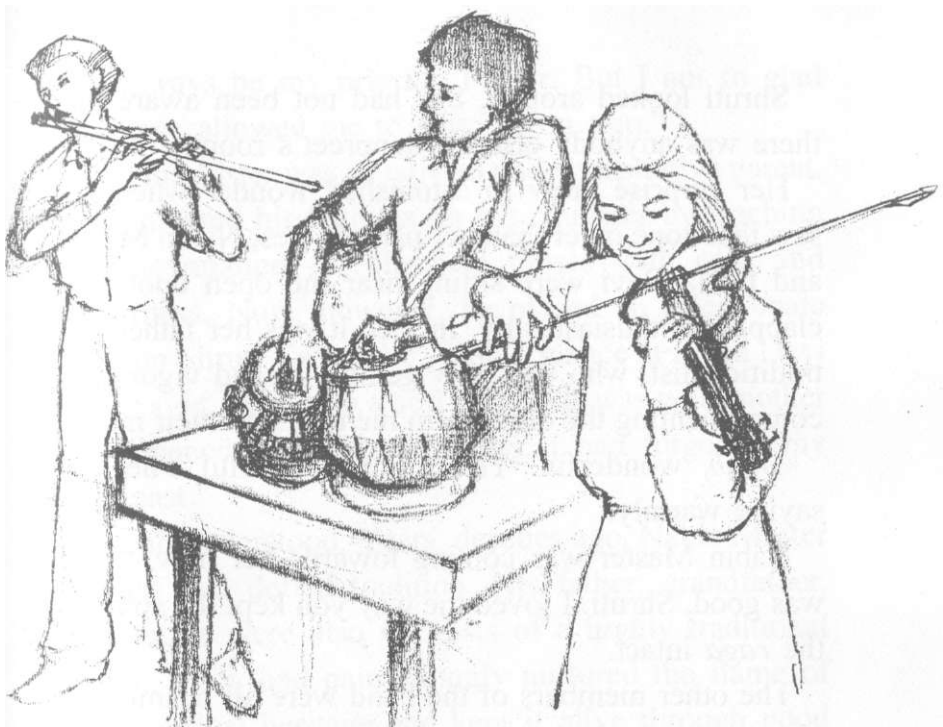
"Time to go to bed," said Leela Devi decisively. "Come on, no dawdling now!"



'I will go and tell Peter and the rest of them that I can't play with them,' thought Shruti as she dressed for school next day. She had spent the night tossing and turning in bed. She kept remembering her father's face when she had told him of her decision to play in a fusion band. He had looked angry and, Shruti realized now, hurt. She had never wanted to hurt her father. The band would have to find someone else.

The others were waiting for her at Manpreet's house.

"Well? Got permission yet?" asked Manpreet as soon as Shruti entered the room. Though Manpreet was two years older to her, Shruti had come to look on her as a dear friend. She realized now that all of them—Peter, Iqbal, Avinash, as well as Manpreet—had become much more than partners in music for her; they were her



friends. Well, she would probably lose their friendship, too.

"Tell us about it later," said Peter. Tall and well built, he was fingering the keyboards, playing a note here and a chord there. Avinash was already tuning his tablas. I will play this one last time before I tell them that I am out, Shruti decided. Something to remember the last few weeks by.

They swung into their routine, as easily as only those who have worked hard as a team together can. Shruti listened with a detached ear as she played. *Raga* and waltz moved together with liquid grace; each had its distinct musical identity.

The sound of enthusiastic applause filled the room as the group wound up.

Shruti looked around. She had not been aware that there was anybody else in Manpreet's room.

Her surprise grew to astonished wonder when she saw that none other than her parents, yes, Nabin Master and Leela Devi were sitting near the open door, and clapping enthusiastically. In fact, it was her father, the traditionalist, who was now getting up and vigorously complimenting the other team members on their music.

"*Wah*, wonderful. Yes, quite wonderful," he was saying warmly.

Nabin Master was coming towards her now. "That was good, Shruti. I loved the way you kept the spirit of the *raga* intact."

The other members of the band were all beaming in a gratified fashion. These words from Nabin Master were high praise indeed.

What had made her father change his mind? Even in the midst of her happiness, Shruti could not help being puzzled.

"Your show is sure to be a success," said Nabin Master. "It is next week, isn't it? Leela," he said, turning to Shruti's mother, "we must make sure that Shruti attends all the practice sessions." He turned to the others and said, "Why don't you come and practise in the Music School? It will be much more convenient for all of you, I think."

It was not until they were out on the street again, on their way home, that Shruti felt calm enough to speak.

"Of course, traditional performances of classical music

will always be my priority, Father. But I am so glad you have allowed me to play fusion also."

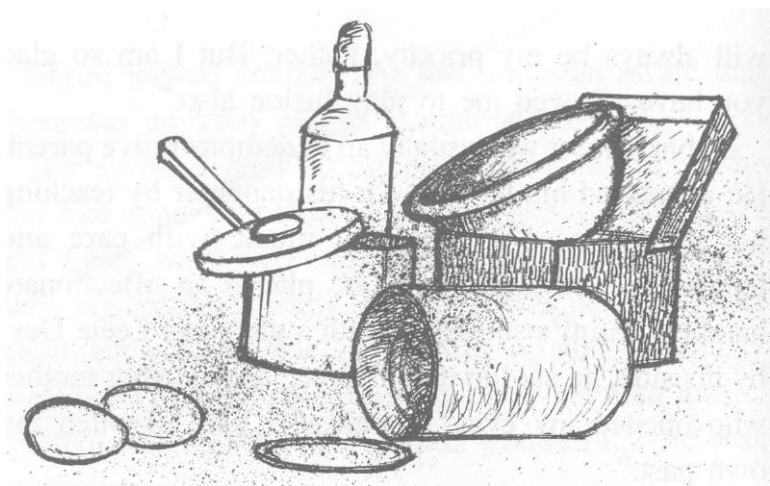
Nabin Master was usually an undemonstrative parent. He expressed his feelings for his daughter by teaching her the nuances of classical music with care and tenderness. Now, however, he placed an affectionate hand on Shruti's shoulder. With a glance at Leela Devi by his side, he said in a soft voice, "It was your mother who opened my eyes, I confess. I had forgotten my own past."

Shruti understood. Years, decades ago, Nabin Master himself had defied tradition. His father, grandfather, and uncles were also vocalists of a highly traditional school. They had painstakingly nurtured the flame of their musical heritage and kept it alive through good times as well as bad.

Nabin Master had angered his own father when, rather than cultivating his voice, he had taken up a Western instrument. At that time, decades ago, the violin had not yet been integrated and absorbed into classical Indian music. Shruti's grandfather had thought of his son's affinity to this instrument from the West as some kind of betrayal.

"I underestimated the power of our own music," said Nabin Master to his daughter. "I was afraid you would be lost to us. I realize that my fears were baseless."

Impulsively, Shruti hugged her parents. Humming the refrain of the melody that the band had just finished practising, the three of them returned home.



## Whose Work Is It?

*Devika Rangachari*

Ravi poked his head into Uma's room. "Hey, I am starving," he said. "Will you make me something to eat?"

"I am busy," said Uma promptly. "I have a maths test tomorrow and I have to slog."

"Don't be so mean! I have been playing cricket for hours. And you know Ma has gone out."

"Okay, okay. I will get you something," Uma rose resignedly from her chair and shut her mathematics textbook. At this rate, she would fail in the test! What with answering doorbells and supervising the servants and seeing to the phone calls, she had had hardly any time to study. However, she was glad that her mother was spending the day with a friend. Mother was always cooped up at home and rarely went anywhere; so a whole day out was a real treat for her.



"Don't forget to bolt the door properly," her mother had said anxiously that morning. "And have your lunch at the proper time. And..."

"Ma, I am fifteen years old," Uma had protested. "I know how to look after myself."

"I know that," Mrs. Malik smiled. "You are a very capable girl. That is why I am trusting you to look after the house the whole day." Then she frowned, "Make sure you switch off the gas cylinder. And remember to give Ravi his food and..."

"Why do I have to 'give' him his food?" demanded Uma irritably. "He is sixteen years old. Surely he is old enough to eat on his own. Why do you pamper him like this? He doesn't do any work at home and he doesn't know the first thing about cooking."

"Yes, yes," answered Mrs. Malik vaguely. "Let us not get into all that now. I have to get ready."

Uma had turned away feeling very frustrated. Her mother always ended their arguments like this. And this was an issue that Uma felt very deeply about. Theirs was an extremely close-knit family but, of late, Uma was beginning to resent the role she was expected to play in the house.

In the mornings, before she left for school, she had to help her mother prepare breakfast, make the beds and pack their tiffin boxes. Evenings were divided between studying and housework. When vegetables or provisions were needed or other errands had to be run, it was always Uma who was on call. Though she liked sharing the household responsibilities with her mother,

it upset Uma to see Ravi lounging about the house, expecting all his work to be done for him.

"Why can't Ravi make his bed in the morning?" she would ask her mother. "Why can't he fold and iron his own clothes?"

Mrs. Malik who had her own views on a girl's role in the house, never tried to involve Ravi in any domestic work. It seemed to Uma that the situation had worsened after her father's death, two years ago. Uma had assumed more and more responsibilities and her mother greatly appreciated this.

"I don't know what I would do without Uma," she would tell her friends. "She virtually runs the house and is such a help to me." Ravi had remained the same—keeping to his usual lazy hours and being totally absorbed in his own interests.

Uma prepared sandwiches for Ravi and took them to his room. "Why can't you learn to make this?" she asked. "All you have to do is to apply butter or jam on bread. What is difficult about that?"

"Of course, I can do it," said Ravi airily. "But all this is woman's work. I am not going to waste my time messing about in the kitchen."

Anger welled up in Uma. "Oh, you think I have plenty of time to waste, do you?" she cried. "I have a test tomorrow, and I have spent fifteen minutes making this for you to eat and..."

"Don't talk to me so rudely!" retorted Ravi. "I am your elder brother, remember? You better treat me with respect. It is your duty to serve me."

Uma flounced out of the room, tears welling in her eyes. Ravi had not even thanked her for the sandwiches. Then she shook her head fiercely and dried her tears. She should not spoil her test for such a petty quarrel! After all, this was not the first argument she had had with her brother on the subject.

A week later, Uma was chosen for the leading part in a play, 'Music and Magic', to be staged by her school. It was the role of a girl who gets involved in magical adventures while walking out in the rain one day. Uma was tremendously excited about it.

"Can you stay back after school today?" asked the drama teacher, Mrs. Srinivasan. "I know it is short notice but I will arrange for your lunch while I try you out in your roles. We barely have a fortnight before the play is staged, you know. I will take you to the office now and you can phone home and ask your parents."

Uma hesitated. Her mother was to spend the day with a friend at the hospital, and she had told Uma to look after Ravi. What was she to do? Then she made up her mind. It was high time Ravi learnt to manage things on his own. Therefore she conveyed the message to him on the phone and replaced the receiver before he could respond.

"What about lunch?" Ravi yelled into the receiver, but the dial tone greeted him. He rushed to the kitchen and tried to forage for food. There was some rice soaked in water in a dish, and several empty vessels alongside. Uma had meant to return home and cook a simple meal but that was not to be now. Ravi investigated the

contents of the refrigerator but there was nothing there except two bowls of curds and several raw vegetables. There was no bread or butter. Uma had meant to buy them that evening.

Ravi tried to fight down his rising panic. Hunger pangs gnawed at his stomach and he stared despairingly into space. What was one to do with soaked rice? He fingered the two eggs he had found in the refrigerator. Was an omelette made just by breaking them? Or did one cook them whole? He decided not to venture on either course.

He longed for a cup of tea to stave off his hunger for a while. After some effort he found the tea leaves, some milk and the sugar, but wondered how they mixed to make tea. In desperation, he chewed a few grains of the soaked rice but spat them out hurriedly. He had never tasted anything so dreadful! He felt quite weak with hunger as he sank down on the sofa. It was too bad of Uma to leave him in the lurch like this! He would complain to his mother and...He jumped up suddenly remembering the market. His enthusiasm evaporated as he realized he had no money.

It was 5 p.m. when Uma returned home. Letting herself in with her key, she was surprised to see Ravi lying on the sofa.

"Hey, why aren't you playing cricket?" she said cheerfully. "All your friends are outside."

A groan answered her from the sofa. "Uma," said the prone figure in a hollow tone. "I am dying. Get me something to eat, please..."



Uma stifled her laughter at the sight of her robust brother being so dramatic, but she ran obligingly to the kitchen. Twenty minutes later Ravi was tucking away into a plate full of omelette, fresh salad and a quickly rustled-up potato curry. Afterwards he sat back, feeling normal once again.

"You are a lifesaver," he said. "Thanks a lot."

"You are welcome," Uma smiled at him as he rose from the sofa. "Going for cricket?"

"No," said Ravi firmly. "I am going to the kitchen and you are going to show me how to make stuff."

Mrs. Malik found her children busy preparing the night's meal when she returned an hour later.

"Ravi!" she exclaimed at the extraordinary sight of her son chopping cabbage in an enthusiastic fashion. "What are you doing? What...?"

Ravi turned'around. "Ma, I am learning to cook. If I had known this earlier, then I wouldn't have nearly died today!"

"But..." began Mrs. Malik.

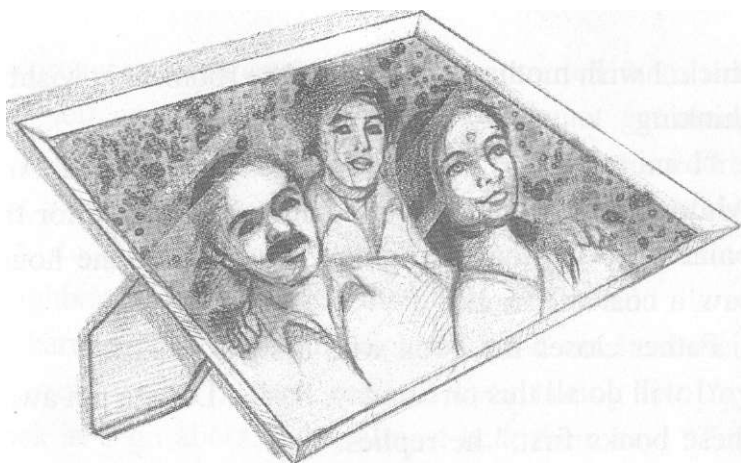
"No, Ma," said Ravi firmly and told her about his dreadful experience that day. "I have made up my mind," he said. "I need to know enough to survive at least. After all, you and Uma can't be my nursemaids forever. Right, Uma?"

Mrs. Malik shrugged her shoulders and smiled. What the boy said did make sense!

"I think you are right," she said slowly.

Uma pressed Ravi's hand and winked at him.

"Of course, he is right," she said.



## **Love Is...**

*Thangamani*

It is peaceful in the living room. I am watching my favourite quiz show on TV. Dad is humming a tune as he sits amidst several piles of books, which he has pulled out of his bookshelf. He finds some book he likes and begins reading it with a contented sigh.

And then Mom comes in. She has the broken iron in her hand and she looks very angry.

"Can't you do anything besides reading books? I wish you would do something around the house!"

Dad does not reply. If he did, there would be a fresh tirade from mother. So he continues reading. His humming has stopped and his hand clutches the book tighter. I know that his mouth would have tightened behind the book, just as his eyes would have hardened. Siddhartha Basu is into the rapid-fire round but I cannot concentrate on the questions. I keep my eyes fixed on the screen. They are not speaking, but the tension is

thick. I wish mother would leave the room. It is wishful thinking.

"I am talking to you! Go and get this repaired. And while you are about it, why don't you arrange for the painting to be done? It is three years since the house saw a coat of paint!"

Father closes the book with a sigh.

"I will do all this on Sunday, Sarita. Let me put away these books first," he replies.

I have tensed up even without being aware of it. My shoulders are hurting with my having to hold them taut, my head is beginning to pound. Do they not have any consideration for the others living in the house? I get up and switch off the TV.

This is the open war day, I guess. There are creepier days when the pair do not talk to each other—not a word. Mom cooks and serves the food, Dad eats and sleeps. We have brilliant conversation at dinner time—they both talk to me, by turns.

"How did your test go today?" asks Dad.

Before I can reply, Mom butts in, "You know, your new hairstyle is quite good!" She tries to act as if she is so 'with it', by praising a lot of things that the teenagers do, even some of the things we find weird!

Before I can turn towards her, Dad says something else. They do not bother if I answer or not.

"Did you see how Sampras thrashed Agassi, yesterday? Super!" says Dad, totally off-track.

Those are my parents for you. They are both off-track. They put on such an act of loving me, of being



the concerned parents. Would someone tell them that all their concern is a waste if they cannot get along with each other? That I need to feel wanted and secure, not like a toy that is being pulled apart by two brats?

I do not have any friends in the immediate neighbourhood. Thank God for that, or I would die of embarrassment. Half the neighbourhood can hear their quarrels. I feel several pairs of eyes boring into my back as I go about. I can almost hear them say, "Tut, tut, poor boy!"

. . .

We were a happier family, though it seems so long ago. Mom worked in those days. I was in primary school—in the fourth standard. Then mother quit working. Oh, how I loved it! She was home when I came back from school, cooked delicious dishes, hummed tunes while she worked and looked beautiful. Father and mother sometimes went to parties with his colleagues, leaving me with my aunt.

I did not like this because Mom was always moody after returning from these parties. Soon she changed. She would often cry, and she stopped smiling and hugging us. There were no more happy dinner times when we exchanged the gossip of the day. She had a whacky sense of humour and joked around with me. Even so, these days all she did was scold or sulk.

"Rohit, do put away the newspaper after reading," Mom would scold Dad.

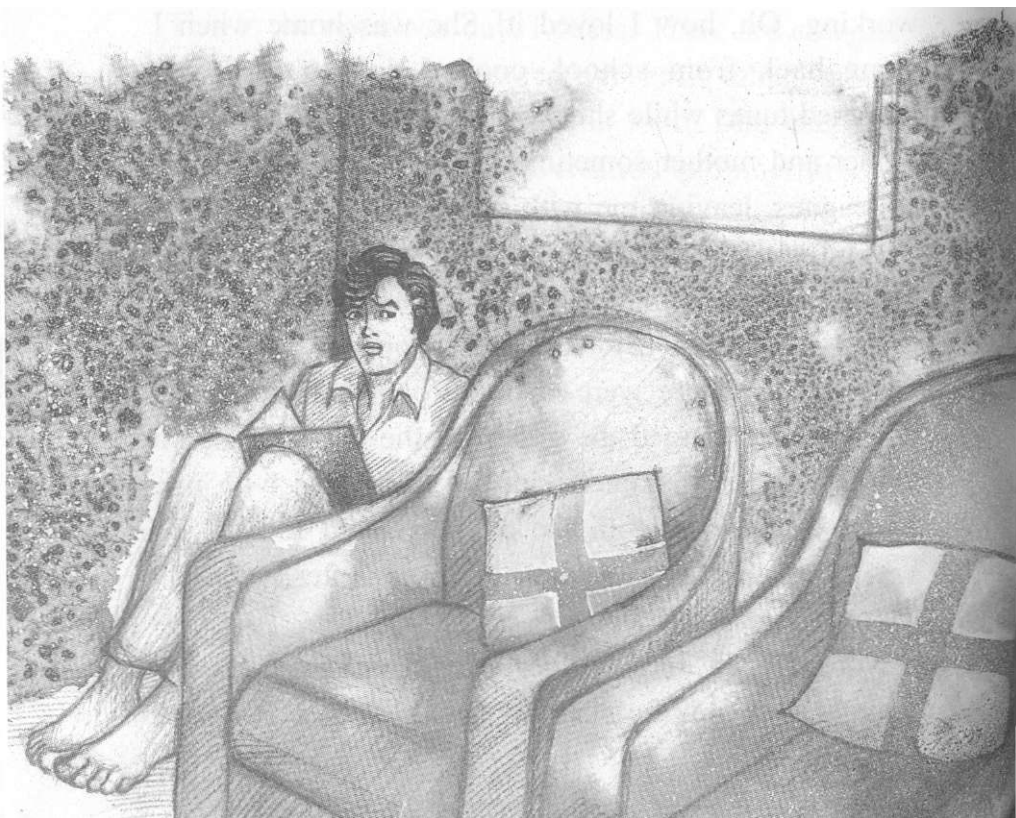
Normally, he might have done it without a second thought, but now he snapped back, "Why can't you?"

After all, you stay at home all day."

"I didn't quit working to fetch and carry for you," she would shout.

She was angry, upset and depressed. Dad grew as silent as she became loud. He often withdrew into his books. Sometimes he shouted back, and that was bad. The fights continued.

That day, I was sitting in the corner between the wall and sofa, my favourite place for reading. My parents were in the room too. Mom was watching TV and Dad was reading. Suddenly she said, "I know why you hate me! It is because I quit working and stopped bringing



all the money, like those women in your office whom you so admire!"

"Wha...? Don't be silly, Sarita! It doesn't matter a whit to me whether or not you work. It was you who wanted to spend more time with Aditya," he said. They either did not realize that I was there, or probably did but did not care.

"Oh, everything in this house is my fault! And you are a liar! I know you only love women who work!"

It went on and on till I ran to my room.

Mom came in later. Her face was puffed up with crying, but she smiled and said she was sorry for all the



ruckus. She looked so sweet and loving that I hugged her and tried to think that the scene in the living room had not taken place.

Nothing changed. I was always tense, waiting for them to start fighting any time. I grew up feeling hurt by their behaviour. I still miss their love for each other. We are a family of huggers or, at least, we used to be. I remember the way I used to go soft and funny all over, at the sight of them hugging. My heart felt full and ready to burst. And I somehow felt cherished when they hugged...

. . .

I am jerked to the present by the voices in the living room. I am sitting near the window, in the dark. I wish I could go somewhere. I feel like crying. The door creaks open. Mom comes in. "I can't take it any more!" she says. And suddenly it is all too much for me.

My lovely, sane Mom is totally transformed before my eyes. What does she expect me to do? Console her? At least can Dad not understand? Why does he fight too?

I get up with a clatter, toppling the chair. "I am sick of both of you. Here I am, preparing for my Board's and I can't have the privacy and quiet to do it. Are you both so selfish that you can't see that I am being torn into two?" The last question comes out as a sob, and I run out of the room and then out of the house. It is past 9 p.m.

I keep running, dodging people on the pavement, who are going home, or some place. Only, I have

nowhere to go to. After a long time, I realize that the roads are getting empty. Yet I run. A loose block of concrete trips me and I fall flat on my face. That does it. I sit down on the pavement and begin bawling in right earnest. Trust my parents not even to bother about calling me back. I bet they are happy to be rid of me. They and their stupid fight over a non-existent problem.

Slowly I become aware of a hand on my shoulder. It turns into a hug and I am holding on to him—my Dad. He is breathless and I realize with a shock that he must have run too, to keep up with me...

"Aditya, I am sorry. I am so sorry. Your mother is depressed. She quit working because she couldn't cope with the office and house work. She wanted to be with you. But now, since you have grown, she feels bored and lonely. And every time she sees someone working, she is reminded of her own lost career. She begins imagining that I flirt with the women at work." I have stopped sobbing; I still hold on to him. I love the stubble on his face and the smell of his cologne.

"Aditya, do you believe me when I tell you that we both love you, and that when we quarrel it is not because we hate each other? We are trying to sort out the problems. Perhaps she will take up a part-time job. Till she does, will you bear with us?" His voice breaks and there are tears in his eyes.

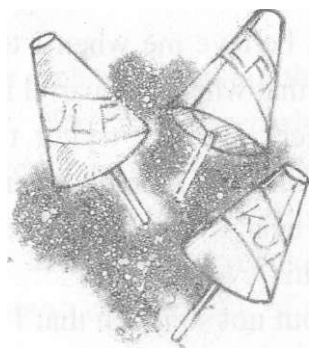
I am still upset but not so much that I cannot see that he is miserable too. And I am sure Mom is worried sick over me. And here I was thinking that they did not care about me! Who does not have problems? I wonder if I

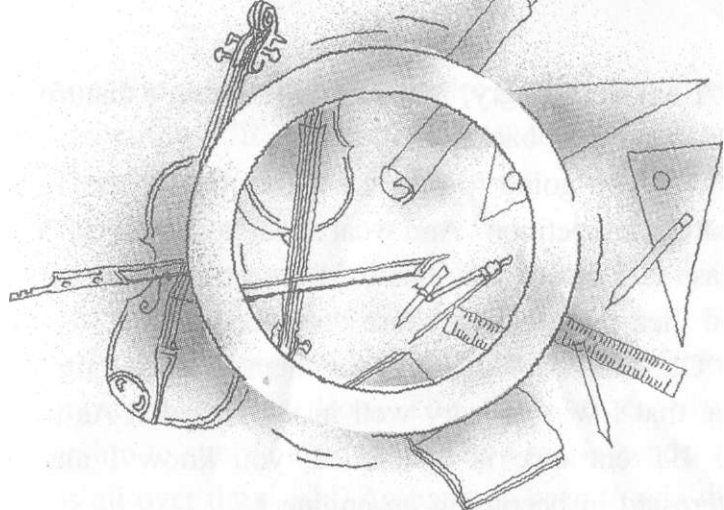
am over-reacting to everything. Will things become better? Maybe, maybe not. Things could become worse after Mom goes back to work. I do not know. I do understand that being a family means pulling together. If one of the members is down, the others have to pull for him or her too. How did I come to this brilliant realization? I do not know. All that matters is that we love and let live. You could say I got enlightenment right there on the road!

Suddenly I feel light and it must have shown on my face, because Dad hugs me tight.

"How about getting some *kulfi* Mom loves it," he says.

I jump up and pull him to his feet. We walk to the ice-cream parlour hand in hand.





## A Dilemma

*Girija Rani Asthana*

Ambar jumped down from the school bus and rushed off towards his house. "These wretched extra classes. It is already four o'clock, and at 5:30 Dad will be back from office. I have hardly an hour to practise," he muttered under his breath. "With such little practice, I should forget about participating in the competition."

He reached the house in five minutes and pressed the bell impatiently as he waited for his mother to open the door. He kept his finger on the bell and kept on pressing it until the door was opened by his mother.

"What is the big emergency? I was coming. But no, when you come home, the whole neighbourhood should know that you are back," grumbled his mother in annoyance.

For a moment Ambar thought of retorting. Then he went into his room and shut the door. "*Arre*, Ambar, *beta*, what about your lunch?" shouted his mother.

"I am not hungry, Ma, and please don't disturb me until Dad gets back, OK?"

"Are you going to practise the violin for the Talent Search Competition? And what about your studies? Your Class XII Board examinations are around the corner, and then there are all those entrance tests."

"Oh, Ma, I am studying for them. I am telling you, Ma, that I will do very well in the Board's. As far as the IIT entrance is concerned, you know I am not interested in becoming an engineer."

"Of course, Pandit Ravi Shankar wants to become a musician! You are a gone case, Ambar, and I don't want to argue with you. Let your Dad handle this with you. I am sick of trying to make peace between father and son!" said his mother, and left Ambar's room in a huff.

Ambar shut the door and took his violin out of its case. He picked up the bow and touched it to the strings affectionately...almost reverently. The small argument with his mother had not disturbed him much. He had become used to these arguments. Ambar was the only child of his parents and they had many expectations from and hopes for him. He was good at studies and his father wanted him to become an engineer like himself. They were sure that if Ambar studied hard and gave his undivided attention to his studies, he would be able to get through his entrance examinations successfully.

Ambar did not want to become an engineer. He loved music and he knew that he had a God-given talent, and that he would be successful in the field of music. His



teacher at the music school was sure that he would win the competition. "It is not every day that one sees a talent like yours," he would often say. "You should never give up music."

And Ambar never wanted to. He wanted to make it a career, if possible. Luckily for him, a big music company was interested in new talent, and was organizing a competition. The first prize was a scholarship to study music abroad in a music academy, famous all over the world. Ambar was keen to win this scholarship. He placed the music in front of him and started his practice. Soon the room was filled with melodious strains.

Suddenly a loud knock...*khat...khat...* on the door made Ambar jump. "Oh! Dad is back," he exclaimed, and put away the violin quickly and opened the door.

His father, Mr. Khanna, came in. "So this is how you are preparing for your exams," he said angrily.

"I was at school, Dad. I returned at four o'clock..."

"And since then you have been playing your violin," interrupted his father. "When are you going to study for your entrance tests? And why didn't you go for your coaching classes today?"

"Oh, Dad, it is only till this competition that I will be a bit little irregular. Once it is over, I promise I will study very hard. Just give me some more days, Dad," Ambar pleaded.

"By then you will miss the bus. Do you know how hard the others are studying? Mr. Lai's son is taking tuitions as well as going to the coaching school.

Mr. Lai was saying that his son is studying so hard that he himself has to ask him to stop sometimes. Lucky man, to have a son like that! But no, after all it is my fault that I agreed to your mother's suggestion to send you for music lessons. If you had not gone for those lessons, this music bug would have never bitten you. I warn you, if you don't mend your ways and give your full attention to your studies, I will have to stop your music lessons. And...I will lock up your violin." His father walked out of the room angrily.

Ambar shut the door and sat down at his study table with a thud. He picked up a book and flung it on the desk in frustrated anger. He picked it up again and opened it, but he could not read a word. He was so annoyed that he just could not concentrate. 'Why, oh, why...why should I become an engineer? Why can't I become a musician? If not as a career, then they should at least let me continue it as a hobby. Why does Dad hate music so much?'

Things went on like this. The date of the competition came nearer and nearer, as did the examinations. Ambar was trying his best to keep a balance between his studies as well as his preparations for the music competition. The atmosphere at home became increasingly tense with each passing day. Ambar continued with his music practice but tried hard not to neglect his studies, especially for the entrance tests. Yet, whenever he opened his test packages, his heart was never in it.

Days passed. The Board examinations came and went. Ambar's papers went well and he expected good marks.

The music competition and entrance test remained.

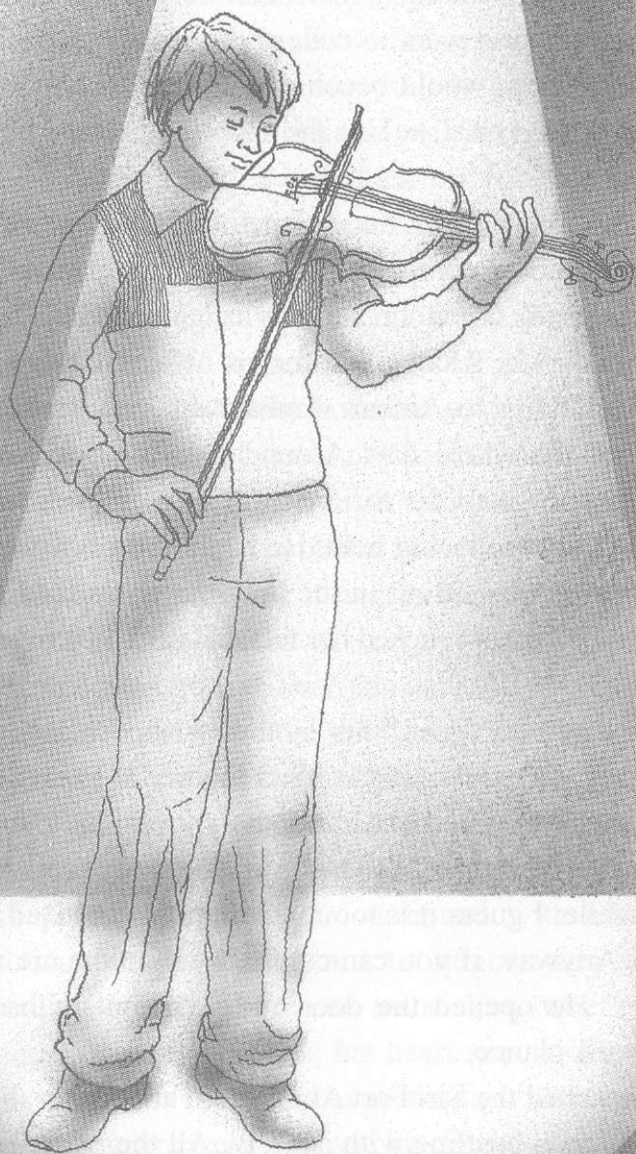
Things became worse at home. His father put a lot of pressure on Ambar to study hard for the entrance test. He knew that Ambar was not really interested in engineering; he thought that once he got through the entrance test and went to college, he would start liking it. Music, then, would become just a hobby. Although Ambar studied hard, he was the happiest when he played his violin.

At last the day of the competition arrived. A few days before the competition, Ambar had spent all his time practising the violin and this had annoyed his father very much. Mr. Khanna left for his office that morning without talking to Ambar. Ambar was very tense and practised the whole day. Around four o'clock Ambar got ready to go to the Siri Fort Auditorium, where the competition was being held. He came out of his room. His mother was sitting in the drawing room reading a magazine. Ambar touched her feet and said, "I am going, Ma."

"Best of luck, dear," his mother wished him.

Ambar waited, hoping that his mother at least would go with him. When she made no move to do so, he hesitated and said, "Ma, come if you can, even for a little while. I guess it is too much to hope that Dad will come. Anyway, if you can come, it will make me very happy." He opened the door and went out without a backward glance.

He reached the Siri Fort Auditorium about four thirty. The hall was bustling with activity. All the participants



had arrived. They were all accompanied by concerned and doting parents, who were fussing around them like mother hens. Ambar tried to ignore the hollow feeling inside his stomach and went straight to his music teacher to get some last minute tips.

At 6:00 p.m. sharp, the competition began. Participants went to the stage one by one. Ambar's turn came last as he had sent in his entry form on the last day. Heart thudding, he walked on to the stage. The Auditorium was overflowing with people. Ambar threw a glance at the audience. He was hoping against hope that he would see his parents, but it was impossible to spot anyone in that crowd. He picked up the violin, said a small prayer, and put the bow to the strings. Soon he forgot everything around him. He played.

All the noise subsided and the hall was filled with the beautiful musical notes flowing from Ambar's violin. When Ambar finished, there was absolute silence in the hall. Then, as he came out of his trance, the audience burst out cheering, and the hall vibrated with the sound of their claps. Ambar bowed to the audience and left the stage. The judges went out to prepare the results. Ambar sat quietly.

The Chairman of the Jury got up to announce the results. "Our decision was really very simple," he said. "We have decided unanimously that the first prize and the scholarship be awarded to...AMBAR KHANNA!"

Ambar could not believe his ears. He pinched himself to make sure he was not dreaming. His music teacher hugged him and said, "*Shabash, bete*, I knew you would

win the prize. You have done me proud today." Ambar was surrounded by people congratulating him.

Yet, in the midst of all the adulation and praise, Ambar missed one thing—the approval of his parents. After some time the people left, and Ambar was alone with his thoughts.

He had started gathering up his gear when he heard, "We are proud of you, dear."

Ambar quickly turned...Ma...and then he saw, standing quietly behind her...his father.

"Congratulations, son," his father said. His face was as serious as ever, but Ambar thought he saw a hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth.

They all went out of the hall. Just as they were about to leave, they were approached by the Chairman of the Jury. "Wait a minute, son," he called Ambar. "I must congratulate you on your fine performance. You play with a maturity far beyond your years. You have great talent and you will go far. It is not every day that one comes across such talent, and I am glad to be involved in helping such a musical career take shape." He patted Ambar once again and left.

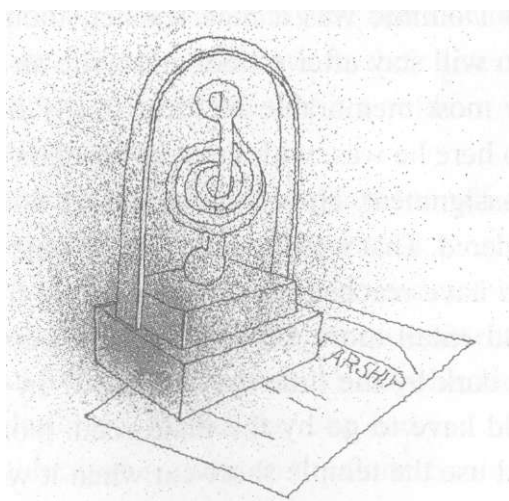
The drive back home was silent. Ambar could not stand it any longer. He felt like he had let his father down in some way. He touched his father's hand and said, "Dad, I promise, I will put in all my effort for the entrance test. I will study, if required, for twenty hours a day but I *will* get through successfully. I will not take up that scholarship. I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it. I will go to the engineering college just like

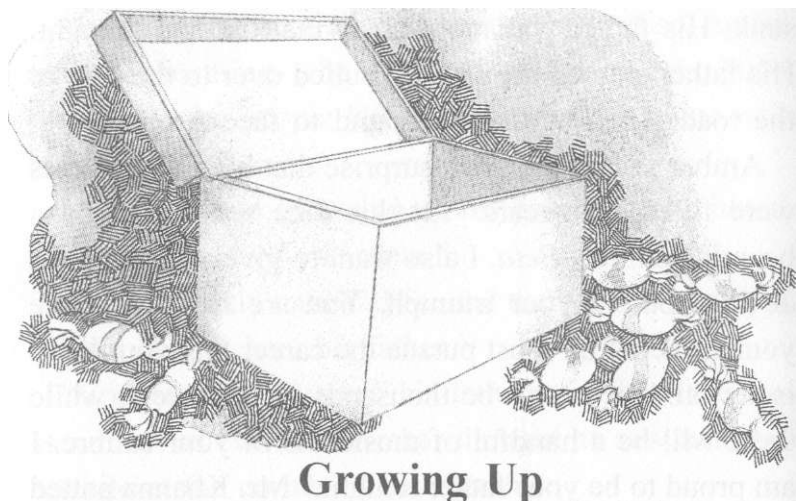
you want me to."

Ambar's father did not say anything. Ambar's heart sank. His father was more upset than he had thought. His father slowed the car and pulled over to the side of the road. Then he turned around to face Ambar.

Ambar saw to his great surprise that his father's eyes were filled with tears. Yet, his face was lit up by a beaming smile. "*Beta*, I also want to give you a present at this hour of your triumph. You are free to choose your career. You must pursue the career that your heart is set on. There will be thousands of engineers, while there will be a handful of musicians of your calibre. I am proud to be your father tonight." Mr. Khanna patted Ambar's head affectionately, while Mrs. Khanna wiped her eyes.

Ambar's cup of happiness was full. This was the real prize that he had always craved for—not the prize or the scholarship—but that his parents be proud of him.





## Growing Up

*Hema Shankarnarayan*

The day had started badly for Subbu. First of all, he was late to school. He missed the bus and had to go by an auto. Which was quite okay except that he could not collect his homework from his friend in Class V B. Miss Dominic was a nice teacher, though very strict. "You will stay after school and write an assignment on 'The most memorable incident in my life'."

So here he was, with three of his class-mates, writing the assignment. How long would an hour take, Subbu wondered. That was the time limit given to them. Would *Appa* have reached home by then? He hoped not, as it would entail more explanations and scoldings. Would it be dark by the time they finished? In that case, they would have to go by the main road. None of the boys dared use the temple short-cut when it was dark. There



was talk of ghosts and spirits. Maybe they could run fast through that stretch of road. He had better start writing; the time would pass off quicker. What could be memorable in a 12-year life? Subbu wished he was older. Then he could mention some important events in his life, as in Gandhiji's story or Nelson's. An essay on a three-legged donkey or the festivals of India would have been easier. He wished Miss Dominic had asked them to write the usual 'I will not...' 100 times. One could write them vertically or horizontally, and it would get done faster. But...memorable incidents?

Should he write about the time he had upset the ink-bottle over Kunju's books? What a fuss she had created over a few blots on her G.K. book and the Science workbook! She had cried a lot and *Appa* had beaten him. He did not mind the beating so much. What bothered him more was Kunju's repeating the story to everyone with great relish. Their older sister, Meena, had helped her complete both books afresh. However, the frequent narration of Kunju's tragedy and his villainy had made it some kind of landmark in their lives. His hands were so smudged with ink that it would not wash off for one or two days.

He could remember an earlier occasion too when his hands were smudged with ink. That was a long time ago. He was three or four. Actually he did not know whether he remembered it himself or because his mother reminisced about it from time to time. Usually his mother cooked on a platform. On that day she had run out of gas and was cooking on a stove on the floor. Subbu had

just gone and dipped his hand into some boiling dal. Meena told him that he had cried endlessly. Ink had been poured on his hands, and Meena had carried him up and down their lane trying to distract him with passing vehicles.

Meena was very kind and sympathetic, especially during times of trouble. Sometimes she made him feel very guilty. Especially if he angered *Amma*. She and *Amma* forged a kind of alliance whenever Kunju or he did something wrong. Raju, of course, would do nothing wrong; he was always the 'baby', though he was only four years younger than Subbu. Whenever Meena and *Amma* sided like that, he wondered if he and Kunju were step-children, but it did not make any sense. Step-children were older than the real children. In any case he loved *Amma* much. Knowingly, he had troubled her only once.

Some of *Appa's* friends had come over, and one of them had left behind half his coffee in the glass. Subbu filled it up with water and took it to *Amma* saying, "See, *Appa's* friend didn't drink the coffee because it was so watery." How was he to know that *Appa* would overhear this and pick a quarrel with *Amma*!

"Why don't you just say if there isn't enough milk? I know you don't like my colleagues coming home, but is this any way to treat them?" Poor *Amma*, she did not even know what had happened. Subbu had felt very bad for *Amma*. Later, he could not help telling her about the mischief he had played. *Amma* said nothing. She usually forgot things quickly, but Meena had gone

on and on accusing him of evil designs and playing the villain between his parents. Actually, he hated to see his parents quarrel. He had only wanted to tease *Amma* for not listening to his complaints earlier in the day.

*Appa* and his friends were sitting and talking in the front room. He was familiar with all of them—Gupta Uncle, Vinodbhai, Seshadri. They would ask him about his school and Gupta Uncle even gave him a ride on his scooter sometimes. Subbu played while they were talking. At one point of time, *Appa* went inside for something, and a sudden idea hit Subbu. When *Appa* returned to his chair, Subbu pulled it from behind as he was going to sit down. *Appa* fell in a funny manner and everyone had laughed. *Appa* had laughed too, and Subbu felt that everyone had thought him to be clever and amusing. How was he to know that *Appa* would be furious with him after the guests had gone?

One can never understand the ways of grown-ups. They were so inconsistent. The things you hoped they would remember, they forgot; and the things you thought they had forgotten they remembered only too well. He had then gone to *Amma* to tell her about this. In some ways she did not appear to be as grown up as *Appa* and his teachers. That day she was in no mood to listen to him, and, therefore, he had wanted to tease her by filling the half glass of coffee with water.

The thought of all these events filled Subbu with a kind of sadness. It was his fervent wish that his friends and he should never grow up and become serious like grown-ups. On the other hand, being grown-up and

independent, buying the things one wanted, going where one wished and not being punished by teachers—all these made him wish he would grow up soon.

While Subbu was lost in these meditations, the peon came along. Miss Dominic had already left and he wanted to lock the classroom. Miss Dominic had asked him to send the boys home. They should complete the assignment at home and bring it the next morning. The boys packed their bags hurriedly and ran. Subbu was happy at the thought that Meena or Kunju might help him complete his assignment.

Luckily, it was not at all dark when they walked home. Subbu reached much before *Appa* and no one seemed to notice that he was later than usual. Though Kunju and he went to the same school, they went and returned with their respective friends. In school, they were not eager to be known as brother and sister. Sometimes, he thought Kunju was ashamed of him. However, there was one thing he could blackmail her with—he would shout out "Kunju" when she was with her friends. In school she was called 'Anasuya' and managed to keep her nickname a secret.

The Janmashtami sweets were over when he reached. It did not matter so much, because *Amma* gave him some cream biscuits with milk. Anyway, he was relieved about reaching before *Appa*.

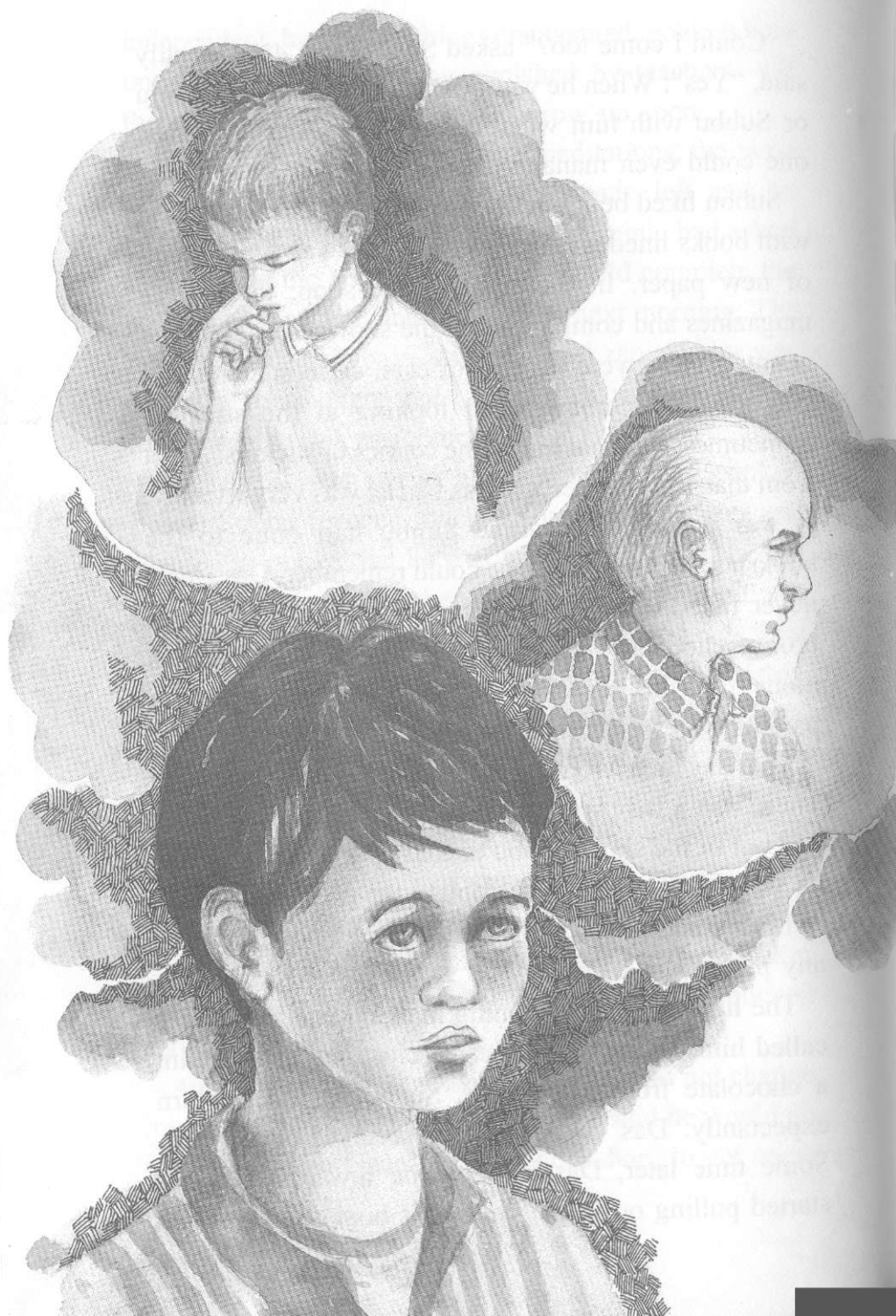
*Appa* came home some time later. He did not change immediately. He had some coffee and said he would go to 'Sastu Kitab Ghar', the city bookshop, to get some new publications.

"Could I come too?" asked Subbu, and *Appa* readily said, "Yes". When he was not in a hurry, he took Kunju or Subbu with him wherever he went. At such times, one could even manage to ask him for an ice-cream.

Subbu liked being in the bookshop. It was a big shop with books lined on three walls. There was a nice smell of new paper. In the front of the shop, there were magazines and comics and, in the showcases under the counter, there were stickers of cars, cartoon characters and the like. Subbu loved looking at the stickers. Sometimes *Appa* got him some comics or stickers. Apart from that, the shopkeeper, Das Uncle, was very friendly. It was a long time since Subbu had gone to the bookshop, but ever since he could remember, Das Uncle never failed to give him a chocolate or two. He had a box of chocolates in the drawer in which he kept his money and he gave some to the children when their parents were selecting books.

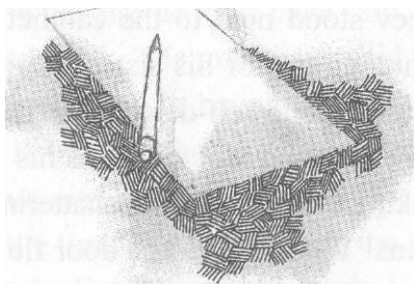
That day there were hardly any customers in the shop. There was a lady with a little boy who kept running in and out of the shop. Subbu picked up a *Phantom*. How he wished he could have comics for textbooks. Some of his textbooks were so boring, they did not even have any pictures in them.

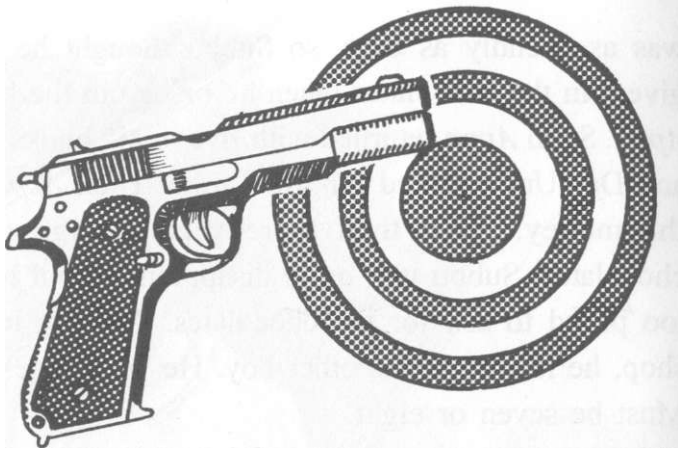
The little boy came running in again and Das Uncle called him. When the boy came close, he handed him a chocolate from his drawer. Subbu waited his turn expectantly. Das Uncle did not seem to notice him. Some time later, Das Uncle came towards him and started pulling out some children's books for him. He



was as friendly as ever, so Subbu thought he might give him the chocolates when he made out the bill for *Appa*. Soon *Appa* returned with five or six books. *Appa* and Das Uncle talked for some time. Then *Appa* paid the money. Even then there was no sign of the chocolates. Subbu was quite disappointed, but he was too proud to ask for the chocolates. As they left the shop, he looked at the other boy. He was quite small. Must be seven or eight.

Subbu was very thoughtful on the way home. Nowadays *Appa* did not insist on holding his hand so often. Slowly, realization dawned upon Subbu; 'I am twelve,' he thought, 'and Das Uncle did not give me any chocolates. Perhaps I have grown up...'





## **Bridges**

*Anis and Ayesha Hameed*

It was a beautiful silver frame capturing within its confines two photographs. One of a small child, catapult in hand and face screwed up in concentration, taking a pot-shot at a raw mango. The other was of a young, attractive girl holding a pistol in one hand, a trophy in the other. Rajeev stood next to the cabinet and stared down at the photographs of his sister, Sanjana, with a mixture of frustration and self-disgust. As remembrance flooded back, he moaned and smashed his fist against the cabinet, making the frame crash, shattering the glass.

"Good heavens! What is it?" The door flew open and Sanjana burst into the room. One glance at the shattered glass and another at Rajeev's face, and she looked as if she was ready to weep.

"Oh, Rajeev! Why?"

Rajeev hesitated. Then he bit his lips in vexation, "I can't face it any longer, *Didi*. I hate having to confront



Papa, but I am not going to be forced into something which I heartily dislike."

Sanjana nodded understandingly.

"That means you can't be attending target practice today?"

"No."

"What do I tell Papa?"

"Make an excuse."

"Another one?" Sanjana tried smiling through her tears.

"Then tell him the truth. Tell him about...about the last fiasco."

"I did."

Rajeev spun around eagerly. "What did he say? Did he understand?"

"No. I mean, in a way he did. He said that booing and catcalls are part of the game—any game. The point is not to show your nervousness. He also..."

"I know what else he must have said," Rajeev's voice was strangely raw. "He must have said that I must have behaved like a sissy to have earned those catcalls. Oh, *Didi!* Can he not see that my heart is not in it? It is not that I cannot aim straight; it is just that something goes wrong by the time I get to pressing the trigger. It is way off the mark. Even the coach feels I am wasting my time, but what do I tell Papa? *Didi*, don't you see the irony of the whole situation? You, my delicate, doll-faced sister can hit a bulls-eye without any effort, while all I get are sniggers and suggestions that I would be far better off playing with one of your dolls."

"Stop it, Rajeev. Do you think I am not aware of your pain? Do you think I enjoy hearing those snide comments when I go up to be congratulated? I hate it, Rajeev. At times I really feel I should give up target shooting so that, at least, there is no question of a competition between us. I know it irritates Papa to see that I enjoy doing what you so obviously hate."

"That is a misconception, if any. There is no competition between us and there never will be. You are a National Champion while I am a greenhorn."

"You would not be one if you were patient. You have to squeeze the trigger gently, not..."

"That is enough, *Didi*, you are sounding quite like Papa now," Rajeev broke in, his face reddening in annoyance.

"Okay, brother, relax," Sanjana laughed shakily. "You had better run to your club before I run out of excuses to give to Papa."

Rajeev's smile was like sunshine breaking through. "That is it, sis. See you later." He gave Sanjana the thumbs up sign and disappeared through the door almost colliding with the Guptas at the front gate.

"Whoa! Watch it, young man. What is the sprint for?" Uncle Gupta demanded holding on to his equally rotund wife. "Practising for the relay race?"

"No," Rajeev retorted. "I am practising for the school band march past."

At Mrs. Gupta's 'How cute!', he burst into a mirthless laugh.

Sanjana knew Rajeev's secret passion. It was music.

If he had enjoyed playing the tabla or stroking the taut strings of a sitar, then his father, Mr. Saxena, would have merely groaned and confided to his friends that classical music was probably the 'in' thing these days. Or if Rajeev had shown any inclination to sing a few soulful *ghazals* then that too would have been pardoned although reluctantly. But...bongo, drums, rock music...? No, never!

"Is that how he intends to earn a living?" Mr. Saxena had roared. "Playing at...at seedy joints? Not on my life!"

'If only Papa would relent,' Sanjana thought despairingly. 'If only Papa realized that each person was made differently, and was not a clone of his or her parent, then life would be far easier. Papa hates Western music...okay; but to despise his own son because he adores it, is just too much. If only Papa could be made to see reason, if only Rajeev would bend just a little.'

Things grew from bad to worse. Meals were either eaten in deathly silence or were followed by equally deadly rows. Neither Mr. Saxena nor Rajeev were prepared to stand each other's presence. If one entered a room, the other would make it a point to leave. Heart-broke if and sandwiched between the two, both mother and daughter looked on helplessly while father and son grew farther apart. Rajeev had threatened earlier that he would leave the house if he was pushed any further. He would not, perhaps, have really kept his word if Mr. Saxena had not, in a moment of heat, scorned him by saying that Rajeev was too weak-kneed a ninny to

attempt a manly action like walking out of the house. That did it. Rajeev left.

Several hours later, when Rajeev had still not returned, a hysterical Mrs. Saxena and Sanjana began contacting his friends.

"Has anyone seen Rajeev? Has anyone heard from him?" The last enquiry gained an affirmative reply.

"Yes, Aunt. I just heard from one of the guys that Rajeev is in casualty."

"What? Oh my God! Was it an accident?"

"No, not that type of an accident. Rajeev, I am told, blew his fuse, and almost willingly, accepted the other boy's challenge to a bout and got smashed up. He will need patching up, I think."

"Bout? Patching up?" Sanjana almost snatched the receiver from her mother's hand. "Rajeev was never a boxer."

"No-o-o. Perhaps not! But he stood up fairly well, I am told. Didn't go under until almost..."

Sanjana did not get to hear the rest of the description. Shock writ large on his face, her father stood in the doorway, his hands mutely stretched forward, as if for help.

"Accident? Rajeev?"

. . .

As a stitched and sedated Rajeev lay on his bed, a silent Mr. Saxena sat watching his son's face intently.

Rajeev was a sight to see. His nose was bloody. One eye had already closed while the other stood out in the centre of a dark bruise. A cut on his cheek showed up

red and angry while a split lip exposed what looked suspiciously like a dangling tooth.

"Who did that to him?" Mr. Saxena had roared, pain and anger blazing through his eyes.

"You, Papa. You."-

Strangely enough, Mr. Saxena had fallen silent and since then had not said a word, except to hold on to his wife's hand and murmur faintly, "I almost lost him."

His wife had nodded back in assent. She knew what he meant, for it was not Rajeev's broken face that he was referring to, but to the mental distance between them.

"Yes," she had whispered back, "but we will bring him home again."

Sanjana sat watching them in relief. She had a lot to say and needed to take courage in both her hands. Now, perhaps, was the correct time.

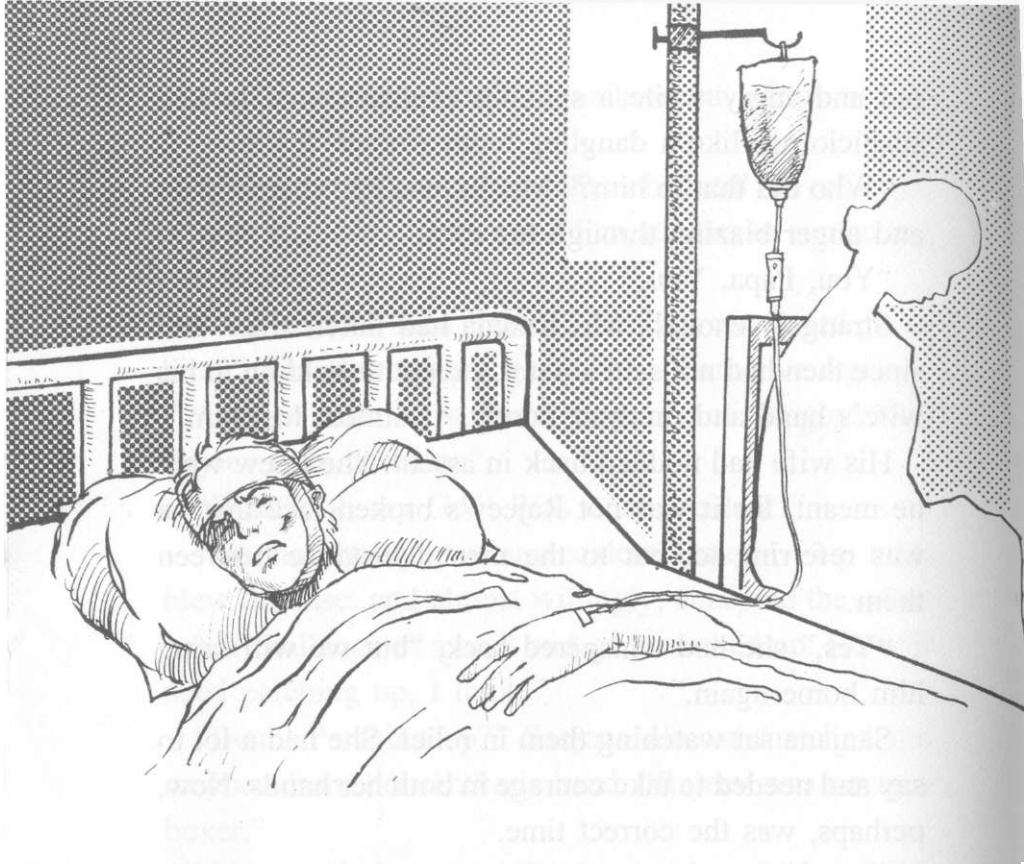
"Papa?"

Mr. Saxena merely inclined his head.

"Papa, when I said you were to blame for Rajeev's condition, I really meant it."

Sanjana's father looked up but there was no rage in his eyes. A little bewilderment, perhaps, as if still trying to understand the events.

"Papa, I am not saying you forced him to take up such a dangerous challenge; but by implication you did force him into accepting it. Your constant jibes pushed him into wanting to prove to you, once and for all, that he was no 'ninny'...your words, Papa. So he took the blows without flinching, like a man. He went down

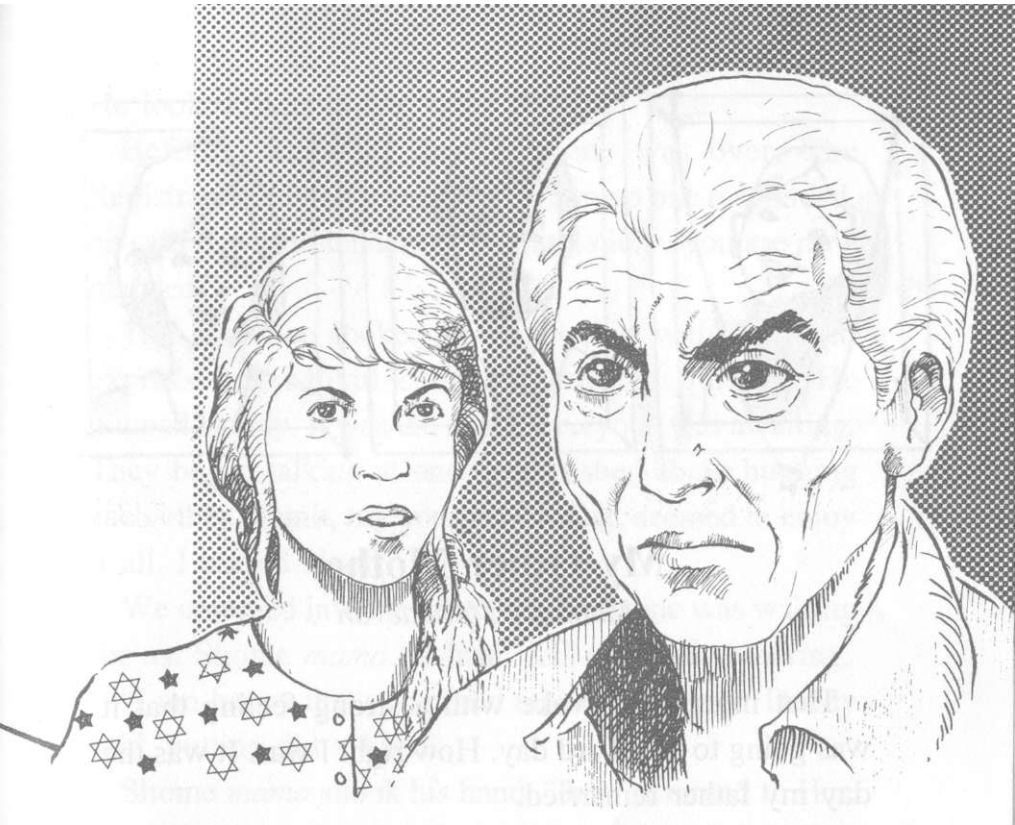


fighting but he did not back off. Papa, he did not run away. Didn't you hear the boys describing it? The way the crowd was yelling? They could smell blood and were howling for it. Would it have salvaged your pride if some irreparable damage had been done?"

"Never," Mr. Saxena's voice was harsh with emotion. "Never."

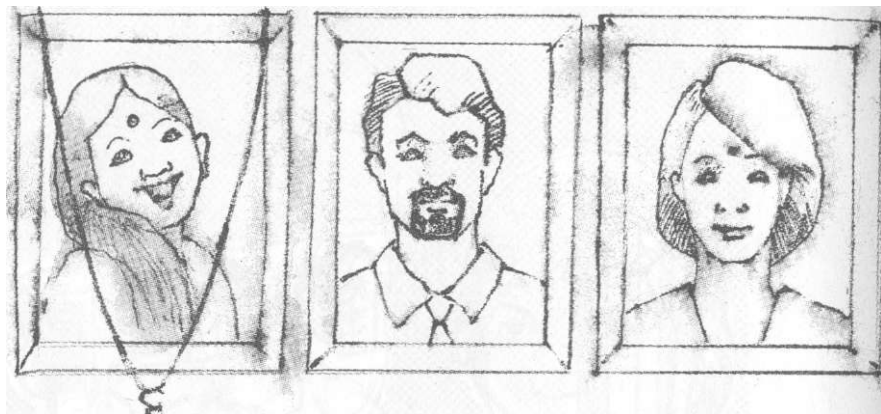
Mrs. Saxena spoke through her tears, "I admit we were never really proud of his choice. I suppose we are too old-fashioned for it. It seemed such a waste of time and talent, but I always did try to cover up for him."

"Mummy!" Sanjana was really angry now. "There



was never any need for covering up, as you put it. Rajeev's choice was his choice alone and, whether we like it or not, we will have to learn to respect it. All these years I was a surrogate for your son. Your praise for me was always tinged with regret for the fact that it was your daughter and not your son who had inherited grandfather's passion for firearms. Do you think we had a choice in the genes we inherited?"

"Yes, I realize that now," Mr. Saxena sighed. Regret over the wasted years was heavy in his voice. "My son, Rajeev, I could so easily have lost you. But it is not that late...is it?"



## My Other Mother

*Madhavi Mahadevan*

That morning, I woke with a strong feeling that it was going to be a hard day. How right I was. It was the day my father remarried.

On our way to the Registration office, I sent up prayers, like desperate smoke signals. A last-minute hitch, I begged. A typhoon, an earthquake, a flash-flood, or at least a flat tyre. Even *Dadaji's* temperamental 1952 Morris Minor behaved beautifully. She rolled along with grace and style. We reached the Registration office on time.

A few minutes later, the Joshi clan arrived. They were a noisy lot. The grown-ups fussed and smiled a lot; the children giggled and chattered. She, I noticed, was very composed and quiet.

We trooped into the Registrar's office. The officer seemed flabbergasted at the sight of so many. He was a thin, dried up old man with an irritable expression.



He looked, what I felt, quite fed-up.

Before I knew it, the ceremony was over. The Registrar mumbled something. When no one responded, he said it a little louder, "Congratulations, you are now married."

The audience looked at each other with confused expressions. Mukul *chacha* recovered quickly. He hugged Daddy. It was the signal everyone was awaiting. They began talking at once and rushed about hugging each other. Sumit, my younger brother, seemed to enjoy it all. I stayed aloof.

We emerged into the sunshine. Someone was waiting for us. Shome *mama*. A hush fell over the gathering.

"I am happy that you could make it, Shome," Daddy said, putting out a hand.

Shome *mama* shook his hand. Then he turned to Her. "I wish you every happiness," he smiled. "May God bless you."

Sumit clung to *mama's* leg. "Why have you come alone?" he asked. "Where are *Nanaji*, *NanimaT*"

"Hey, Sumit," Mukul *chacha* interrupted. "Do you want that red balloon?"

"Join us for lunch, Shome," *Dadaji* invited.

"Thank you. But I have to get back to my office," *mama* said. "I must take your leave."

I thought that he had not noticed me in that big gathering. Then he looked straight at me and smiled. My Shome *mama* is tall, broad and bald. When he smiles, he looks just like Ma. He ruffled my hair and turned to go. The sight of him moving away seemed

like the closing of a door.

*Wait, Shome mama. Take me with you. Take me to Nanaji, Nanima's house. My mother's house. To that magical, untidy garden where she once played; to its rooms that seem to await her. Like I do.*

The words formed a tight, hard knot in my throat. Through the blur of tears, I saw that he was gone. "Come on, son," a quiet, tired voice said. "Let us go through the rest of the day."

I felt Daddy's hand on my shoulder, firm and warm. Brushing it away, I got into the waiting car.

. . .

"Vidur, I am too old to look after your sons properly," *Dadima* had said. "They need a mother."

That was the day I had brought home my Report card. I did not show it to *Dadima*. In the evening, my class teacher phoned. I overheard *Dadima* speaking with her. I took out my bicycle and fled.

Returning well past the time I was supposed to, I heard voices in the drawing-room. Daddy was back. He is a commercial pilot. We see him only on weekends. I tried to sneak past them, but *Dadima* saw me.

"Arjun *beta*," she called out. "Please fetch your Report card."

Later, Daddy came to say goodnight. Sumit was asleep. I pretended to be. Daddy seemed to know. He sat at the bed's edge and ran his hand over my forehead. I could not hold back my tears any longer. He held me while I cried.

"I am sorry," I said when I could speak. "It is maths

that is getting me down. I don't understand it. Ma'am goes too fast. I will get tuition. I will work hard."

"It is not just maths, Arjun," Daddy said sadly. "It is you. Your teachers are concerned. They say you simply sit in class and stare out of the window. You have stopped taking part in all activities. You hardly talk."

What could I say? What was there to say?

"Everyone understands, son. Nobody can take your mother's place. We've got to accept that nothing can bring her back. We must learn how to move on. There is no other way to go. We were a family once," he slowly said. As if willing himself to go on, he added with a sudden determination, "We will be a family again."

. . .

Are we a family now?

We have moved to a new city.

New flat. New curtains. New sounds.

For years I woke to the music of *suprabhatam*. Ma loved it. The chant would swell and rise in the cool morning freshness. I brushed my teeth to it, dressed for school, drank my glass of milk.

"Arjun, your lunch-box," Ma would call from the kitchen. She would be in a blue dressing-gown, her long hair in a loose plait.

I knew what I could expect from my lunch-box—unfussy food, just the way I like it. Vegetable sandwiches, *idli* and *chutney*.

It was never the same. *Dadima* would give me whatever was made for *Dadaji's* breakfast. *Sooji halwa*,

*aloo-puri*. The oil would mess my books.

And now, She is no better. Wafer biscuits, tiny round sandwiches, toffees. It is fine for Sumit who is only five. But I am thirteen. How can I eat this baby stuff?

"You don't know how to be a mother," Sumit told her one day.

"Teach me," she smiled.

"Grow your hair," he said. "Sing in the kitchen. Make hot *pakor*as when it rains. Tell me a story before I go to sleep."

"What else?"

"Two stories," he said craftily. She laughed.

Now, Sumit calls her Ma. She likes it, you can see that.

I call Her nothing.

I hardly speak to her.

"Here, let me repair that shirt for you, Arjun."

"No, thank you. I prefer to do it myself."

"Any help with your homework, Arjun?"

"No. Thank you."

"Another helping of *kheer*, Arjun?"

"No. Thank you."

. . .

Last Saturday, she said, "I have three tickets for 'The Lost World'. We can follow that up with pizzas later. What do you say to that?"

"Hip hip hurray," Sumit jumped up.

"Will you both be ready in fifteen minutes?"

Later, when she looked into my room, I was lying in bed, listening to music on my Walkman.



"Ready, Arjun?"

Was she blind? I had not even changed my old Bermudas and T-shirt. She stood there, clearly waiting for a reply.

"I am not going with you."

"Why not?"

"Don't feel like it."

"I heard you tell your father that you wanted to see this film."

"I have changed my mind." My reply was cool. Her face turned red.

The air vibrated with tension. Sumit looked at our faces. He crossed the room and stood by my side.

"I won't go without *bhaiyya*," he said.

Her eyes never left my face. She opened her handbag, took out the tickets and tore them.

"I hope this will make you happy," she said quietly. I heard her pick up the car keys from the hook in the hall. Then the front door slammed shut.

Sumit looked as if he was about to cry.

"*Bhaiyya*, will she come back?" he asked in a frightened voice.

"Who cares?" I said. "Come on, let us play with your Lego set."

I made an aeroplane for him, but my heart was not in it. To tell the truth, I was ashamed. I knew that I had gone too far. Sumit's favourite TV serial was on air. He settled down to watch it. I went out for a walk. I needed to be alone.

The sky was overcast. There was a light drizzle. The

park was empty. I walked briskly along a tree-lined path. The wind picked up. Lightning flashed. Suddenly there was a terrific downpour. I stood under a neem tree. It rained for a long time.

Darkness had set in when I finally left the park. The road was slick and slippery, the pools on its surface reflecting the flashing headlights of vehicles. Ahead at the roundabout, there was a traffic jam:

Horns tooted impatiently. The red lights of a Police Gypsy winked. There had been an accident. My heart began pounding. I pushed my way through the crowd. A bus had hit a car. A white Maruti, like ours. It had folded up completely. Shattered glass powdered the road. Who was the driver? Who?

*That evening too, it had rained. That is why Ma has been delayed, I had told myself. She would be back any moment from her office.*

*Eight. ..Nine... Ten.*

*The maid gave us dinner and left.*

*When did we fall asleep, Sumit and I? Right there on the carpet, before the blaring TV.*

*It was not the TV that woke me up. It was the doorbell. Ma, I thought. It was not her. It would never be Ma again.*

*A wet road, a truck that lost control...*

*No, it would never be Ma again.*

The wailing of sirens receded. The traffic had started moving. My limbs unfroze. I turned and ran home as if a million devils were after me.

Sumit opens the door. His cheeks are wet with tears.

"Ma..." he stammers, "Ma."

Oh God.

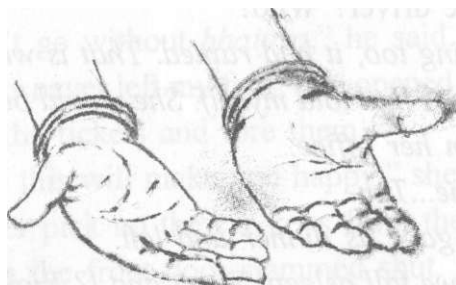
And then I see her. Next to the telephone. She drops the receiver, quickly crosses the room and pulls me close.

"I thought something..." she whispers into my hair. "Don't do this, Arjun. Don't go out without telling me."

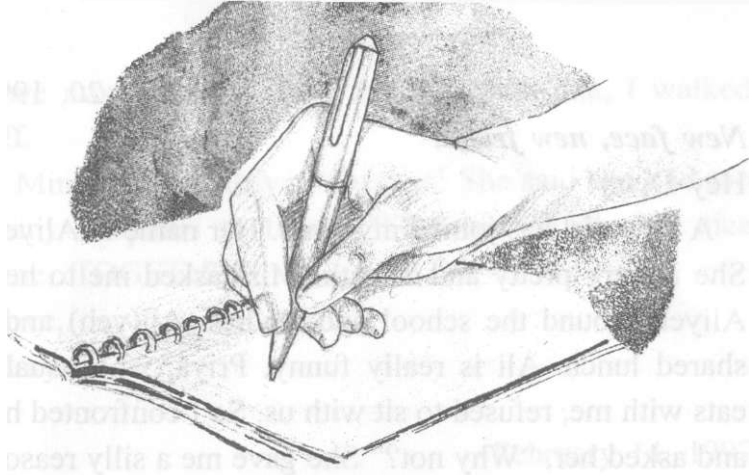
I look up, see her face.

I see the worry, the pain, the relief. And the love.

I see that it is really no different from my mother's face.







## Growing Pains

*Mira B.*

January 7, 1997

Dear Diary,

Hi. My name is Mary Mathew. Daddy gave me this diary for Christmas. I have never had a diary before. I don't know what to write. I have homework to do now.

January 11, 1997

Dear Diary,

Daddy says I should write to you, as if you are my new best friend. Write whenever I feel and whatever I want. My secrets, problems, fears... anything! I told my best friend, Priya, about you and she agrees. It is good to have an account of my thoughts, because years later, I can read it and have good memories. I would like that. My years recorded, to look back and cherish.

Love,

Mary

January 20, 1997

***New face, new friend***

Hey Diary!

A new girl has joined my class. Her name is Aliyeh. She is very pretty and Shanthi Miss asked me to help Aliyeh around the school and studies. Ali(yeh) and I shared lunch. Ali is really funny. Priya, who usually eats with me, refused to sit with us. So I confronted her and asked her, "Why not?" She gave me a silly reason, about not sitting near the boys. That is a lie, because Priya has a crush on Arun, and he sits with a gang near us. I know Priya feels 'threatened' by Ali, but she has no reason to, because Priya will always be irreplaceable.

Friends are to be shared, not possessed.

Love,

Mary

February 3, 1997

***Reconciliation***

Dear Diary,

Mid-term test results are out. I got low marks for mathematics. In Ali's previous school, she was the overall top student of her class. History is her weakness, and happens to be my strength.

It has been nearly two weeks since Priya refused to sit with us at lunch-time. Today, I got totally fed up and approached Priya for the last time. I told her, "We are not babies to fight. Place yourself in Ali's shoes. How would you feel if you were a new girl in a strange, new school? You are still my best friend, but I can

have more friends, if I want to." With that, I walked off.

Minutes later, Priya joined us! She said she had too many chapattis to finish. Whatever! We had a nice time...TOGETHER.

Love,  
Mary

February 14, 1997

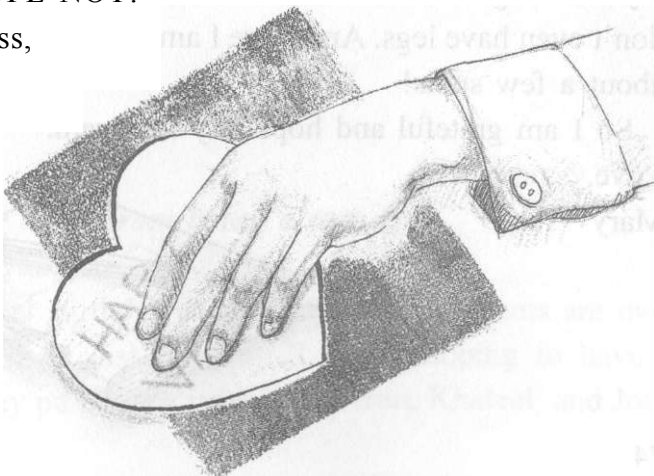
### ***V-Day***

Dear D,

Ssssh! I am going to tell you my first secret. I can't believe it! Today being Valentine's Day, I made heart-shaped valentine cards for Priya and Ali. I showed them how to make some hearts at lunch-time. That is when Priya got the idea of a 'mystery valentine'. Priya said we would make a heart for Aran, but keep it anonymous. So, we DID it! I snucked it into his school bag. I have never been so terrified of being caught. Ali says he will never know it was us.

I HOPE NOT!

Heartless,  
Mary



March 14, 1997

***Yuck! I am sick***

Dear Diary,

Sorry, I didn't write for so long. I was sick with chicken pox for 25 days! It was awful. Bumps all over my face and body. I was completely polka-dotted! Now only a few spots on my legs remain, which Mummy says may go away, soon. I hope so. I am looking forward to school on Monday, because of Priya and Ali, and not homework!

Love,

Mary

March 18, 1997

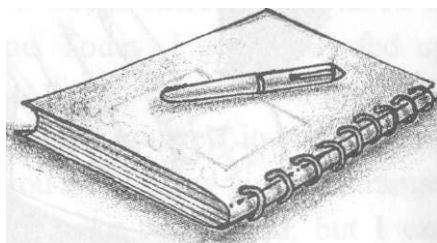
Dear Diary,

Hi. The spots are still on my legs, but they have dried up and are harmless. I finally went to school. I was a little conscious of my legs, that too while wearing my uniform skirt. Priya and Ali had to convince me that it was hardly noticeable. Besides I should count my blessings. There are some unfortunate few, who don't even have legs. And, here I am selfishly worrying about a few spots!

So I am grateful and hopefully less vain.

Love,

Mary



April 1, 1997

***All Fool's Day***

Dear Diary,

April Fool's Day, and was I really fooled today! During history class, I found a valentine (YES!) card in my textbook, which was unsigned. Initially I suspected Priya and Ali were playing a joke on me. During lunch time, they made no mention of it, and were unusually quiet. So I knew it wasn't them. Yet, I didn't tell them, in case they teased me about Arun. Priya would feel so hurt. Right after maths class, I could bear it no longer. I told Priya and Ali about the heart. To my surprise, we found out all three of us had received valentines. Now we were sure it was Arun!

When questioned, Arun simply said, "Why would I send you three valentines? Have you girls sent ME a valentine before?"

Eeeeeeeee! So embarrassing! Luckily, Shanthi Miss came into class at that moment for the science class. Saved in the nick of time by a teacher! Arun made proper April FOOLS out of us! Ha-ha!

Foolishly,

Mary

May 9, 1997

***A year away from being a teenager***

Dear Diary,

Happy Birthday to me! Yippee! My exams are over and I have just turned 12! I was hoping to have a birthday party with Priya, Ali, Arun, Khaleel, and John





at home with balloons, ice-cream and stuff. Then Mummy suggested I do something different—responsible and beneficial to others. That is true, I am no longer a baby. So this birthday, the whole gang with Daddy and Mummy, celebrated it at the local orphanage, by distributing sweets and pastries to all the orphans. It was great, meeting and making so many friends. Some of them don't even celebrate their own birthdays. I felt bad. Sharing my day with them was the best ever.

12 years and counting,

Mary

June 20, 1997

Dear Diary,

School has re-started, but I am writing this far away from home and school. We arrived at Grandma's farm last night for the weekend. It is a very rural area. I love this farm because there are many animals. I never get to see cows, goats, parrots, fish, and horses in the city. I love listening to Grandma's stories and playing with my cousins. They are David, Asha, Divya, Paul, and Ria. Ria and I are the same age and are very close. We spent the day playing in the fields, swimming in the river and feeding the animals. And my favourite—CLIMBING TREES! Life is simple here—no TV, no

car. Of course, there is the radio and the bullock cart. At times, it is good to get away from all the pollution and the noise of the city. I feel you should always experience 'different people and places', not judge them; just accept and enjoy the experience.

Love,  
Mary

July 7, 1997

### ***Death***

Dear Diary,

Today is the worst day ever. I attended Ali's mother's funeral. She died last night of cancer. She was a heavy smoker. What do you say to a friend who has lost someone she loves? I did not know, so all I could do was hold Ali, and be there for her. Smoking, drugs, alcohol...Why do people 'do it'? If only all the smokers, drug addicts and alcoholics had been at that heart-wrenching funeral, they would realize that temporary satisfaction is not worth it, when in the long run, all you get is...DEATH.

Mary

August 22, 1997

Dear Diary,

Yesterday was Ali's twelfth birthday. Naturally, we didn't celebrate it. She didn't even want us to visit her at home. But Priya and I went to visit her. What are friends for anyway? No one should be alone for their birthday, especially in these circumstances.



Ali has lost much weight and is so 'lifeless'. Not the old Ali we once knew. We visited her mother's grave, offered prayers, crying our eyes out and holding each other.

I was such a baby, thinking life was just another fairy tale. Instead, life is harsh and can be unfair.

Mary

September 29, 1997

### ***Rejuvenation***

Dear Diary,

Life is good. Ali's almost back to her normal self again! It is competition week in school. Priya, Ali and I have joined all sorts of competitions like dance, drama, elocution, singing and more. I think it is great to feel lively and excited like a kid again. After so long.

We just cannot let the bad times drown our good times, can we? I love life!

Love,

Mary

October-November 1997

### ***Preparations***

Dear Diary,

It is exam fever once again. Education is essential for the basic foundation of a person. I think education is an important part of growing and maturing. Heavy stuff, eh?

Sadly, exams can become competitive. I make sure I don't exhaust myself studying and don't fall into the

fears and tension of examination fever! I take one c  
at a time, with my portions and studying schedules

I must not lose myself...ever.

Love,

Mary

December 31, 199'

### ***Reflections***

Dear Diary,

We have reached the end of this year. Twelve months have passed by and with each month, I have grown on the inside, as well as the outside. Life has its good and bad moments. It is up to me to sift through both and understand what I have learned and experienced, and to remember it for...always.

Growing pains will never cease, and may never get easier, but I know, I will get by—with the help of my faith, family, and friends.

Love always,

Marv



