



Seniors -

1. And I came face to face with my evil doppelganger,
2. I was falling through space
3. All the trees were turning yellow
4. I stumbled on a suitcase full of 1000 rupee notes on December 25, 2016

Like last year, this year too the preliminary selection of the entries was done through a unique process—a Ranking Panel. To participate in the contest, each participant was asked to read and rank three stories, assigned to them through a random computerised selection. The entries with the highest ranking were then judged by a panel comprising well-known authors—Andy Cope, Annie Besant, Arti Sonthalia, Debashish Majumdar, K. Krishna and Seema Chari.

An unfortunate aspect of the writing awards every year, and this year being no exception, is that numerous entries get disqualified because students often plagiarise from books and the Internet and many entries do not seem to be independently written. Though efforts have been made to cross-check the authenticity of the published pieces, we need to keep in mind that this is a persistent problem. We, at Scholastic, believe that a child's mind is truly encouraged when she is taught how to think, not what to think.

The pieces have been minimally edited for grammar and spelling, since our goal has been to let the children speak for themselves.

About the Judges

Andy Cope

ANDY COPE is the author of the famous Spy Dog books, a trainer and keynote speaker. He is an expert in positive psychology and happiness, which led him to develop *The Art of Being Brilliant*. This is delivered in various forms as workshops for businesses, conferences, teachers and teenagers. It has also informed the thinking behind his brilliant books.

Annie Besant

ANNIE BESANT is a children's author, poet and editor based in Chennai. An avid reader, she discovered that she too could shape words to create new and exciting worlds. Since then she has been creating ink and paper portals for children to discover. Her picture books for young children include *Mala's Silver Anklets*, *When I Grow Up*, *Sam's Christmas Present* and *Sammy Cricket Gets into Trouble*. Her short story 'Magic' appeared in *The Puffin Book of Magic for 8-year-olds*. *Emma Bigton and the Sphinx* was her first book for older children, and was followed by the Tara books—a four-level graded reader series. *The Pterodactyl's Egg* is her most recent

offering for young readers. When Annie is not scribbling for growing minds, she is busy with her nose buried either in a Neil Gaiman book or a volume of Pablo Neruda's poetry.

Arti Sonthalia

ARTI SONTHALIA is a Hyderabad-based children's writer. Her first children's book *Big Bully And Me* was nominated for the Crystal Kite Asia awards. Her second book *Hungry To Read* has touched many hearts. She also has many stories in the *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. Besides writing, she enjoys reading.

Debashish Majumdar

DEBASHISH MAJUMDAR is a qualified marketing professional from The Chartered Institute of Marketing, UK and has spent over 20 years as a copywriter and advertising consultant. He has won a dozen national writing awards for children and was shortlisted for a Commonwealth Short Story Award in 2003. His works appear in 17 books in addition to the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series. Debashish has also written over 250 stories for children, which have appeared in many national newspapers/magazines.

K Krishna

K KRISHNA has written books for children that weave life tips into everyday adventures. She has written the Me and We series and the Watch Out series for Scholastic.

Seema Chari

SEEMA CHARI speaks seven languages, and is a quizmaster and author of a dozen knowledge, quizzing, puzzle and activity books. She loves the magic of words and their power to awaken the senses. She delights in the ludicrous, revels in adventure and has missed dates because she was laughing at jokes, smelling the roses or slipping on pigeon poop.

Junior Fiction



Shruti Chakraborty

Shruti Chakraborty, a student of Class VI at South Point School, Kolkata, has won the first prize.

Shruti Chakraborty is an avid reader. She is learning to play the violin and writes poems and short stories in her free time.



The Staff of Delphi

Shruti Chakraborty

The audience stood up in applause. Henry Callesan, a boy of only eighteen, and Bess Patel, a seventeen-year-old girl, were being awarded for bringing back twenty five people who had been considered dead in their quest for the staff of Delphi. Henry had achieved what was the dream of many archaeologists. He was happy with himself. He had finally done it. His parents were with him today. In this one moment, his entire life flashed before him.

He was six years old. He was lying in bed with his head in his mother's lap and tears were flowing down his cheeks. He didn't want his parents to leave

him alone and go in search of that magical object. His father was leaning by the bed and holding his hand. Together they promised him, 'We will be back soon, Henry, we promise. It will be okay, and we won't forget to bring you the toy train you want.' His mother sang him a lullaby. When he slumbered into his dream, they kissed him and very quietly walked out of the room, and picked up their camping bag. They climbed into the Jeep, where the other necessary things had been already loaded, and left.

Henry would wait at the gate every evening for his parents to return. A year had passed thus. But instead of his parents, a letter from the department of archaeology arrived. It bore the news that his parents had gone missing. The grown-ups interpreted this as their death. But to the seven-year-old boy, it meant his parents breaking their promise which was just not like them. They had always kept their word. He refused to believe that they had died. He kept crying, but did not give up. Whenever his grandmother would try to make him see the reality, he would look at her with his big, innocent eyes full of tears and say, 'But Grandma, they promised! My mom and dad always keep their promises. You told me that. They will come back! They'll keep their promise. They will come back. I know that!' He was sure they would return but now all he wished for was they did it sooner. Their long absence was creating

room for doubt. His grandmother would hold back her tears for the sake of her grandson and together they would pray for the safe return of his parents.

It was his parents' wedding anniversary. Henry had made a beautiful card for them and had forced Grandma to make her special chocolate cake. And he hoped that they would come. But as the night approached, he started losing hope and finally broke down in his grandmother's lap. He sobbed, 'They said they would return, they promised me. They broke their promise!'

Time passed by. Henry learnt to deal with the fact that his parents would never return. But the void always remained. He had made quite a few friends in his school. But his best friend was Bess Patel.

Bess was an adventurous and friendly girl. She had never seen her mother as she had died when Bess was born. And she could feel in her father's conduct that he held Bess responsible for his wife's death. This pain could always be seen in her eyes, and she hid it sometimes with anger and at other times with a nonchalant attitude.

One day, when Henry had walked home from school accompanied by Bess, they saw his grandmother staring at a photograph of his parents, as if pleading with them to come back.

His parents had gone in search of the mythical staff of Delphi. This staff had been gifted to Delphi by the Greek god Apollo. It had the magical power

of showing the future to its owner. Hence, it was the most sought-after object of archaeologists. Many, like his parents, had gone in its search, but none had returned. The staff of Delphi haunted Henry. It had caused his parents to go missing. It had caused his grandmother and himself such pain that time could not heal. Besides, Henry had started to develop an interest in archaeology and the staff's power intrigued him.

He searched through every website for information on the staff, read every book on Delphi, went through a lot of books about archaeology trying to find more information. Bess was good at geography and history, and she would often help him.

Once when they were in the library going through books, Bess called out to Henry, 'Henry, come here. Check this out.' She was pointing at the book she had been reading. There was a picture of a stone on which was engraved:

*As you walk through the entrance in the wood,
You will have three choices to test what you should.
First, regret and guilt shall haunt you a lot,
You could change the past, forget when you fought.
Second and last, fear and panic profound
Shall change your mind, shall make you bound
A bond with choices, a bond with pain,
Shall lead you astray from the prize main.*

Henry and Bess shared a look. With Bess's deep knowledge of geography, they figured out from the codes that it was in an American forest where they would find a place where the trees formed a thick circle in the middle of which there would be a large stone. After the stone would get blood, it would reveal a passage. Henry knew he had to complete what his parents had started, so he told his plans to Bess and she willingly agreed to accompany him. They knew only too well that Henry's grandmother would not allow them to go, so they decided to leave the house secretly at night. Henry left a note for Grandma, apologizing for leaving stealthily and assuring her that he would return. It was a promise he would keep. Henry and Bess set out on their adventure. After reaching the jungle and following the instructions of the map, they came to the place with the large stone. Now they needed blood. They were wondering how to pass this hurdle when Henry spotted a mouse nearby. He caught the mouse and sacrificed it on the stone. No sooner had he done this, than a passage was revealed to them. They made their way down it. The passage was just like a flight of stairs with extremely wide walls radiating light. They walked for about five and a half hours, occasionally taking breaks.

As they walked further, they noticed a table laden with delicious food. There were three chairs

near it. On one chair, a lady was sitting. She was beautiful, her brown hair was let down, and she had a very kindly and motherly expression. She welcomed them and told them to eat the food. As they were eating, a vision appeared; they were in a hospital. A man with a resemblance to Bess was sitting outside the operation theatre. After some time, when he was called in, he rushed in. When he came inside, his face fell. The mother, who was on the bed, was chained to life support. Her heartbeat was failing. The baby was safe, though. The man watched helplessly, with tears trickling down his face, as his wife died. Then it changed. They now saw the man shouting and hitting a seven-year-old child who looked like Bess. Then they saw the Bess of the present day, crying, while being abused by her father. Then the vision hovered and vanished.

Henry looked at Bess. Tears were rolling down her cheeks and she was very pale.

Henry tried to console Bess but was cut off by the lady who spoke in a hypnotising manner. 'You can change that, my dear, you can change that ...'

Bess looked at her with a tear-stained and determined face and asked, 'How? How shall I do that? Please! I'll do anything! An-anything!'

The lady looked at her and smiled kindly. 'A life for a life is all that is needed.'

Henry looked perplexed at these words. Bess nodded, as if she understood what the lady was

talking about. Whatever they were talking about, Henry had a feeling it would not be nice. But Bess was determined; she had seen the pain in her father's eyes. She wanted to bring her mother back, at all costs. The lady spoke in a very soothing tone, 'Come my child, I shall bring her back. Come with me ...' These words hit Henry like a bolt and he understood that it was a trap. Before anyone could say or do anything, he held Bess's hand and told her to run. He dragged the unwilling Bess away from the lady. Bess was very angry at Henry; he had ruined her chance to set things all right again.

But then Henry took her hand in his and spoke in the gentlest tone, 'You know it, don't you? That the dead can never come back and we must not meddle with them? It was a trap, Bess.'

She realised the truth in his words and wiped her tears, got to her feet and said, 'Hey, hurry up! We have work to do!'

Henry smiled at her and said, 'God be with us.'

As they were walking again, they saw the narrow passage changing into a very wide road which was lined with all the things they desired. Henry's dream sports car, a tree house just like the one he had asked his father to build, but he had not been able to, he wanted to go to it but Bess held his hand and said, 'They are all only dreams, they won't let us see what we want.'

Henry realised that he could see around him

everything that he ever wanted. He asked Bess, 'How can you say it is not real?'

She pointed to a place where Henry could see a big toy engine and a younger Henry riding it. She said, 'See, your father is hugging you, and your mother is helping you with homework, this can't be real.'

That's when Henry realised that what he saw was not what Bess saw, each one saw what they wanted. He asked her, 'What do we do? Desires will always hide the truth. Even if we were face to face with reality, desire won't let us see it.'

Bess told him, 'Take a deep breath and close your eyes. Think of the gifts God has given us. Think of all the happy times. Think of all that we have. Try to be satisfied.' As they started feeling the joy of satisfaction and happiness for the life that they led, the visions started disappearing and in its place a fragment of a garden was revealed. When Henry and Bess, brimming with the joy of satisfaction, opened their eyes, they found themselves in a garden with the most beautiful flowers and birds chirping. In the middle of the garden, something shone.

It was the staff.

It was the most beautiful thing Henry had ever seen. The staff sparkled like diamonds. They both looked at each other. They quickened their pace. But, they found, when they were close to the staff, an invisible barrier stopped them. A barrier of agony

and pain. Whenever Henry put even a toe through the line, he remembered all his worst moments, his worst memories. 'Second and last, fear profound shall change your mind and make you bound,' Henry muttered.

'No, Henry, we will win. I am sure of that,' said Bess.

'I want to give up. Too hard,' Henry mumbled.

Bess encouraged him, saying, 'For your parents? For the promise we made? Come on. On the count of three!'

Henry said, 'Okay!'

Bess replied, '1 ... 2 ... 3 ... Go!' They took a deep breath and ran forward. Henry remembered the day his parents had left, the day news had come to him that they were missing. He sobbed, but kept on running. Suddenly a thought came to his mind; Bess had suffered more than him. Yet, she could run through the invisible barrier. His sufferings were so negligible compared to Bess's. The moment this good thought, that his sufferings were less than others', and that there were people who would exchange places with him as they considered Henry to be luckier, entered his mind, the distance vanished and he was in front of the staff.

Instantly, everything was all right. They could breathe freely. They had the staff! Smiles lit up their faces. They had done it! Suddenly, there was a loud rumbling. 'Uh-oh! Another trap?' Henry wondered aloud. But no, a few stones fell down, revealing a

cave. Some people came out of it. The lost people.

The first were Henry's parents. The first thing Henry noticed about them was that they had not aged. They still looked twenty eight and thirty. Unsure, he asked, 'Mom ... Dad?'

They both looked at him. 'Henry!' his mother cried and both his parents ran towards him. They gave him a bear hug. All three of them were crying.

'Henry, my son! I am so proud of you. I-I knew you would break the spell!' his father said.

Suddenly a spirit appeared. Everyone quietened down. She spoke directly to Henry and Bess, 'My heroes! Congratulations! I am the spirit of Delphi, owner and guardian of the staff. You must have worked very hard for this moment. However, I am sorry to tell you, I cannot let you take this staff with you. Instead, I grant you a wish each.'

Henry and Bess looked at each other. They made a silent agreement. Bess said, 'Hail the power of Delphi! O great Delphi, I have only one wish: let my father no more hold me responsible for my mother's death. Make him love me.'

Delphi answered, 'So be it! And what about you, Henry?'

Henry answered, 'O great Delphi! Please get us all safely back to my house.'

Delphi answered, 'So be it.'

Then they all—Henry, Bess, Henry's parents and the other people—were instantly transported to

Henry's house. Bess's father was also there. When he first saw her, he slapped her across the cheek. This took her by surprise. He yelled at her, 'You have been missing for three days! Do you know how worried I have been?'

Then he started sobbing. He hugged her and said, 'Don't do that again! I was so worried. I love you so much. I am sorry I was angry.' Bess was crying too.

Henry's grandmother was also crying when she saw them. But they were tears of joy.

Time passed by. Henry and Bess both got recognition and were now being awarded for rescuing the people who were lost. And they had never been happier. All was well.



Anahita Misra

Anahita Misra, a student of Class VI at Chrysalis High School, Yelahanka, Bengaluru, has been awarded the second prize.

Anahita Misra was born in 2006 in a small town in Switzerland and now lives in Bangalore with her parents. She loves her pets whose antics often appear in her stories. Hers is a big, loving multi-cultural family living in different parts of the world. Stories have been her mates since toddlerhood, thanks to her dad's huge story bag on Indian mythology and her mom's bedtime story renditions. She started writing at a very young age and wrote her first picture story when she was five. She likes reading all genres—mythology, magic, fantasy and adventure—but her love for the Harry Potter series surpasses all.



Unexpected Visitors

Anahita Misra

On a bright sunny day, as I sat on my two beautiful eggs, I couldn't help wonder who my little ones would resemble. Would they take the bright green from my plumage or the dull purple from their father's, who was still very much around, albeit in our thoughts. Suddenly, I heard a sound at the rusted window. It got louder and louder, until, CRASH! The window banged open. I saw a hand holding a piece of cloth. The hand reached out to clean the settled dust on the balcony window of this empty house where I had found shelter. I was startled by the noise but I would not lose my eggs, no matter what!

I shut my eyes and braced for a "shoo shoo". Instead, I heard a little girl's gasp, followed by a loud bark. I opened my eyes and that's when I saw her. Her olive green eyes, her waist-length red hair and her fair complexion. She smiled at me and went into the house ... only to be back again, this time along with her mother. She looked straight into my eyes. In that moment, we sort of connected. I knew I could trust her. I calmed down a little and sat comfortably. I heard her ask out loud, "Mom, can we please keep her?"

The mother replied, "No, Melody darling. We already have a dog. The most you can do is give this bird some food."

Her mother came back with a bowl full of millets. I ate to my heart's content. Then I settled down in my corner to escape the afternoon heat wave. As I sat, I felt something shift under my tail feathers. I fluttered my wings and hopped off. A small piece of shell had come off one of the eggs. I chirped in delight. I think Melody heard me because she came out to see what had happened. With her almond-shaped eyes now wide as saucers, she stared in wonder at the eggs. Suddenly, she stirred and called out, "Mom! Dad! Come here quickly!" Her parents came just in time to see my first hatchling pop out of its egg. Soon my other young one came out of its white confines. I gathered them up and kept them safe from the Californian summer heat.

Very soon, they started fledging. One of my budgerigars was a bright bluish-purple. The other was a mix of green and yellow. Melody, I think, felt that they were perfect in every aspect. The chicks and their antics made me frown and flutter but Melody would laugh and watch over them.

As the summers got over, she had to start school. Each morning, a good ten minutes before leaving for school, Melody would bring us fresh bowlfuls of grain and water. She would pat Aiva, her golden retriever, and instruct her not to be too "licky" around the chicks. While Melody would be at school, Aiva would guard them, constantly looking around, twitching her ears, sniffing every now and then, as if to prove that keeping guard was no easy task! Aiva was quite likeable, though sometimes I had a feeling that she envied my chicks for the amount of time Melody spent with them. Aiva was also very inquisitive. I can recall a particularly funny episode of her inquisitiveness. One evening Melody was sitting in the balcony, sipping lemonade and admiring the beautiful evening sun. Playfully, she scooped out a cold, hard, slippery substance from her glass and slipped it towards Aiva who, until now, was sitting quietly with her best behaviour on full display. Her curious eyes remained fixed on the substance as she tilted her head from side to side. Slowly she lifted herself up and went towards it. As soon as she tried to sniff it, the chase began.

The moment Melody would be back from school, she would come rushing towards the balcony to check on my young ones. She would greet them with a series of human-sounding chirps and hand-feed them. I would flutter around and chirp

Then she would keep it a hop away and wait for me to jump onto her finger. I loved knocking



on the painted, sometimes pink, small doors at the end of her fingers. I would tap and knock with my beak but could never open them. I had to stop when Melody would tap me on my beak and whisper "Stop knocking on my nails!" I would then direct my view to the sprig of millet and bob my head to say it was yummy! The trick always made her laugh. She would then join me in this bobbing dance. Using a millet sprig, she taught me a series of obstacles. After I went up a ladder, down a stick, through a tunnel, onto her skateboard, and shot a ping pong ball goal with my sharp beak, I would be allowed to sit at the dinner table and eat bread before going back to my nest.

But lately, Melody's time with me had reduced drastically. At first, I thought it was because she was studying so hard for her exams. I had half a mind to complain to her teacher but of course, I could only speak bird language.

I remember that night, vividly. I had just gone off to my nest. But even before I could snuggle my head inside my own body for a good night's sleep, Aiva started barking. Her loud, consistent barks were accompanied by a loud, distinct siren and flashing blue and red lights. I was startled by all the commotion. I peeped inside Melody's room and saw two hefty men taking her away on a stretcher. She looked flushed and had red rashes all over her body. She saw me peeping inside and smiled weakly.

She lifted her frail hand to say bye before she was taken away. It was the first time I saw such a thing happen. That night, whenever I closed my eyes, Melody's pained expression flashed in front of my eyes. I was unable to accept that it would be a long time before I saw her again.

Melody's exit disturbed me a lot. Sleep did not come easy. I would dwell on her last words, "Hope to see you soon."

In the days that followed, Aiva and I fed on the sweet memories of our times with Melody. Each discussion somehow ended with Melody. We really really missed her ... and finally when I could bear it no longer, I decided to go off in search of Melody. I had already sent my children away ... what did I have now? I went to bid adieu to Aiva but she insisted on coming along. I knew how much she missed Melody, but honestly speaking, it was not simply out of empathy that I agreed. I was won over by Aiva's argument that her keen sense of smell will come in handy. And so we decided that I would fly while Aiva would run, and together we would find our friend.

For the next few days, we dodged many troubles. We wiggled past the city traffic and ignored many prying eyes until finally we located Melody's family car parked outside a hospital building. What a welcoming sight! The moment was overwhelming for both of us. We felt as though we had found an

oasis in a desert! Aiva's search for Melody's distinct sweet odour and my eagle-like view from the sky had found the target. Yes, we had travelled miles, stopping only to catch our breath or eat food offered by some kind passerby or sometimes just to relocate the smell trail, and yes we fought the fear of the unknown for days ... yet it was worth it, after all. I danced in excitement. I swooped down, landed on Aiva and chirpingly told her the plan.

'There is someone knocking on my window ...' Melody repeated weakly. Through the slight gap in the window, I had heard her say this to the nurse a short while ago. But this time the nurse turned towards her and said, 'Who would come knocking at the thirteenth floor window of a hospital to wish someone "Get Well Soon"? If someone really wants, there are elevators that work and doors that open to let people in.' Of course she wouldn't know that it was I who happened to knock feebly at the window. I was knocking to attract attention, I wanted someone to remove the curtains that covered the outside view from where Melody lay in her bed.

Just to humour Melody, the nurse came towards the window and opened it. She didn't expect to find anything on the other side of the window. She had surprise written all over her face when I flew right inside and landed straight on Melody's shoulder. If she thought that was enough surprise for the day, she was wrong. At that very moment we heard a

booming bark. Aiva came bounding in through the door and gave Melody a wet, loving lick. And so, after almost a month, we were with each other once again. The hospital security officer who was chasing Aiva entered the room along with two other men. They were panting. The nurse was still looking at us, surprised. Melody's parents seemed awestruck. Melody, Aiva and I snuggled close, lost in our little world. How we had longed for this reunion!

Some bonds are just so special, the bond of friendship for one! It can connect and unite living beings in strange, mysterious ways. Melody recovered quickly after we were allowed to stay with her. As for that room on the thirteenth floor, it became popular and was sought after for a quick recovery. A picture of the window appeared in the local newspaper with the heading "Most-photographed window of the season".

Children loved clicking selfies there. They had painted a girl, a dog and a bird on it ... for memory's sake.



Anavi Kurade

Anavi Kurade, a student of Class VI at Indus International School, Bommasandra, Bengaluru has bagged the third prize.

I started to love reading since I was very young. I would always be hooked into one book or another, be it Physics or vampires. Every drop of ink that was etched onto the pages of a book held millions of new creatures and places. My imagination was sparked, and not soon after, I started to write my own stories, followed by poems, and then, eventually, songs. This imagination also aroused my curiosity about new technologies, and out of this interest grew my passion for programming robots and AI. My parents supported me in ways that I will be ever grateful for, giving me help on my journey to success. A story is never complete without action, so I decided to take up the sport of shooting. I found joy in practicing shooting 10 metres with an air rifle.



Dimensional Distress

Anavi Kurade

It was a usual Friday night, but Laura Mowen's life wasn't a typical college student's life. I'm a bully victim, so I get hurt often. Though today was very bad, I was cut, bruised and bleeding. I staggered into my room, into my apartment and collapsed onto my bed. I willed the darkness to cover me, hoping to disappear forever. I closed my eyes, wishing I could escape my suffering. Soon I fell asleep, and had a nightmare, a terrible one.

Suddenly a sharp pain ran down my spine as my head throbbed. I saw that my wound had opened. 'Shoot,' I mumbled as I cautiously got up

and made my way to the bathroom. Right then I saw that there was someone knocking on my huge thirteenth-floor window. The figure was blurred in the dark, night sky, leaving me clueless about who was outside.

'Open the window, Laura,' said a beautiful irresistible voice. I complied and did what it asked without a second thought. A woman in a long, white gown gracefully floated through my window and landed on the bedroom floor. She had long, brown tresses that reached her waist and unnaturally beautiful golden eyes that gleamed.

'Who are you and why are you here?' I questioned. There had to be a reason for her visit. No one came to me without reason. I guess that was mainly due to the fact that most people despised me.

'My name is Arabella. I need your help. There is a crystal and it is falling apart, and so am I. Only you can save it, because you are one whose heart is pure and I believe that I can trust you.'

She looked down at my arms and looked mortified. 'What the hell happened to your arm, and who did this to you?' she questioned. I shrugged it off. 'This is a result of bullying. It's normal! I'm used to it and the kids in the school usually target me.'

Her expression morphed to one of shock and disgust. 'It's not normal to get hurt so much at such a young age, especially due to violence. Trust me, they will soon regret it. Mark my words,' she said

and tenderly took my arm. She muttered something and my skin knit back together. The blood and purple patches disappeared along with the pain. I sighed happily; a day without pain, a day when I didn't have to be cautious about my actions.

'Magic,' she stated. I pulled my hand back. She could hurt me as well. 'How ...' I started, but was stopped when the darkened diamond on her pendant necklace cracked. I blanked out. My mind became one with the darkness.

I heard a slurred voice after God knows how long. I'd passed out. My eyes fluttered as I adjusted to the bright light. The first thing I saw was Arabella standing next to me. 'Oh, you're awake,' she said. I glanced to my right. I looked out the window to see havoc everywhere. There were strange creatures of different colours, shapes and sizes roaming about the land, performing strange actions. Outside my apartment, I saw a huge fight, people fighting deathly-pale creatures.

'The gem was the only object which kept the dimensions apart. Without it, all the dimensions have collided. The world is a mess and soon everything, as you know it, won't exist,' Arabella said sadly.

'What can we do?' I questioned, desperate for answers and information.

'We need a drop of nectar from the Skliro Brochen, the rarest flower, to put over the shards.

However, it is trapped in the shed on the other side of the fight between humans and vampires.'

We spent the next few hours formulating plans and getting to know each other. I was a person who relied on trust and believed it was very important. Our plan was decent and the best we could think of. But it had a high risk of failure. One wrong move and the world along with me would be majorly compromised. And I might end up dead. 'Tell me, what are you?' I asked.

To this she replied, 'I'm the half human dimension keeper. I was brought to life by the gods when they created the multiverses. They told me that when the gem would get weak, they would give one person the power to bond together the stone. That person is you, and you will have to be the one to save it and me,' she said.

'What do you mean save you?' I questioned.

'The crystal is a part of me. When I was weakened, the diamond got weak. When the diamond got weak, I got weaker and it went on until the crystal broke,' she said regretfully.

We floated out the window, thanks to Arabella's magic, and landed on the paved cement. We cautiously followed the sound of commotion and made way to the place where the fight was taking place. I positioned myself near the shack, behind a large rock, where I could not get hurt. I peeked around the corner.

Bullets were being fired. Bodies were dropping dead everywhere and blood gushed out. The wounds made a horrific sight as vampires bit into people, staining their fangs with blood. This was it ... life or death ... it was now or never. Arabella brought in the werewolves and everyone froze. They turned to look and then got stuck in a trance, thanks to magic.

I knew that the trance wouldn't last long. Trying my best to keep quiet, I held the shards in my hands and ran, ducking behind large objects. I felt a drop of thick red liquid fall from above and onto my fingers. I looked up to see Arabella slowly bleeding because the crystal broke. They relied on each other to stay alive. While my concentration was elsewhere, I stepped on a leaf, breaking everyone's trance.

'A human is trying to breach our warfront: get her!' cried a voice. I ran for dear life, clutching the shards closer to my heart. I hid behind a large barrel and then ran through the shadows towards the shack. I heard the voices and steps come closer to me. I ran faster than before, fear taking me over. Adrenaline pumped through my blood, helping me run faster as my heart pounded against my chest. The only thoughts that were in my head were to get the crystal repaired and escape.

'Where is the girl?' hissed a voice.

'There she is,' said an equally cold and creepy one. I dashed under the brown wooden door into the shack and looked around desperately. A calming

glow issued from the darkness, and a beautiful flower stood on a rotting wooden step. It was golden and orange and had a blood red drop of nectar clinging from a petal.

I made a dash across the wooden floor towards the flower. Unfortunately my foot got stuck in a broken floorboard right before the step. I fell. The crystal shards fell right before the flower, and a drop of nectar fell down. I looked up in fear to see a pointed pair of silver fangs stained with red blood. They belonged to a pale hooded figure about to descend onto my forehead. It had to be a vampire, I just knew it. My life was in danger. Just then the world went into slow motion, the drop slowly headed towards the crystal, and the fangs got dangerously close.

Finally the drop reached the shards and they fused with a golden glow, spreading light. The light was blinding, my hair flew at the power emanating from the diamond and then my eyes closed. I felt relief and then fear. The vampire was behind me!

Just then I felt a sharp pain in my head and woke up with a jolt, sweating, with blood dripping down my forehead. Was that a dream? I asked myself. I looked down at my arm, which bore signs of all my previous injuries. There were around 40 scars, a large cut down my arm and a huge purple patch. I glanced at my bedside clock. It was 11:50 p.m. Only 30 minutes had passed. It was definitely a dream, I

said to myself. It was a pity that the kids who tried to hurt me wouldn't regret using me as a punching bag and anger reliever.

I got off the bed and made my way to the bathroom when someone knocked on my thirteenth floor window. Was this my dream or was this a brand new adventure waiting for me?

The same angelic voice called out, 'Open the window, Laura.' Let's see where this adventure goes and ends, and maybe I'll be able to say sorry to Arabella for messing it up. This time the story will end differently. I won't get so close to dying I hope, I muttered to myself and then threw open the window, hoping to see the same familiar face.



Jatin Aditya Tennety

Jatin Aditya Tennety, a student of Class V at National Public School, Bengaluru, has been adjudged the first runner-up.

Jatin Aditya is a lively, vivacious boy studying in Class V of National Public School, HSR Layout, Bangalore. He enjoys reading fiction and non-fiction, playing with friends and going on long walks with his pet German Shepherd puppy —Shadow. His favourite toys are from the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles series. When he is not playing or reading, he can be found travelling or listening to music. He celebrates his birthday on June 5.



Hotel California

Jatin Aditya Tennety

Edward's summer holidays were about to start. It had been a long and tough semester. And he was aware that he was not very popular at school.

Edward joined St Mark's school a year ago but hadn't been able to make many friends. He came from a family of farmers who were always hard-pressed for money. And St Mark's School was a prestigious institution for children from wealthy families. Edward, unfortunately, was always considered to be an outsider.

Edward felt that his classmates found him odd and that his teachers did not want him around. He felt they deliberately gave him low marks.

Except for one person—his new geography teacher, Mr Smith.

Mr Smith, with his grey hair, silver-rimmed spectacles and kind, blue eyes, had become Edward's friend and guide in a matter of few weeks. He seemed to understand Edward's loneliness and his teenage fears. He spoke kindly to Edward and helped him whenever he faced a problem in some subject. If it had not been for Mr Smith, Edward would have surely run away from school by now.

Edward wasn't really looking forward to his summer holidays. As it was the harvesting season, his dad and brothers would be out on the farm the whole day. His dog, Wobbly, was too old to play. And his few friends in the village would all be away to the city markets. Edward was sure his summer holidays would be drab and boring.

Edward picked up his bag and made his way to the bus station where he would catch the 9 p.m. bus to his village. When the bus arrived, he found it empty, as expected. He plonked himself down in a corner seat and dozed off. Nearly 10 hours of a bumpy, grinding journey lay ahead of him.

The bus was going too fast, he thought. The driver needed to slow down. For God's sake ... there could be an accident! And what has happened to the road? It's so smooth! The bus was speeding ahead as if it was turbo-fuelled. Just then the bus took a vicious turn.

'The bus won't make it!' Edward let out a silent scream, just before the bus crashed into the railing by the road. He could feel the bus leap into the air, turn a couple of times and smash into the rocks below.

When Edward opened his eyes and felt himself all over, he was surprised that he was not injured at all. He stumbled to his feet and headed towards the distant line of lamps without looking back at the debris. When he reached the lights, he found that he was standing in front of a tall multi-storeyed hotel. The blue blinking lights in the foyer proclaimed the name as "Hotel California". The receptionist smiled sweetly at Edward and his red lips glistened in the dim lights. For a moment he looked like a lizard.

'Are you looking for a room, Mr Edward?' he asked. His voice sounded like that of a snake slithering over dry leaves. Edward was surprised. How could there be a hotel in the middle of nowhere? How did the receptionist know his name?

Edward fumbled for an answer and stammered, 'Yes, I need a room.'

The receptionist smiled again. For a moment, his teeth looked like fangs. 'Mr Edward,' he said, 'I hope you don't mind that we have only one room available on the thirteenth floor.' Edward nodded. He had no choice. He had to stay over for the night.

The bell boy ushered him into a dingy lift. It creaked painfully upwards and deposited them in

a dimly lit corridor. The carpet was worn out, the electrical wiring was sticking out of the walls and there was a musty smell of age and neglect. Room number 1313 was going to be his abode for the night. Inside the room, Edward found a rickety wooden cot with thin pillows and a torn blanket, a small fridge, a TV with a broken screen, a noisy AC and a large window covered with wooden laminates. As Edward lay on the bed, he could hear the distant howls of a pack of jackals. Somewhere nearby, an owl hooted gloomily. Behind the walls he could hear weird sounds. He also thought he heard a human groan. Edward shuddered. It was a spooky night.

Deep into the night, Edward woke up with a start. He heard it again ... a knocking on the window. 'Someone's knocking on my 13th floor window,' thought Edward. And a shiver ran down his spine. He didn't know what to do. Again the knock sounded on the window ... a rapid 2, 3, 2. Edward could not contain himself anymore. With floundering steps and shivering hands he reached for the window latch. The knock came louder and more insistent. The blood drained from his face as he opened the latch and flung the window panes wide. The cold darkness invaded the room. But there was no one at the window. Edward turned back, relieved that it was just his imagination playing tricks on him, when he heard a voice, 'How are you Edward?'

He whirled around and froze in fear. Mr Smith was at the window, hair neatly combed, a kind smile on his face and suspended in the air. Edward heard himself croaking incredulously.

'Yes my boy,' said Mr Smith, shaking from side to side as the wind buffeted him. 'I have come to take you home.'

'No,' Edward screamed, 'this is not happening!' And he started backing away from the window. Mr Smith's kind blue eyes suddenly turned icy. Angriily he asked, 'You are not coming home with me?' Edward turned and tried to run away from the room. But Mr Smith's claw-like hands clutched his shoulder and pulled him out of the window into the dark abyss. As Edward plummeted to the ground, he could see the light blinking stupidly. Hotel California ... Room number 1313 ... 13th floor ... a hotel in the middle of nowhere ... a creepy receptionist ... Edward knew that he had stayed in a haunted hotel. And Mr Smith was the haunter-in-chief.

Edward screamed for the last time, 'I am not going home!' Mr Smith was shaking him so vigorously that his eyes popped open.

Edward was sitting in the stationary bus and his father was shaking him roughly, 'Wake up! You have reached home.'



Naviya Gupta

Naviya Gupta, a student of Class VI at Cathedral And John Connon School, Mumbai, has been adjudged the second runner-up.

Naviya Gupta is a 12-year old ardent reader and a budding story writer. Artistically gifted, she has a multifaceted personality. She switches from Bharatnatyam to Ballet with effortless ease and is a competitive pianist and artist. She is also a rank holder in various Mathematics and Science examinations.



One Fine Detective

Naviya Gupta

Maya's summer was no fun so far. The only form of progress she had made was the detective agency, and even that wouldn't be counted as progress. The truth was, she had no members. Her detective agency was a one-man agency. Sometimes she felt lonely, but she was okay with that. That wasn't her biggest problem. Her problem was that she had no cases. None whatsoever. The whole purpose of a detective agency was its cases and not having them basically meant that her agency was pointless. She hated pointlessness.

As she sat in her "office" (her dad's garage), she thought about how she would make her summer

useful (and possibly get some members for her agency).

She absentmindedly stared at her old doll house. All those pretend games from her childhood were trapped under layers and layers of misty cobwebs. Pretend! She could solve a pretend case. That would definitely make her summer fruitful. This particular case would be of a murder, she decided. She liked murder mysteries and had always wanted to solve one. The only problem with them was everyone was a suspect. Even the nice people. That's why she had tried her best to avoid murder mysteries so far. She shook her head vigorously. She couldn't afford pessimistic thoughts at the moment. She had a pretend case to solve!

Maya stood outside Dr Pepper's clinic with a box of pastries in her hands. She was Maya's first suspect. Maya liked Dr Pepper. She was fun to talk to and gave Maya free mint toothpaste when hers ran out. Even though she was a dentist and dentists are supposed to have a perpetual war against sugar, Dr Pepper had a sweet tooth. She rang the doorbell. Dr Pepper opened the door with a snap. Her face was contorted with anger. Maya's instinct told her to run but she stood rooted to the spot. Dr Pepper's expression changed the moment she saw Maya. She smiled. Her warm brown eyes were back.

'Look who's here!' she exclaimed, stepping out of the door. Maya wordlessly handed her the box of

pastries. 'What are you standing there for? Come on in!' she said.

'No, thank you, Dr Pepper,' Maya said politely. 'Well, suit yourself. Thank you for the pastries!' added Dr Pepper. As she turned around to go inside, a single white handkerchief fell from her pocket. Maya picked it up and pulled out her notebook. She would have to write this down:

Clue 1: Dr Pepper's white handkerchief she wrote in loopy handwriting. She checked the handkerchief for initials. They were embroidered into the border rather untidily.

Initials: SP

She turned the handkerchief over to check for stains. There was one ghastly red blotch. In her opinion, it looked like blood, but she had to be practical here.

Stains (red in colour): Ketchup/medicine/blood?

There, she was done. She stuffed the handkerchief inside her sling bag. Her next stop: Carley Graham's villa. There was a lot to say about Carley Graham. Maya could write a sixty-four-volume book series on her. For one, she was mean. Her parents were mean. She wouldn't have been surprised if Carley's entire family was mean. Carley gave her dirty looks in class. If it was any relief, this was one suspect Maya enjoyed accusing. She rang the doorbell of the villa, bracing herself to be greeted with verbal daggers.

Unfortunately, Ms Obnoxious herself stood at

the door. She was a mess. In one hand she held a mirror and in the other, a tube of lip gloss. It seemed as if she was in the middle of a makeover as half her lips was covered in the overly sticky substance. Her hair was done up in rollers and only half of her toenails were painted. 'What do you want?' Carley asked, her greasy lips turning into a thin line.

Maya let herself in without an invitation. She wasn't going to get one, anyway. 'Something,' she said, examining the artefacts on the mantelpiece. 'What's this?' she asked, holding up a bottle of blood red liquid.

'Daddy's medicine. Why?' Carley asked.

'I'm taking this,' said Maya, shoving it in her bag. This was all the evidence she needed. Without waiting for a response, Maya darted out.

'You're up to your detective stuff, aren't you? You and your dumb childish games!' Carley's shrill, cruel laughter echoed after her. Maya steeled herself. She could deal with Carley later. Back to the case.

Clue 2: Mr Graham's medicine

Prescribed by?

Prescribed for which ailment?

Colour: Red

Her next location was Cory Chung's dojo. Cory was a karate teacher and almost everyone in Maya's neighbourhood attended his karate lessons. He was

also famous for his fortune cookies. Maya knocked twice. There was no doorbell, and her knuckles hurt from the knocking. She had figured Cory's swords would help her with the murder mystery. The door slammed open and an Asian man with shiny black hair stood at the door. 'Oh, it's you,' he said rather disappointedly. 'Well, come on in.'

Maya mutely examined his display of weapons. He had swords, shields, staffs, whips and other dangerous-looking equipment. This guy was ready to go to war! Then she saw a dentist's probe right at the end of the glass case. She wasn't sure it was a part of the exhibit. At the hooked end of the probe was a stain the same as the red stain she had seen on Dr Pepper's handkerchief and the same colour as the liquid she had seen in Carley's father's medicine bottle. 'Um, Master Cory? What is this probe for?' Maya asked nervously.

'Dr Pepper gave me those as a sample to add to my weapons display. It's not exactly a weapon, but it'll do,' Cory said, pulling out a tray full of steaming fortune cookies from his oven. 'Cookie?' he asked, offering her the tray. Maya took one and bit into it.

'So, can I borrow it?' she asked, carefully picking up the probe. 'Just remember to give it back,' he said, following her to the door.

'Thank you so much. The cookie is delicious,' said Maya. Cory Chung smiled, and as soon as he shut the door, Maya fished out her clue book.

Clue 3: Dr Pepper's probe (borrowed by Cory Chung). Hooked end dipped in red.

Red colour = Blood/Medicine/Ketchup

Cory Chung had told Maya a lot of things, but not enough. Maya's pretend case was far from solved. She had one more suspect left and she was on her way to the suspect's domain: Cindy's salon and spa. Her mom went there once a week for her manicure. All the mothers in town did. As Maya gazed around the packed spa, she wondered if it was like this, every day. Who would want to get their nails done in a zoo of people? The thought made her shudder. 'This is our sauna. You don't get to try this until you're sixteen,' Cindy said, facing Maya. Maya had asked for a special tour of Cindy's salon so that she could find clues. So far, she hadn't found any, but she had seen a sauna, a pedicure pavilion and the hairdresser's salon, all of which were extremely boring. She diverted her attention to Cindy instead.

Rumour had it that Cindy Davis had reached the finals of the national beauty contest but had missed the crown by a small margin. She had done her makeup and hair herself. People trusted her beauty treatments. When you looked at Cindy Davis, you knew why. She was pretty. Really pretty. Cindy had chocolate brown hair with natural gold highlights. It was straight, with slight waves at

the ends. Today it was done up in a high ponytail. Cindy had olive skin and blue almond-shaped eyes. Her cheeks were tinged with just a bit of red rouge and her eyeshadow was a shimmery pink. Her clothes were just as beautiful as her face. She wore an off-shoulder turquoise T-shirt and black ripped jeans. Denim-coloured flip flops adorned her feet. Today, she wore no accessories except for silver hoop earrings.

'... And this is our teeth whitening space!' Cindy exclaimed as they entered a room. The room was completely white. There were dentist chairs occupied by people with their mouths wide open. Attendants kneeled over them with floss and whitening tools. The entire room smelled of mouthwash. Then Maya saw it. On every table lay a solitary bottle of red liquid, exactly like Mr Graham's!

'Cindy, what's this?' Maya asked, pointing to the medicine bottle.

'Oh! This is the red tooth syrup recommended by that dentist down the road, Dr Pepper. It works wonders. I went to her just this morning for new stock. She suddenly got really angry and accused me of stealing it! Then she said she would never give me so much as a drop again. She's kind of eccentric,' Cindy said, grimacing.

'This is why Dr Pepper had been so mad when I had gone to meet her,' Maya whispered to herself.

'Could this be... a real mystery?' It wasn't a murder mystery, but still, a mystery all the same. Maya had walked right into it without imagining in her wildest dreams that it would turn out this way. What was up with Dr Pepper? It wasn't like her to shout at anyone. She was one of the calmest people Maya knew! Once again, Maya fished out her clue book. This time she was smiling. She had a real mystery to solve!

A REAL MYSTERY!

Why was Dr Pepper angry?

Why did everyone have that red medicine in possession? What was that liquid?

Why did Dr Pepper accuse Cindy of stealing her medicines?

Suspect: Dr Pepper

She knew her next stop: Dr Pepper's clinic. She rang that rusty old doorbell for the second time that day. Dr Pepper stood at the door looking rather disgruntled. 'What is it, Maya?' she asked rather irritably.

'Oh! Mr Graham wanted to thank you for the red syrup,' Maya said smoothly. She had rehearsed well. 'Also, Cindy says "hi"'. She really needs a new stock of these syrup bottles for her teeth-whitening section.' At this, Dr Pepper's expression hardened. 'Yes, she asked me for fresh stock this morning.'

'I heard you lost your temper?' Maya asked.

Dr Pepper sighed. 'Yes, I don't trust Cindy. Her manicures made my nails extremely sticky ... and her pedicures, the less I say the better. I almost had to amputate my toes! If that's not enough, last night five boxes of my syrup went missing. The only person who would need them in such bulk would be Cindy. For some reason, there is always a free nail treatment offer over there. I always refuse it but I am probably the only one who does so.' The doctor ended with a huff.

'So what does your syrup do exactly?' Maya asked. Now she was curious.

'It strengthens tooth enamel, but if mixed with certain rare chemicals, the effects can be addictive and induce a false sensation of satisfaction,' Dr. Pepper said, lightly.

Realization dawned on Maya. Could Cindy be ... a fraud? She could have mixed Dr Pepper's red syrup in her cosmetics. Dr Pepper had said that her syrup mixed with a chemical could get the user addicted. Then even if Cindy's manicures and teeth whiteners weren't good, everyone would feel that they were and would come back for more! Only Dr Pepper refused the free nail treatment and that's why she could see that Cindy's manicures weren't good. Cindy could have been making money even though the quality of her makeovers was terrible! Now all Maya had to do was prove it!

Ten minutes later, Maya was inside Cindy's spa. 'Maya! What are you doing here?' cried a very flustered Cindy.

Maya ignored her and ran towards the manicure room. She didn't have time to answer questions. 'Attention everyone, stop all activities right now!' Maya called out, climbing onto the nearest table and tipping over quite a few items in the process. All the faces in the room turned to look at her. 'This woman,' she said, pointing at Cindy who had followed her into the manicure room, 'is a fraud, and I can prove it to you. Hand over the nail polish.' She ordered a timid-looking spa attendant. The attendant pressed it into her hands obediently. Maya gestured towards the woman in the front row. 'Now apply it to all the nails on her left hand,' Maya said authoritatively. The attendant did so, but this time with some hesitation as Cindy was glaring at her from behind Maya's back. The nail polish was applied messily and shakily. 'What do you think of this?' Maya asked the woman, holding up her hand.

'The nail polish has been applied untidily, now that I look at it. Perhaps all the raving reviews of this place had coloured my opinion and I thought mine were done well at first. Now I see their true colours,' the woman replied.

Maya poured the red treatment ointment all over the woman's nails. 'Now what do you think?' she

asked. The woman's expression changed. She looked dazed. 'This is delightful. I am definitely coming back for more,' she said dreamily.

Maya then held up the bottle of Dr Pepper's red syrup. 'Cindy's cosmetics contain a syrup which when mixed with certain chemicals is addictive and induces a false sense of satisfaction. Cindy has been cheating you all!' she exclaimed.

Suddenly, Maya felt someone pull her harshly from behind. 'How dare you ruin my steady business?' Cindy hissed at Maya.

A customer right at the back stood up and declared, 'I just posted that video on Facebook. Now everyone will know how you are cheating people.'

Cindy turned to face the woman. Her face was contorted with anger. Then she stumbled out of the room.

Suddenly, time seemed to stand still as all the occupants of the room stood up in applause. Maya turned around to see who they were clapping for. There was nobody behind her. Could they be clapping for her? It took her two minutes to register this. For Maya, that moment was magical. She wanted to hold on to it forever and never let go. Then somebody uttered those beautiful words, which would ring in Maya's ears for days to come. 'Little girl, you are one fine detective. One very fine detective!'

Senior Fiction



Naveen David

Naveen David, a student of Class XI at Indus International School, Bommasandra, Bengaluru bagged the first prize in the senior section.

Naveen David has been devouring books since he was six. Several years down the line he's still an avid reader, but also enjoys playing cricket, watching movies and spending time with his dogs. While he enjoys writing short stories, the prospect of having one published wasn't likely until he learnt about the Scholastic Writing Awards. He also enjoys studying Science, although Math tends to give him goosebumps. He has a younger brother who has a tendency to drive him crazy.



Clyde and the Heist

Naveen David

Svalbard is extreme. Of course, when you live halfway between Europe and the North Pole, things are bound to be difficult. Temperatures regularly drop far below freezing point. The local bear population outnumbers that of humans. The island is so remote, it was chosen to hold all the world's seeds in case a worldwide catastrophe eradicates humans.

That's pretty extreme.

Everyone who lives here is pretty odd too. They're all either trying to hide, or they want a challenge, or they're completely crazy, or all three.

I'm the last sane one.

After I broke out of prison, I somehow managed to sneak onto a ship and ended up here, in this abandoned, unwanted icebox. To be fair, the mailman is nice; but here fugitives are more common than snowflakes.

Enough about the past, let's get back to today. After all, today is an "interesting" day.

I step out the door of my shabby apartment at precisely 8:00 a.m. Shoes tied, shirt tucked, parka zipped up to protect against the cold that nips at my fingers. Same as always. I toss my briefcase into the back of my beat-up Volvo. Same as always.

What isn't normal about today is the fact that I'm about to ruin my boss's life.

Why, you may ask. Because the scumbag deserves it. He's "forgotten" to pay me on more than one occasion; demoted me for being a few minutes late; given me a whack on the head on at least one occasion. I'm not the only one. Actually, I'm more fortunate than most.

It's funny how similar this is to the crime I was arrested for. Perhaps I should try to live a clean, safe life, but that's not who I am.

I step out of my car onto the garbage-ridden atrocity known as the staff parking lot. In front of me, a massive metal dome juts out from a never-ending line of shabby wood-and-concrete buildings.

I take a deep breath and walk in, flashing my identification card at the burnt out, disinterested guard at the door. He doesn't bat an eyelid.

I quicken my already brisk pace as I scan the hallway. Nobody else knows what's going to happen.

Nobody knows that this whole business is about to, quite literally, collapse. Nobody.

I feel beads of sweat forming on my brow and my palms. Nervousness takes over. Trapped in the spiral of my thoughts, I fail to notice the milky-eyed janitor in front of me.

With a cacophony of noise, we collide. His bucket—and my briefcase—meet the floor. I find my cheek against the cool granite. The janitor groans, his thin hair wet. The poor man's head had smashed against the sharp corner of a table nearby.

Passers-by are beginning to notice. Slowly a crowd forms. The janitor is propped up against the wall, his milky eyes covered by thick, wrinkled eyelids. He's breathing steadily; out for now. I gotta finish this quickly.

I mutter my apologies into the janitor's ear and continue my brisk walk down the corridor. But now I'm unsure if I should do this.

'Turn around now,' says a voice in my head. 'The police will catch you and you'll spend the rest of your life rotting away in a dark cell. Is that really what you want? Years wasted in prison? Leave now

and throw the briefcase into the ocean. Then perhaps you'll have a decent life. Stop this madness. It won't end well.'

The voice is rich and angry at the same time. Angry at fate for giving it such poor odds. Angry at its boss for abusing it. Angry at itself for throwing away its chances at a regular life.

The voice is mine.

No. I won't listen to it. I have to do this. Better to try and fail than to submit to the regime. Too late now, anyway.

'Don't be a fool. Just drop the case and go home. Not your pathetic one-room apartment. Home. Home where it's warm and sunny and where you don't need to slave away to make some cruel dictator rich. Just leave. You're accomplishing nothing. Go home. Be happy. Maybe you can build a life for yourself. A real life, not ... this.'

'I can't. If I leave now, how many others will waste their lives submitting to the regime? And there's nothing for me at home. The second I arrive, the cops will get me.'

'Their lives aren't your problem. They are the regime.'

'I can't run away. After all, this is what I do. So shut up and get out of my head.'

'Leave, and I promise you'll have safe travels. Leave and—'

'Shut up.'

'All you have to do is drop the case and turn around. Don't you want to see home again?'

'Stop.'

'All it takes is—'

'SHUT UP!'

And just like that, he's gone.

Dissociative identity disorder is odd like that. One moment I'm, well, me; the next, I'm a completely different person. I've managed to keep it under control but once in a while he emerges. I call him Clyde.

Clyde, in my opinion, is somewhat cowardly and persistent. That's not always a bad thing, but sometimes it gets a little annoying. For example, sometimes at a supermarket, Clyde tries to get me to avoid buying a new type of cereal. Clyde is also extremely manipulative. He's almost like my evil doppelganger.

All these thoughts fill my head as I swing open a steel door and finally enter a corridor. The walls are metallic and cool to the touch. A few metres above me are light bulbs shrouding the room in harsh bluish light. Nobody but Clyde and me are present.

I fumble with the lock before it finally clicks into place. My hands are shaking. Sweat drips into my eyes despite the frigid air. Soon someone will start banging on the door in the hope of getting to their office. I need to be quick, or else I'll spend years of precious time in a prison cell. Between me and the

basement stands only one door. Unfortunately, the door can only be unlocked by my boss. In theory, at least.

The thick titanium door is protected by both a passcode and biometric security. Behind this door lies a stairwell leading to the company's main computing system. In addition to this, if placed well, a few explosives could destroy the building without damaging surrounding apartments. So if I don't mess it up, I destroy the business without harming customers or staff. In theory, at least. Time to get to work.

I carefully open the case and pull out two items, each designed to break through one part of the security system. The first? A Post-it note. Not any regular Post-it. This one has the passcode on it. How did I get it? I can't tell you that. The second? Silicone gel. When my boss was asleep, I had managed to create an imprint of his finger on the gel. Fool proof, in theory. My hands shaking, I unfold the Post-it and read the number: 185628. As I key it in, a thought strikes me. When this company collapses, where will I work? How will I earn money?

'Finally, you understand the futility of this. Why not just quit your job? You still get to leave the regime if you do.'

'Stop it.'

'Don't make a mistake. The regime doesn't need to fall for you to quit this job.'

'So? It needs to fall. And if it does, someone will replace it. Someone offering jobs without abusing employees.'

And Clyde is gone.

Back to work. There's only one thing left to do. I plaster the gel onto my finger, throw all last-minute thoughts away and place my trembling, gel-coated pointer on the fingerprint sensor. For a second nothing happens. Then the silence of the room is broken by a click as the door swings open. A mechanical voice welcomes me into the basement.

With the door—and Clyde—out of the way, I can focus on planting the explosives and bringing this building, this regime down. I've planned this all year; now it's time to get to work.

The basement, unlike the previous room, is brightly lit. The room is made from unblemished, radiant tiles with chandeliers hanging above my head. A plush crimson carpet leads from the entrance to the left where I find a group of leather sofas surrounding a table. The table itself is empty but a cart nearby holds a bottle of champagne. One wall is decorated with oil paintings that probably date back to the 1500s. A massive bookshelf hugs another wall, leading from the sofas to the pool table to the massive TV to another door.

The sight of such luxury drowns me in rage. My boss could afford to live like this while he claimed the company's financial situation was too bad to give

me a raise. This room alone is worth millions. It'll be gone in a few hours. His fortune, his business, his reputation—all down the drain.

'Don't waste your time on him. He's just another misguided businessman. Just forget this ever happened, go to China, build a new life. After all, he won't be around forever. Didn't you notice the dwindling number of customers in the lobby? His business doesn't need a catalyst. Leave.'

'I have to do this. I have to shut him down. He still might recover.'

'So naive.'

'He's an evil man. Who knows what kind of things he'll do if his business goes global?'

'Is he really the evil one? You are the person about to blow up Svalbard's most expensive building. You are the person destroying a business your boss built all by himself. You are the person about to send us both to jail.'

'Don't you want radical change?'

'Radical change doesn't always need the destruction of buildings and businesses.'

'I'm trying to stop the regime that abuses all these people who only work here because there's no alternative. I'm an agent of change.'

'You're not an agent of change. You're a terrorist.'

'I've had enough. Shut it or I'll shut it for you.'

'How? I'm not a physical character. Therefore you cannot inflict physical harm on me.'

'Imagination is a powerful tool, Clyde. A weapon, even.'

'You want to fight me in an imaginary battle.'

'If I kill you in my mind, is your character dead?'

'Now is not the time for philosophy. Just leave this place and give up this stupid quest. Anyway, there's not a chance you'll win. I know you better than you know yourself.'

'I could say the same about you. And in my imagination, I design the battlefield.'

'But is it really your imagination?'

My vision starts fading. Sections are vanishing, only to be replaced by blank white. I begin to make out a figure somewhere in the distance. The figure is Clyde.

Clyde is facing away from me, staring into the pasty white surroundings that stretch on and on forever. He wears a pair of jeans, a grey hoodie and a pair of hiking boots—all with unnerving slashes in them. Clyde has dark, uneven hair that falls down to his shoulders. A scar stretches along his neck. When he finally speaks, his raspy voice surprises me.

'So here we are. Two crewmates fighting for control of a storm-tossed ship. Who will win? Only time can tell.'

'Clyde, stop.'

Clyde turns around slowly, a hockey mask covering his face. Once again, his hoarse voice croaks out.

'Me? Stop? I'm the voice of reason here. Maybe it's time you stopped. Your careless decisions are dooming me, your boss and hundreds of innocents to a wasted life. I'm about to take over the ship. Either obey me or ... walk the plank. I guess you're going for the latter.'

Clyde leaps towards me in one fluid motion. His boots leave the ground and suddenly a machete appears in his grip. I jump to the side, barely escaping a wild slash from his machete that severs a lock of hair from my head. In that instant, I notice two things. One, Clyde has the same height and build as I do. Two, a sudden weight in my pocket. It appears Clyde isn't the only one armed.

Clyde stops right behind me. Through cracks in his hockey mask, I can see muscles twitching in apparent frustration.

'I'm surprised you lasted this long.'

'What's wrong with you?'

'You won't believe what kind of monsters one finds inside the human mind. Ah, the mind. A terrible and beautiful place. A place only one person can own. Me. Do you know what your subconscious has done to me? You have no idea how lucky you are.'

Clyde takes off his mask. The thing underneath

is grotesque, something more suited to a horror movie than to a human being. One eye is sunken, half covered by the lid. A network of scars runs across. The jawbone is half missing, as is the nose. I almost lose my breakfast.

And so I came face to face with my evil doppelganger. My evil, vengeful doppelganger. Myself.

'Feast your eyes upon what you've done to me. On the last thing you'll ever see.'

Once again, he jumps towards me. This time, however, I'm prepared. I lunge to my left and simultaneously pull a revolver out of my coat's pocket. A shot rings out and Clyde lets out a grunt. I notice a stain blossoming on the sleeve of his hoodie.

'Came prepared, did you? I'm impressed.'

I take another shot, but he's ready. Clyde turns into a blur—one moment here, the next there. Once again, the blade whistles past my ear. I turn around, adrenaline flooding my body, and I am met with the sight of Clyde leaping towards me again, a barbaric scream leaving his throat. In that instant, time slows to a crawl, Clyde's progress halting, the thumping of blood in my ears suddenly louder than ever. I notice every detail in Clyde's clothing, the chip in his front tooth, the rusted blade in his hand. I raise my gun towards him and watch the terror ripple across his face, the clenching of his muscles. Then I am pulled back by the BANG! of my pistol, and Clyde

collapses. I walk up to him as he struggles for breath.

'It's over, Clyde.'

'If I go to hell ... so do you.'

He takes one last, deep, raspy breath and points a gun between my eyes. A single shot rings out, and I collapse, the thumping of my heart slowing to a stop. Darkness takes over and I return to the cold of an Arctic apartment.





Mathavan Chidambaram

Mathavan Chidambaram, a student of Class VIII at Delhi Public School, Faridabad has won the second prize.

Mathavan is a 13-year-old boy studying in the ninth grade. Writing is one of his foremost passions along with classical Carnatic music, Bharatnatyam and the violin. In his free time, you will find him rowing on the Adyar river or cycling along the beach. Roald Dahl and Agatha Christie are his biggest inspirations.



Epiphanies in Stardust

Mathavan Chidambaram

I stare at the millions of stars and galaxies beyond the thick pane of glass that separates me from the silence outside. Some are large and dusty, half conformed, caught up in a haze of nebula, and what my teacher tells me is electromagnetic radiation. Some are sharp and bright; others are broken and fragmented in smoky spirals.

I search for Faith, my favourite star. She isn't big or small, but somewhere in between. She isn't bright or fierce or insubstantially beautiful like the other stars I see. She's actually a dull shade of blue. (My Star Classification Index says that she's type

B1. Not that I know what that means.)

I like Faith because she's like me. Nothing memorable going on, just really rather commonplace. She's always there, steady and unblinking, listening to everything I ramble about. I wonder if she can hear me through the window of my capsule. I wonder if she would have anything to say.

See, Faith isn't even her real name. Clever people around here call her Alpha Virginis or Spica, which is a rather ridiculous name if you ask me. They would tell you that she has a solar luminosity of 12,100 and a mean surface temperature of 22,400K, making her the 16th brightest star in the sky.

Maybe they've forgotten that we don't have a sky any more. Or maybe they're still in denial.

The Earth, or Terra Planeta SS3 as we now call it, is far behind us. We navigated the last few tracts of the Kuiper Belt sometime ago, leaving the final vestiges of the Solar System behind.

I try to feel at least a shred of remorse or homesickness. I feel nothing. I am numb.

I move slowly and carefully from my bunk, my legs weak and atrophied from lack of use. I surprisingly like the aimless floating. The others here find it frustrating and tiring. It makes me want to ask them why they're in such a hurry. There's nothing to win or compete for here. There's all the time in the universe to do absolutely nothing at all. What's the rush?

My bedroom capsule is very small, efficient and compact. There's a bed bunk that doubles up as a bench in the day (not that I know when it is) and a dresser compartment next to it that has 3 drawers. The bottom one has five sets of clothing. The second one has my SpaceScreen, ID card, Star Classification Index, The Realm Daily Schedule and vitamins. The top drawer is for keeping old belongings in, little keepsakes from Earth. Mine is empty.

Many of the others find the capsules stifling. I rather like mine. Here no one can talk to me about things that don't matter anymore. I can stay in my bed and talk to Faith without anyone disturbing me or asking me delicately phrased questions, silently pitying me all the while.

I was one of the very few who wanted to stay behind.

Earth had been my home for as long as I could remember. I was orphaned young and spent my entire childhood living with my grandmother on her tiny plot of land in Nepal.

Around us, Earth died.

Two major events led to the beginning of the end. One was The Inferno.

18 volcanoes, all of varying size, erupted together in the middle of the Pacific. Some said that it was triggered by the illegal deep-sea mining that China had been up to. Some said that it was because of sudden tectonic shifting. Some said that it was

because of the collapse of magma chambers under the sea bed, making the explosive calderas blow up. Grandma told me that it was probably Mother Nature unleashing her fury.

The resulting smoke, debris, cloudy ash and poisonous fumes had cloaked the world in a blanket of death and darkness. The immovable fog blotted out the sun for weeks on end. The temperature had dropped dramatically, making freezing nights in Tibet even more frigid than usual. Grandma succumbed to her many dormant respiratory illnesses and lay coughing and croaking in her string cot.

The darkness pervaded for months on end. Harvests failed and the only rain we got was leached with acid and particulate matter. The ground remained frozen in the spring, unyielding to the pickaxe I wielded. The world began to starve.

The second event was The Plague.

The outbreak of diphtheria took us at our weakest. We should have expected it though, what with people taking to drinking any water that they had at hand.

The Black Death swept through Africa, Asia and South America, swiftly and surely killing people who hadn't already died because of the noxious air quality. Coupled with The Inferno, it wiped out nearly two thirds of our world's population.

After that, the natural disasters didn't seem to end. Tsunamis, cyclones, tropical storms, blizzards, cloudbursts, heat waves—all deadlier than the ones that preceded them.

In the midst of this chaos, The Realm was created.

The Realm was an intergalactic programme to leave Earth and find a more suitable place for the rest of humanity to live in.

Targets had already been set for Viridi Bellator, a viable planet near the star system Clara, a couple of thousand light years away.

The Realm had begun to scout for candidates for the programme, and that was when humanity lost the last shreds of humanity that they had possessed.

People who were old, newborn or terminally ill were cut off without consideration. Then there was the Intelligence Test and the Stamina Protocol and the Longevity Index. A summation of these results determined whether you could get into The Realm. The Realm wanted the best, the brightest, the strongest. They wanted people who could carry on the future of the human race. They needed survivors. They did not want liabilities.

Charles Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest took on a whole new meaning.

The day came when The Realm Officers came to take me away to the station. The enormity of the situation had not dawned on me until then. I would

have to leave my grandmother behind. I would have to leave her there to die.

I remember kicking and screaming and crying in the unrelenting grip of Officer 0973 as they took me away to the docking vehicle parked casually in the snow.

The worst part was the fact that I hadn't said goodbye.

Grandma had been sleeping in her string cot in the loft. I try to imagine her waking up, calling in her weak voice for a granddaughter who would never come. I wonder if she had felt the same pain I had felt on our separation, or if she just lay back, resigning herself to fate and the snow-soft blanket of death.

I do not remember much after that. I got to know later that there were sedatives and cryo chambers involved. Not much of a surprise, that.

The people who we left behind were more humane than we will ever be. We sleep, we wake, we eat. Sometimes we talk, or float around. Some of us read about science and math and geography.

I wonder if I've become a robot, or a living being with no sentient feeling. The AI in charge of our sleeping quarters probably has more feelings than I do. Heck, Faith probably has more love in her pulsing core than I have in my heart.

I look at the people around me in their

rudimentary uniforms and ID tags, living with no purpose until we find our next Earth. I think of how this is just one endless cycle. When we reach Viridi Bellator, we will again start our apocalyptic timeline of exploitation, power and ambition.

It was at that moment that I had an epiphany.

I realised that the people who were with me now were dead. Not dead physically, but within. They were a group of wandering soulless beings, trying to hide their true selves behind misplaced veneers of pretence and false emotion. They pretend to care about Earth, when it was people like them who were responsible for its demise in the first place. They fill up top drawers with mementoes and souvenirs from a planet long gone. I wonder what it is they feel when they look at them. Remorse? Survivor's guilt? Or just an overwhelming greed for colonising our next land?

Maybe they are as I am. Numb.

Insensate. Apathetic. Paralyzed.

You see, I'm not exempt from the rest of them. I'm dead too. I died a long time ago, the day The Realm left Earth and everything I've loved and cared for behind.

It's funny, really. The Realm was launched to support the continued existence of our race in a new land. It was done in an act of defiance against fate, to ensure against all odds that a branch of Homo

Sapiens survived the apocalyptic events that should have wiped out all humanity.

In doing so, The Realm wiped out the very qualities that made us humane.

I realise this now, floating gently in front of the window of my capsule, staring at the broad expanse of constellations and galaxies interspersed with nebula and stardust and large patches of nothingness.

I want to weep for what I have lost, but I know I cannot.

Instead, I lie on my compressible mattress and fasten the straps across my chest. I want to sleep and hopefully never wake again, but that is just a fantasy.

Faith watches me like her namesake, constant and unwavering amongst the rest of her bedazzling comrades. I thank God for small mercies.

At least the stars are brighter here.



Grace Treesa Antony

Grace Treesa Antony, a student of Class VII at Gear Innovative International School, Bengaluru, has been awarded the third prize.

Spending time with family and friends, travelling, listening to music and watching movies are some of her many interests. She appreciates all forms of creativity and delights in understanding them. She is currently studying in GEAR Innovative International School. Her winning story, "The Colourful Shadow", written for *The Times of India*, NIE, inspired her to do all that she has till date. She is a regular contributor of articles related to activities of her school, for the student edition of *The Times of India*. She was part of the script-writing team of VAZ Dramatics Academy, a company which promotes theatre in schools. She looks forward to having a career in writing and always dreams of living in a house with all the walls filled with books.



The Roadside Birch

Grace Treesa Antony

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date;
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,*

*Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

Sonnet 18, William Shakespeare

All the trees were turning yellow with the exception of the birch tree on the sidewalk. It was often ignored by the pedestrians who walked by it.

However, only the tree knew what he did, and how the people were affected by it. He was the only one who saw the people drawing towards the shade he had to offer, with the pretty daisies during springtime. He would wave his leafy branches as the children returned from school, sweating and laughing away to their own glory. The ladies would often walk towards him, discussing the so-called "secrets" of the neighbourhood, and their opinions on the goings-on everywhere in every family, rich or poor. However, the trees were the only ones who knew the real secrets of the neighbourhood, having watched as it grew and developed for the past one and a half centuries.

He watched as Alvita Jessica Alexander stepped out of her house in a navy blue dress that fell till her

ankles. She clutched at her purse and looked around, as if afraid of something, then pulled at the string on the pouch and threw the contents out on the damp soil next to his roots. She went back into the house. He watched the soil as if expecting something out of the ordinary to happen. Soon, growing tired of watching the boon of his growth, he fell asleep. Later in the morning, waking up, he felt the pull of saplings somewhere in the soil. He stretched, sending nestling bats flying haphazardly into the dawn. Curious where the new lives formed, he stretched his roots down further into the earth. Feeling a little resistance, just as slight as of a little breeze, he looked down at the soil. Suddenly remembering his unusual thoughts last night and what he had seen, he looked towards the house of Alexander Rossi. He saw little white shoots on the moist wet soil that would eventually become bouquets of daisies. The first signs of the birch tree sapling he had once been had been similar. He smiled in newfound affection. He shook his branches, waking up the tree next to him. The dogwood turned and ruffled her leaves. He gestured towards the saplings. She bent her branches towards him, letting him feel the little buds on her leaves, ready to bloom as spring arrived. He realised the milk truck would soon arrive and choke him with carbon which he would struggle to fit in his stomata. Circumstances made the flowers stay closed because of the unnatural amount of air. Fall, spring and

winter would come and go, but the flowers would stay closed and eventually fall off.

And there it came, the milk truck, rumbling and grumbling as it spread dust everywhere and coated his leaves with it. Unable to breathe, the birch tree bent down with suffocation and tried moving the dust off him. However, that only made his branches get stuck under ghastly black circular rubber that was so rough that it tore apart his bark like a child would tear paper. He reared up in pain, but he only got more of his leaves torn off. Many were already on the rocky pavement, which explained the numbness he felt throughout his body. He was wondering if he would recover when one of the humans came running up to him, screaming his name. 'Devon! Devon! Oh!' Then turning to the truck driver, she said, 'How could you hurt him? What did he do to you?' Through the haze of his agony, he could hear that the voice sounded familiar. He felt the velvet on his trunk, soothing his wounds and comforting him as he inhaled the scent of roses and daisies. Did he have a name? Had someone actually taken the time to name a tree? By George, that was something rare. A little starstruck, he looked down at the little human that held his thin trunk to her chest. With a start, he realised it was Alvita herself. The only large-hearted human who actually cared enough to defend him. The harsh rays of the sun beat

down on his branches. He felt her try to shade her eyes. So he bent his branches, even though they hurt, over her head, wanting to do something, anything to pay her back. As he rested his leaves, he watched as she picked some leaves up from the ground below and dug up a hole around his roots. Placing the leaves haphazardly but respectfully in the hole, she covered it up with the soil again, doing everything with her bare dainty hands, muttered a prayer and stood up. Smiling at him again, she pressed her hands to his bark, making an imprint that would probably stay there forever.

*Each creation has a purpose. A way of life.
Each tree has a dream, and to live for it, they strive.
To hold something a far cry from uninteresting.
The trees in that area were an example of what
greatness a tree can be dreaming of.
One thought of being the tallest
One to hold treasures best,
One to become the best boat.
The tallest one wanted people to be devout
And so his wish came true
Into a cross he was fashioned.
The one to which the Lord bid adieu
The one who dreamt of being a chest*

*Overflowing with the treasure best,
He was styled into a manger.
And as a few days passed, a baby was laid there,
to rest.
Then he knew that he could not hold a treasure any
more supreme.
The one that wanted to be a boat,
Was too weak to fulfill its dream
But in his aura was performed a miracle no words
can deem.*

This revelation soothed him, from his inner core to the tips of his leaves. He could feel the growth of new leaves from the stalks of the dead ones already. He felt happy. As Alvita went back inside the large mansion that she owned, the birch turned towards the tree shoot next to him which seemed to be snorting with laughter.

'What is the joke?' he asked, a little apprehensive because of the shoot's habit (of bursting into song every chance he had). It said, 'I come from India, where I am known as the Gulmohar or the Flame of the Forest. There I grew in a northern state. The humans were very passionate about trees, much more than Alvita.'

'What?!? I don't think that any human is more loving towards trees than her.'

'Well, you know how the woodcutters come and

pick a few trees with good wood, cut them and then take them away?'

'Yes, I find it a very ghastly thing to do.'

'Obviously.' So far, Devon was thankful for the sapling not bursting into song. He was still dreading the worst. So he egged him on to continue talking.

'So the people loved the trees because we gave them a lot of things, like pretty flowers, good air cleansing properties and so many types of perfumes.

One day after many years

The woodcutters came.

*Waiting for this day we had shed many tears.
Afraid they would kill, afraid they would destroy,
We pushed our roots deep inside, not a bit like
Helen of Troy.*

*Faithful to the soil we grew from, we stood firm
and tall.*

And prayed that God may take us, at nature's call.

But suddenly we saw an amazing sight,

*Humans running to protect us, with all of their
might,*

What love, what passion, they protected us with

They put their arms around us and said,

We will not move from here

Is killing a tree okay? No, that's just not done!
For years they had a tryst
Even though the murderers did persist
They never gave up
They never let us die,
So the woodcutters bid us goodbye.

Devon stared at the young plant, slightly annoyed and surprised at the same time. The tree had seemed very foolish at first, sprouting out bright flowers at the wrong time of the year, which people would pluck on sight.

Now he felt respect for the little tree, seeing what he had gone through in the little time he had lived. He felt love for him because they had something in common. They had seen humans that were savage, and ones that were kind. They had been on the brink of death and were willing to die.

And for the second time in his life, he felt happy.



Aanya Sharma

Aanya Sharma, a student of class VII at Pathways School, Noida, has been adjudged the first runner-up.

Aanya Sharma is a master procrastinator and wrote this story after wasting at least a few months. When she is not randomly browsing the Internet, she can be found watching *Sherlock* or *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. Some of her favourite authors are Rick Riordan, Jeffrey Archer and Agatha Christie. Aanya lives for music. She is a pretty decent guitarist and her favourite decade of music (not including this decade) is the 70's. She is also a golfer and tries not to be horrible at soccer. Aanya prides herself on her sense of humour which mainly consists of bad jokes and puns. She is currently 13 years old.



Sunday Morning Coffee

Aanya Sharma

I stumbled on a full suitcase on December 25, 2016. It was a large purple one placed in the centre of the cobblestone street. I looked around. Surely it had to belong to someone nearby. Who would just leave their suitcase in the middle of a street and walk away? I scanned the surroundings. Then I found her.

How could I not have noticed her for so long? Now that I knew where she was, she seemed almost impossible to miss. Her intense green eyes burned a hole through my forehead. She wore her fiery red hair in a bob. The lady walked towards me, her smile growing bigger and bigger the nearer she got.

I looked to see if anyone was behind me. Then I looked in front.

The street was empty.

'Hey!' she said.

'Umm ... hi,' I replied, a little bit on edge.

'I'm Kira,' she reached out and shook my hand.

'Archer,' I introduced myself. Something about this lady didn't add up.

'Are you in need of money?' she unzipped a little of the bag to flash me a glimpse of the stacks of notes inside. It was Christmas time; I could use a little money. I barely had enough for daily expenses, the publishing company hadn't paid me yet, and a little extra for buying presents couldn't hurt. 'I guess ...' I was still suspicious. I should have been. In fact, I wasn't suspicious enough.

Kira insisted we gamble. Solitaire. I didn't exactly know how to play, so I suggested Go Fish. She laughed and agreed, money per round. And that is how I got stuck. We gambled, and after looting me of every last penny I had, she started letting me win. I didn't understand what she had up her sleeve at the time. I just thought I had suddenly become amazing at playing Go Fish. How could I have been so naive!

I strutted home after bidding farewell to Kira, lugging a heavy suitcase behind me. And, boy, was I angry when I opened it! My face was so red, it was as if I had just eaten a ghost chilli pepper. *The suitcase was filled with Indian currency.* What was I

supposed to do with this in Copenhagen? Now you must be wondering, 'Well, Archer, why didn't you just exchange the money?' *Because the money was fake.* This was a different level of cruelty.

Again, you might suggest that I should go and inform the police. *I have never felt so humiliated in my life.* Therefore, I, being a proud Sherlock Holmes fan, would solve this case myself. I would find this Kira, whoever she was. I would take back the money which was rightfully mine and I would restore justice! No, I am not being dramatic. Don't judge me.

I googled "How to catch a con artist". I scrolled through the search results, carefully inspecting each website that came up for information that might help me. Unfortunately, none of them did. How was I supposed to catch a con artist if I couldn't even catch a fly?

Oops! I should not have said that. I can totally catch a fly. I need help, but not in excess. I still needed to solve this case on my own.

I walked to the Footprint Detective Agency, decked up in a big floppy hat, oversized sunglasses, a trench coat, and to top it all off, a fake moustache, Charlie Chaplin style. Aren't my skills of getting into disguise awesome? I know, I know, I'm the best. Anyway, I was going to see a private detective, to gather inputs. I was going to describe my problem and listen to and memorize what the detective would

do. Then, I would do the exact same thing myself.
I entered the agency and headed towards the front desk.

'Hi! Umm ... I would need to make an appointment with one of your detectives.' I disguised my voice by using a high pitch.

'Sure. When would you be available?' she enquired without looking up from her magazine.

'Now.'

'Right now?' I think she was a little surprised because she looked up. I mean, I don't know why. I looked totally normal!

'Yep!' I replied.

'The only detective available right now, who isn't with another client, is Detective Monaco. Down the hall, sixth door to the right. Not the left ... that's the washroom, the *right door*.' As I reached the sixth door, I grasped the brass knob. I opened the door and stepped inside. I was caught off guard. I almost sat down on the toilet. '*Right door, not left!*' I scolded myself.

I entered the correct room, still lost in my own thoughts. I sank into the chair and looked at the detective. Jaxon. My best friend. At Footprint Detective Agency. How?

'Hi!'

Jaxon looked up from his laptop. 'Hey-y-y-y! Archer?' he was onto me. It would be easier to solve the problem if I gave in. 'Why are you here?'

I took off my sunglasses. 'FBI cover.'

'Why are you here anyway?'

'To gather input!' I gave him the basics of the situation, I just want to know where I will find the fake money and how to find the person who purchased it.

'Seriously? You came here to "gather input" on how to find fake money?' he was flabbergasted. Almost laughing.

'It's way more complicated than that! Now is not the time to discuss this. I'll tell you later! Just tell me what to do!' My words came out in a rush.

'Okay, okay! Chill, man!' I had an action plan.

Jaxon and I walked to the gag store. As we opened the door, a bell rang and an Indian dude greeted us, shaking his turban.

'Hallooo! Velcom to da Funny Villy Gag Store! Howe may I help ju?'

'Hi!' Jaxon replied. 'Do you happen to have any fake money?'

'Ohhh noooooooo. Day-before-jesterday lady came, took all.'

This would be a lot easier than I had expected. 'Could you describe what she looked like to us?'

The man, Bubbly (according to his name tag), described a lady exactly like Kira. The only difference was that she had washed out BLUE hair. We scanned through his computer, looking for her purchase. Jaxon scrolled down to the purchase made

on the 24th. Thirteen people made purchases, but only one bought fake money. All of it. Her name was Lynn.

Jaxon had an idea, and he seemed pretty confident. 'Her name is Kira-Lynn.'

I asked, "How do you know?"

'It's a simple trick most frauds use. They're not really lying when they tell you their name that way. Her name is either Lynn-Kira or Kira-Lynn.'

'Probably Kira-Lynn.'

'Taxi!'

Where can you find information about a person, information that is completely accurate?

Yes, at the airport. An ideal place to catch an escapee. We arrived at the airport and headed towards the Emirates counter. Jaxon showed the lady his badge and requested to see the files on their ticket sales. Linda (according to the lady's name tag) called Bill over. He led us to an office with a bunch of computers and people with glasses. At the end of the room there was a large one, almost like one of those gaming computers. Jaxon knew exactly what to do. How does he know all this stuff? Oh yeah ... he's an FBI agent. (Nervous laughter)

He typed something into the computer, and all the names of the people who had bought tickets and whose names included Kira or Lynn popped up on the screen. There seemed to be an endless list, so he narrowed down the search to people named Kira-

Lynn. There were a few people, but they were all like SIXTY. Suddenly Jaxon burst out laughing.

'What? I didn't even crack a joke!'

'No no. Her name is Lynn-Kira! Lynn-Kira!'

He was laughing so hard, his face was turning red. 'It's not that funny, Jaxon. Just check her flight details.'

We rushed towards counter B. I still couldn't believe we got the right airline on the first try. Unlike me, Jaxon was pretty lucky. Or could work magic. Probably just lucky, though. We checked all four desks while the line screamed (words I cannot repeat here) behind us. Jaxon ran to the front of the line at the last desk and showed the lady his badge. He was already running to the ticket counter before I caught up.

'The flight takes off in just under an hour and a half. They have made a special exception for the FBI and we can pay them later. The bosses know—Linda sent them an email.'

I'm assuming he meant his boss as well as the Emirates, senior officer.

Jaxon flew through immigration and security, with me panting behind him. It didn't take much time because we didn't have any luggage. We arrived at the boarding counter just before they were closing. Jaxon flashed his badge and gave them our tickets. The lady sensed we were in a hurry and did her job quickly. Jaxon finally relaxed, and explained,

'We have to switch seats so that we get two next to Lynn-Kira.' He tried to control his laughter. The name wasn't even that funny.

We "shimmied" over to our seats. They were right at the front of the aircraft, while Kira's was somewhere in the middle. Jaxon glanced at the flight details he had noted on his hand. Her seat was H2. I scanned the rows of seats until I found it. There was nobody sitting there. I walked at the fastest pace I could and asked the lady and man sitting next to her if they knew where she was. They said that they saw her going over to the flight attendants. Jaxon bribed them into switching seats with us. There was way more leg room up front. I sat down on the seat across the aisle, and Jaxon took the window seat. There was already a grin spreading across my face.

Lynn-Kira settled into the middle seat as Jaxon turned to face her. I plopped down onto the remaining seat so that she had nowhere to go. I greeted her just as she had greeted me two days ago. 'Heyyyyy!'

And then I woke up. I jerked up in bed and rubbed my eyes. That was literally the best dream I had ever dreamt. EVER. I looked at the time. 9:28. Craving a cup of Sunday morning coffee, I got dressed and stepped outside into the crisp December air. I locked up the door of my little cottage-like home and made my way down the sidewalk, still

lost in my own thoughts. I didn't want to let go of that dream. I finally knew what to write about for my next book.

I smiled at the patterns my breath made when I breathed out. They were little swirls, curling over and over again. The stress of finding something to write about evaporated. I turned the corner and tripped over something. I looked down and saw a purple suitcase. Hands so icy that they burnt through me tapped on my shoulder. 'Hey!'



Ananya Khare

Ananya Khare, a student of Class IX at Deens Academy, Bengaluru, has been adjudged the second runner-up in the group.

Ananya loves to brighten the world with her laughter. A budding poet and a complete foodie, Ananya particularly relishes dark chocolate. Apart from poetry, she dabbles in music, classical dance and badminton. She has a passion for languages, German and Latin being her favourites.



The Song of Hope

Ananya Khare

All the leaves were turning yellow. Autumn was fast approaching, and the squirrels hopped from this tree to that in preparation. Nature was fast moving, but Maya's life had come to a standstill. She looked at a withered leaf as it fell to the ground with a swoosh. 'Do we all wither and fall like this some day?' she thought to herself. It had been a fortnight since the war had ended. And Lieutenant Colonel Mishra had still not returned. Stifling a sob, she got up from the garden bench and walked home briskly.

Memories from the previous autumn came in like a whirl in her head. She swam in the temporary bliss of a land that would never be. Her hours of laughter

floated past her eyes as the softer side of Lieutenant Colonel Mishra winked at her lovingly. 'Autumns are beautiful, darling,' he used to say. After all, how sad could anyone be in the vicinity of a lark?

The next morning, Maya woke up to a songbird's song. It reminded her of the lush green parks her daddy used to take her to. As she looked around, she saw her mother dressing up and packing her purse. 'Where are you heading to?' she asked.

'The army camp,' replied Mrs Mishra.

'Why? Is Daddy back?' asked Maya, making a mental list of everything she would do to greet him. 'No darling, he is not. But he'll soon be. You must keep up hope and look up to the sky. He will return someday.'

'That I do, and will keep doing. But you still haven't told me. Why are we going to the camp? Is there a meeting? Or is there an emergency?' Maya asked, making another mental note of all the emergency procedures to be followed.

'Well, not really. It's not we, but only me who is going. I am going there to enquire. I am going to ask till they don't answer! It's necessary for us to keep following up with them regarding the status of the war. It is necessary that a search party be sent for all those who still haven't returned. Fourteen days is too long a time,' said Mrs Mishra, in a determined voice.

'Mom, I understand all that, but why not me? Don't I have a right to know about the whereabouts

of my father? This is so unfair! I am tired of all these rules at home,' Maya said, frustrated and almost about to cry.

'Child, you have all the rights to know about your father. And no one's denying them,' Mrs Mishra said, holding Maya's face in her hands and caressing her hair. 'And child, it's also not about the discipline. It's just that the situation there might be too disturbing for you. I do not want you to go through what I did in my childhood ...' she said, as she glanced at her late father's portrait on the wall. After all these years, it was still difficult for Mrs Mishra to cope with the death of her father, a valiant naval officer who had perished in war. 'I do not want to add to the burden you have naturally carried for the past fortnight.'

'I understand your concerns, but it's important for me to go. I consider myself tough enough to handle all of this. At least, won't you take me there to meet Rakesh uncle? He said I could go to him for help whenever I needed it,' said Maya in a confident voice, referring to a very close family friend who was also a fellow Army Officer.

'Okay, but only for Rakesh. Meeting him would do you good. But you must ask for no more.'

'I won't, Mom,' said Maya, with a comforting smile.

As they got closer to the army camp, they passed several coffins being carried out of a truck. 'Mom was right,' Maya thought to herself. 'This is indeed disturbing.' Mrs Mishra got down at the first army tent behind the gate and told her to wait. 'I'll go in alone. I'm not letting you come,' said Mrs Mishra, and went in.

After a moment or two, Maya put her ear against the wall of the tent.

'But I need you to find out. This is not an answer. I demand the whereabouts of my husband!' shouted a familiar voice, filled with anxiety.

'No ma'am, I have already told you. After three search expeditions, he has been assumed dead.'

Maya couldn't believe what she heard. This was not something she expected. She ran away from the tent and closed her ears. Yet she could not block the voice in her mind. It was impossible. 'No! I will not believe what I heard, at least till I don't get proof,' she told herself. 'I'll go and ask Rakesh uncle,' she thought. Determined, she walked to Tent no 3, the tent which was allotted to Colonel Rakesh Deshpande. He sat there, legs on the table, planning a search expedition with a few more mates. 'Rakesh uncle, may I have a minute?'

'Oh! It's Maya! Yes, you definitely may!' he said, coming outside. 'What's the matter, dear?'

'Uncle, is Daddy considered dead?' asked Maya in a low tone, stammering twice at the last word.

Colonel Rakesh sighed. 'Child, there are five more troops yet to return. We must wait and see. The search expeditions are still on.'

'Uncle, I am not a child. I need the truth! And I demand it from you!' Maya half shouted.

Colonel Rakesh was shaken by the anger in the little girl's voice. He knelt down. 'It is all right, okay? Your daddy will come back. I promise,' he said reassuringly. He then put an arm around her. Maya found it very comforting to know that someone would stand by her. Colonel Rakesh tapped her back thrice. And then he tapped again. It was a kind of rhythm he followed, and then just broke away, leaving Maya puzzled. With one last smile, he walked back to his tent.

As she briskly walked towards the gate, Maya wondered about the strange rhythm. Was it the beat of a famous song? No, it didn't feel so. The tapping was almost desperate. She tried to recall a few codes her dad had taught her. She tried the opposite alphabet code. No, cross. Then she tried the Morse code. Three short beats. That made an 'S'. Gap. One short beat and then one long 'A'. Two short beats, one long, then one short again. It was an 'F'. Then one short beat. That was an 'E'. It all made sense!

'Rakesh uncle knows something, but he can't spill the beans, so he put it in code! This means Daddy is safe!' Maya thought to herself, as she

skipped the rest of the way to the gate.

'Maya! Where have you been?' asked Mrs Mishra, while pulling her into an autorickshaw.

'I went to meet Rakesh uncle. Where are we going, Mom?'

'To the army hospital.'

'But why? We know Dad's not in the city!'

'Yes, but the officer at the desk said that we must check the unrecorded casualties for confirmation. We can't take a chance.'

'Don't stress yourself out, Mom, Dad's all ...' Maya stopped abruptly, remembering that if she let the cat out of the bag, Rakesh uncle's post was in danger. 'Dad's all what?'

'Oh, I just hope Dad's all okay,' she finished with a smile. They got off the auto and made for the records room.

'Sir, could you please check the records for Lieutenant Colonel Rahul Mishra?' Mrs Mishra inquired. 'Search negative,' the records clerk replied.

'What about all the recent entries, within the last twenty four hours?'

'Negative!'

'Any new casualties this morning?'

'I said it's not here! Only three young soldiers with injuries in their feet.'

Mrs Mishra held her head in her hands. 'Maya, what do I do?'

'Mom, we have waited a long time. A little more

wait will do no harm. You sit here. I'll just use the washroom and be back in a jiffy.'

Maya briskly walked towards the washrooms in the other wing so she could inspect every ward in search of her father. Through the tiny windows, she saw many injuries in each ward and witnessed pain that put the best of wills to test. Some casualties were so horrifying that Maya had to turn away. As she passed ward no 76, she saw a bald head peeping over the blanket. 'That's Daddy!' she exclaimed. Alas, for Maya, luck seemed to be fickle. As she tried to peep into the ward to get a clearer view, a doctor and a team of nurses blocked the way, and a sign said *Intensive Care Unit. No outsiders allowed*. Lamenting her ill luck, she moved on.

Right before leaving, Maya inquired about the patient in ward no 76. 'Kartik Pandey,' the receptionist replied. Maya wondered. She was positive she had seen her dad. Yet, feeling a trifle dejected, Maya and her mother went home.

Days passed and there were many uneventful evenings, when the residents of #67 Army Welfare Society, sat looking out of the window at the horizon, waiting for a weary traveller to set his footsteps on its threshold. There were frequent visits to the hospital and army camps, but all in vain. Soon the trees donned masks of orange and red, which they gradually laid down with dignity to pave the way for the oncoming northerly winds to cover the

land in white. After all this while, Maya had started to believe that her father had left them once and for all. Rakesh uncle's reaffirmation was the only thread of hope that she was clinging to, which had also started feeling false after her last support had gone to war himself. She started to find comfort in memories more than in people, in books than in gardens. In this state, one fine day, as the snowflakes melted in the shining sun, life decided to bless Maya with the ray of hope she most needed.

One chilly morning, there were three subsequent knocks on the door. When no one answered, the knocks repeated themselves, sounding very loud and urgent.

'It better be something important,' grumbled Mrs Mishra, as she woke up and walked to the door, her eyes half-closed.

'Madam, it's an emergency. Colonel sahib has been identified,' said an army camp clerk, panting heavily.

'Where is he?'

'His state is critical. It's an emergency. You need to come along right now.'

'Yes, just a second. Maya! It's an emergency! It's your dad! Come along!' The change on Maya's face happened faster than a chameleon changing its colour. This news was more dear to her than to a bird its freedom. She ran like she never had, her smile brighter than the sun. She boarded the Army

vehicle parked in their driveway. The journey was no highway, but Maya hardly even felt the bumps.

As they walked into the hospital, Mrs Mishra spotted Colonel Rakesh and ran up to him. 'Oh, Rakesh! Where is Rahul?'

'You can meet him in another fifteen minutes. Come this way.' Colonel Rakesh led Maya and her mother to an empty ward. 'During the war three months ago, Rahul had breached the LOC to save someone's life, for which he could have been arrested by the other nation.' He took a deep breath and continued. 'To save him, Major General Joshi decided to prove him assumed dead. He was under intensive care and surveillance all along, and now that the case has ended, he has been given leave to meet you and return home. This information is confidential, only to be revealed to his family members.'

Maya couldn't believe what she heard. Presently, she went into a state of euphoria, and everyone standing outside ward no 76 thought that it was her smile that had healed the Lieutenant Colonel.

'Daddy!' Maya shouted as she burst in through the door of ward no 76. She found her father unconscious, but breathing with a healthy pulse rate. Maya looked at his pale skin and protruding bones. 'He needs some air,' she thought to herself.

She gripped his cold hand tightly and started humming the tunes he often used to sing her to sleep. As the first melody ended, she looked upon the pale face, now brightened by a beautiful smile and twinkling eyes.

'Maya, my girl!' he said, gripping her hand harder. It was the first time in months that the audience felt such a positive vibe in the room and saw such a serene look on the patient's face. And father and daughter sang, one in a croaky voice that could never be sweet again, and the other in a most innocent and true voice that put everyone into a trance and kindled the fire of hope in every heart. They sang hand in hand, one in the bed and the other on the stool, for every child of Earth gets his beautiful moment to cherish forever, and none disturbed the beautiful two that morning. And if the duo cared to look outside, they would have seen the first hibiscus that had bloomed in the garden.

Scholastic Writing Awards

The annual Scholastic Writing Awards calls for outstanding original works by students of classes 4 to 9, in the category of fiction/short story in English. The Writing Awards is an annual competition that encourages students to use their writing skills and creativity.

The competition is divided into two groups:

Group 1 (Classes 4-6); 1200-2000 words

Group 2 (Classes 7-9); 2000-2500 words

Both groups are given a choice of topics to choose from.

A couple of years ago, the submission process went online. The preliminary selection of the entries was done through a Ranking Panel. To participate in the contest, each participant was asked to read and rank three stories, assigned to them through a random computerised selection. The entries with the highest ranking were then judged by a panel comprising well-known authors to declare the top three prize winners and the first two runners-up in each group.

The three prize-winning entries from each group along with the two runners-up entries feature in the anthology titled, *For Kids by Kids: Award Winning Stories from the 2017 Scholastic Writing Awards*.

The top 25 entries in each group receive a certificate of honour.

All other participants receive a certificate of participation.

For more details on the Scholastic Writing Awards, log on to the Scholastic India homepage www.scholastic.co.in and click on the Scholastic Writing Awards icon or go directly to the following URL: www.swa.scholastic.co.in