

The illustration depicts a vibrant scene of three children running on a red track. The track is marked with white curved lines. In the foreground, a grey line with three golden jalebis hanging from it crosses the track. The children, two boys and one girl, are all wearing blue tank tops and yellow shorts. They are running towards the right with joyful expressions. The background features a green hill with a blue building and trees under a clear blue sky.

# *The Jalebi Race*

*and Other Stories*

*Rachna Srivastava*

# The Jalebi Race And Other Stories

Rachna Srivastava



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*To my family and friends*

# Table of Contents

Ganesha Comes Home .....	1
The Jalebi Race.....	6
Picture Perfect .....	10
Chatter Buddies .....	16
The Neem Juice .....	20
The Self-driving Bike .....	24
The Case of the Missing Peanuts.....	29
The Genie .....	33
The Unknown Route.....	37



## Ganesha Comes Home

"IT'S FINALLY OVER!" exclaimed Alka, her face adorned with a broad smile. It was May 26, 2003 - the first time Alka and I visited Delhi. We had been in interviews since nine in the morning.

A week earlier, when we received emails inviting us to interview at a company in Delhi, we were still deciding whether to attend. Delhi was many hundreds of kilometers away and an unfamiliar city.

We had hardly any acquaintances in Delhi where we could stay. After hours of deliberation, we decided that Garima was our only option; she was a senior from our college who worked in Delhi. We called her, and she was very happy for us; insisting we stay with her.

When the interviews concluded, it was nearly six in the evening. We were exhausted but happy. We called Garima and thanked her. She was pleased that our interviews had gone well and invited us to stay with her if we visited Delhi again. We then hired an auto-rickshaw. We planned to go to her apartment, collect our belongings, and head to the New Delhi railway station to catch the train. Alka was going to college, and I had to get down mid-way to visit my home.

It was around seven when we were approximately halfway to her apartment. When our auto-rickshaw stopped at a traffic light, a young boy came near the auto-rickshaw with clay statues.

Anyone traveling in Delhi and nearby areas must have seen the vendors at the traffic signals. They swarm around vehicles as soon as the light turns red. They have a few minutes to market and sell the wares before the light turns green. Sometimes, they devise engaging and hilarious punch lines to sell the products.

I glanced at the boy. He was a thin teenage boy wearing a shirt with some patches and dusty blue shorts. Roaming in the sun had burnt his skin dark. He had matted hair, with feet all grey and chalky due to dust. Despite his shabby look, his eyes gleamed with hope and determination as he worked tirelessly to earn his next meal.

I was uninterested in the statues and started looking to the other side to ignore him.

I assumed that the boy would move on and looked back. However, he persisted. The statues were now right in front of me, impossible to ignore. The statues depicted Lord Ganesha, the beloved Hindu deity renowned as the remover of obstacles in life. The distinctive features of Lord Ganesha were meticulously carved in the statues, each showcasing a charming pot-belly, an elephant head with fan-like ears, and four arms. They looked beautiful painted in white.

He looked at me and said, "Didi, buy one and take the Ganesha home. Lord Ganesha will bless you and your family."

I shook my head in refusal.



But the boy remained unwavering. "Didi, please have a look. You won't find such finely crafted statues anywhere else."

I ran my fingers over one of the statues, admiring the artist again, "These are truly beautiful."

I hadn't intended to purchase, but I enquired, "How much are they?"

"Two hundred fifty rupees for both. If you like this, please buy it, Didi," the boy urged with a hopeful smile.

"This is so fragile. How will I carry this on the train?" I thought out loud.

"Don't worry; if Ganesha can protect the entire world, he can certainly look after himself on a train."

Alka and I could not stop grinning.

He smiled shyly and added, "I'll wrap it carefully in newspapers to ensure it stays intact."

I looked at Alka, and she shrugged, "It's entirely up to you."

Although I had no idea how to carry the fragile statue, I decided, "I'll buy one. How much for a single statue?"

"Didi, you can have one for a hundred rupees."

I reached into my bag and gave him a hundred-rupee note. He wrapped the Ganesha idol in a newspaper, and gave it to me, beaming happily.

As the light turned green, our auto-rickshaw moved.

I was perplexed. I had spent a hundred rupees on a clay statue and wasn't sure how to safely take it home.

While I was sorting out my thoughts, the auto-rickshaw driver said, "Madam, you paid too much; this statue isn't worth more than fifty rupees."

"I know I may have paid a bit more, but I liked the statue," I replied.

The driver's comment briefly made me doubt my decision. However, deep down, I was content. I could already imagine the joy on my mom's face when she saw it.

"These vendors often ask for unreasonable prices. You got tricked. It's just clay and can easily break," he continued.

Gradually, my doubt turned into irritation.

"Don't worry; I'll find a way to secure it," I said coarsely.

Upon reaching Garima's apartment, I searched for any available piece of paper and wrapped the statue before putting it in my handbag. The unmindful, hasty packaging made it significantly heavier.

It was an overnight sleeper train journey, and I kept the bag close behind my pillow throughout the night. When the train arrived in my hometown the following day, I said goodbye to Alka and got down.

As I reached home, Mom opened the door and hugged me. While her hugs made me emotional, I was so excited that I hugged her quickly and spoke eagerly, "Look what I got for you!"

I couldn't wait to show her the statue, although I was also worried that the idol might have been damaged.

My mom took my backpack from my shoulder and said, "First, come inside. We can look at this later. You must be hungry; have some breakfast."

As we walked inside, I insisted; "No, I'm not hungry. First, see what I brought." I handed her the bag.

"Ganesha Bhagwan (Lord Ganesha)!" She opened the bag, and her eyes sparkled with delight.

I was overjoyed and relieved to see that the statue was unharmed. The moment was priceless.

Exhausted from the journey, I took a refreshing bath, sipped on warm tea, and enjoyed my favorite breakfast.

As I moved about the house after breakfast, my eyes stopped at the statue. It was all decorated with flowers and incense sticks.

"Mom, did you perform the Ganesha puja (worship)?" I asked.

"How could I be late? Ganesha had come to our home," she replied from the kitchen.

Her childlike happiness filled my heart with pride.

I smiled, realizing that I had only paid a hundred rupees to the boy, but the countless smiles on my mom's face were worth millions. The priceless joy reflected in my mom's million-rupee smile convinced me that I had made the right choice.

## The Jalebi Race

"IS EVERYONE FROM the class here?" asked Mrs. Meena, our Grade Two class teacher, as the students hustled into line.

"Yes, Ma'am!" We cheered in one voice.

"It's Grade Two's turn," she announced with a smile.

We were excited. It was the annual sports day at school, one of our favorites.

Our Grade had several games lined up: an obstacle course, a three-legged race, and a sack race, but our favorite was the jalebi race.

For those unfamiliar with jalebi, it's a popular Indian dessert made by deep-frying all-purpose flour batter into circular shapes, which are then soaked in sugar syrup. Several jalebis are hung with threads on a rope firmly secured at both ends in a jalebi race. The goal is to run from the start line to the jalebi, grab a bite, and sprint back to the start line. The first player to reach the start line after eating a bite from jalebi is the winner.

## The Jalebi Race

The game seems easy in theory, but it's not so in practice; the jalebis are hung much higher than the players, they sway with the wind, and the players are not allowed to use their hands. Participants' hands are often tied behind their backs with handkerchiefs, making the game challenging and fun.

Before the sports day, every Grade Two classroom had several rounds of trial games, allowing all the students in each class to participate. The jalebi race was the most enjoyable because we got to eat a jalebi, win or lose. Ritu was the champion of the jalebi race, representing our class in the sports day event. She was a fast runner with good athletic ability.

When the three-legged race finished, P.E. Instructor Mrs. Ghosh invited the participants to the jalebi race. Our class started cheering for Ritu from the sidelines. The team from our class had stumbled and fallen in the three-legged race, so we wanted our class to win this one. The three-legged race was a classic game where each participating team consisted of two players who stood side by side with their adjacent legs tied together, racing against other teams. If a team fell, they were out of the race.

Mrs. Ghosh finished the announcement, and the jalebi race participants were ready at the starting line.

Now, all eyes were on Mrs. Ghosh.

"Players, are you set?" she inquired, and the whistle blew.

They sprinted, and Ritu took the lead.

Everyone tried to reach the jalebis. They were hanging high, so they first tiptoed and then jumped to get them. The jalebis swayed like pendulums, and the players followed with their mouths wide open.

Some players managed to touch the jalebis occasionally but couldn't grab a bite. Others kept jumping without any luck. After a while, a few players got frustrated and ran to the start line without eating the jalebi.

Ritu jumped left and right to grab the jalebi, and when she took a bite, we all cheered with joy.

"Ritu! Ritu! Ritu!" we chanted. Her victory seemed certain.

Mrs. Ghosh was standing at the start line to declare the winner.

We eagerly waited for Ritu to run back, but she didn't. She finished her entire jalebi, then moved to the next lane where a player had quit the race and started jumping to eat another jalebi.

"What is she doing?" yelled Ragini.

Ritu jumped and managed to get a few bites of the jalebi.

"Oh, not now!" Mrs. Meena said. "She could eat them later."

Ritu continued to eat and check if anyone else had grabbed the jalebi. She was confident she could run faster than the others and decided to enjoy more jalebis.

We were anxious. "Run, Ritu, run! You already finished your jalebi; run!" we shouted vehemently.

She remained unperturbed. Suddenly; she noticed that one player had eaten his jalebi. She sprinted, running as fast as she could, but the other player was faster. He won the race.

Ritu lost a race she had nearly won, and she felt sad.

## The Jalebi Race

She said, "Sorry guys, I did not win a medal for our class. It is all because of my silliness."

"You can try to win the race next year!" said Mrs. Meena. We nodded.

We had many things to say; but we kept quiet.

Ragini couldn't hold back and said, "Know what? You may have lost the race but you actually won the game. You got to eat most Jalebis!"

Everyone burst into laughter, and Ritu smiled.

"See, we cheered you up," added Ragini.

Mrs. Meena patted Ritu on the head and said, "Ritu, you are a good player. But please make sure you eat lots of jalebis before coming for the race. I am confident that you will be unstoppable."

"Sure, I will," Ritu answered with a hearty laugh.

## Picture Perfect

THE TRAIN ARRIVED at the platform in Chennai, and Pradeep, Shikha, and I took a sigh of relief. We had been on a train journey for the last three days.

Looking back some thirty years ago, we were a group of twenty-year-olds eager to explore on our first trip to southern India. We came to Chennai to attend job interviews at a company.

Three days ago, when we started the journey from the college, we were excited. We hoped to perform well in the interviews and looked forward to creating great memories. We yearned to see the beautiful sceneries of the sea and the Sun.

It was April, and even though it was morning, it felt hot. We hadn't anticipated the muggy weather. We were dehydrated and exhausted after a long journey in a non-AC compartment; we couldn't think of anything other than the journey to end.

As the train slowed, Pradeep hurried to collect our luggage while I and Shikha looked out the window at the platform. We eagerly scanned the area for Shikha's sister, who had offered to pick us up. Chennai was a new



city for us; she was the only one we knew there. We were staying at her house. We searched through the platform but did not spot her, which worried us, but we kept looking.

"Is that Didi (elder sister)? She looks just like in your family picture." My eyes lit up as I exclaimed.

Bringing her head close to mine, Shikha looked in the direction I was pointing.

"Wow! You found her," she said.

Suddenly, smiles appeared on our faces. Shikha's sister and her husband were waiting for us.

"What a relief; I am already missing home," I sighed.

Shikha's sister's house was close to the station. The feeling of being at home was comforting. Didi prepared a delicious lunch, and a hearty meal in an air-conditioned house almost made us forget our journey woes. We chatted for a long time and had more to talk about. However, we were tired and anxious about the next day, so we finished our dinner and slept.

The following day, we arrived at the company's office at nine. Aman, another friend from our college, joined us. He had some commitments, so he took a later train. We were exhausted from the 3-day train journey. At this point, our care for the interviews was very little.

The interviews were over by the Three in the afternoon. As we exited the company's office building, the smell of coffee filled the air. The irresistible aroma of freshly brewed coffee from a nearby restaurant prompted us to order coffee along with sandwiches, and burgers.

While we waited, Aman opened his bag and took out the city map of Chennai. "Let's decide which place to visit; there is no time to waste," he said with wide eyes as he unfolded the map.

Shikha and I looked at each other.

"You two, don't embarrass me. I bought this at the train station," said Aman.

"Nothing like that. It's very wise," I smiled.

"Marina Beach," said Shikha, "I did my research. It is the most beautiful, and we have never seen a seashore."

"Perfect! Then," Aman folded the map and put it back in the bag.

"But it is very hot outside," I said as I looked out the window.

"Who cares? By the time we reach the beach, it will cool down," replied Aman.

We were hungry, and when our food arrived, we quickly devoured it.

Pradeep took a sip of his coffee and sighed with delight.

"This coffee is so good! He smiled.

"No wonder that's why we are drinking hot coffee in this scorching weather," I giggled.

After finishing the coffee, we hired an auto-rickshaw and headed to Marina Beach.

We were stunned by the vastness of the ocean. It was beautiful, with turquoise blue water, golden sand, and stunning waves crashing on the shore. We removed our shoes and walked barefoot, feeling the sand between our toes. As we walked towards the water, our excitement grew.

Suddenly, Shikha said, "This is so beautiful; I wish we had a camera and could take pictures."

"I have a camera but no film," Pradeep mumbled. "I didn't have time to buy any."

Pradeep had brought his dad's camera. Unlike recent times when digital cameras are everywhere, in those days, roll film cameras were popular. These cameras use roll films, which are spool-wound photographic films. They capture images by exposing a film to light, reproducing the scene in front of the lens onto the film's material. The film is then developed in a darkroom to create actual prints. By today's standards, these cameras may seem primitive, but taking quality photos requires sure craftsmanship. Not everyone could do it, and with a limited number of frames on a roll of film, photographers have to adhere to the saying "measure thrice, check twice, and cut once."

Shikha was happy. "At least we have a camera. Let's go and buy a roll," she said.

Pradeep looked puzzled. "We can pool our money," she added promptly.

We purchased a roll of film from the convenience store, even though we paid almost double the regular price.

Once we had the roll of film in the camera, our happiness knew no bounds. We splashed in the waves, wrote our names in the sand, watched the sea waves erase them, and then wrote them over and over. We saw

some beautiful sand castles on the beach and made one of our own. We captured all of it on camera.

We enjoyed ourselves so much that we didn't realize it had been more than two hours at the beach. The Sun began to descend, and the sunset over the water was surreal. We took several pictures, some pinching the Sun and others seemingly holding it in our palms. It felt like a dream and was unforgettable.

The following day, we had to catch our train back to the college. It was another three-day-long train ride, but we were better prepared this time. We reached the college, dropped our stuff off at the hostel, and headed to a nearby photo studio. We couldn't wait to see the photos. The studio owner told us to return after four days to collect the prints.

We shared numerous stories from the Chennai trip with our friends for the next few days. Most had never seen a beach, so they were amused and eager to see the pictures. After four days, we arrived at the photo studio early.

The studio owner saw us and said, "Here you are! I was waiting for you."

"Yes, we are here. Are the photos ready?" Shikha asked happily.

"Where did you buy the roll?" inquired the studio guy.

"Why?" Aman asked as a nervous look crossed his face. "Aren't the photos good?"

The guy responded, "There are no photos on this roll."

"What are you saying?" yelled Shikha. "We took so many of them."

"But there are none on the film," he continued.

"It was a new roll," I interrupted. "We bought it on the beach in Chennai."

"Oh, now I understand," the studio person said, shaking his head in despair. "The tourist places are full of scams. They mostly sell counterfeit products that look like the original packaging. The film is fake."

"Are you sure?" I insisted.

"Yes, there are no photos. I'm really sorry, guys," he replied.

We couldn't believe what he said. We were shocked and disappointed, and Shikha was on the verge of tears. The studio owner felt sorry for us and didn't even charge any money for developing the roll. We took the roll and returned to the hostel.

We sat in Aman's room, feeling sad and quiet. Pradeep had the roll film, which he tossed in his hand while we watched.

Suddenly, he stopped and said, "Come on, guys! We have picture-perfect memories in our minds, even without photos." He threw the roll of film into the trash can.

That was abrupt, and we looked at each other in surprise.

"You're right. Great shot, by the way!" Aman chuckled. "Who's up for some coffee?"

We all laughed and then headed for coffee, leaving behind the disappointment of lost photos but cherishing the unforgettable memories we had made.

## Chatter Buddies

SANDHYA ROLLED HER bike back and forth while she and I waited for Sudha. It was our first day of school after the winter holidays.

Sandhya, Sudha, and I were neighbors; they were a year older than me. I was in Grade 8, and they were in Grade 9.

"She wakes up late, and then we are rushed," Sandhya groaned. "Some-day, I want to leave her and go."

"Should we go, then?" I asked mockingly.

"No!" She replied in a firm tone.

"Then stop whining," I said.

We waited a few more minutes, and Sudha came out of her house and took the bike out of the porch.

"Sorry, guys, running late," said Sudha as she joined us.

"It is nothing new; let's quickly go to the school," said Sandhya, and we started off.

We loved our ride to school and back home. We would talk about our class, friends, movies, and almost everything from everywhere. We could not meet during the holidays as we were busy with family events. Sandhya visited her grandmother, Sudha attended her cousin's wedding in Kanpur, and at my house, my Dad's school friend, Ramesh Uncle, and his family came over.

Usually, two of us biked together, and the third person followed. It was morning, and the roads were empty, so we started biking together. Sandhya was in the middle, and Sudha and I were on the sides.

We were talking about a romantic film released during the holidays, where a boy pursues the girl he loves from London to India. Eventually, he wins over her father, gaining approval for their marriage. The enchanting love story between a sweet girl and a charming boy captivated all of us. We were deeply engrossed in our chit-chat, and the school was now just a few blocks away.

Suddenly a car sped by. The speeding vehicle created a strong gust of wind that swayed Sudha. She lost her balance, and we all fell like dominoes in the blink of an eye. Sandhya and I fell to the ground, and Sudha landed on us.

It took a few minutes to find our bearings. We then picked ourselves up and moved the bikes to the curb after some time. When we fell, we came down on hands and knees. Some gravel lodged into my skin, leaving bruised knees, while Sandhya suffered wounds on her palms. Sudha was lucky; she fell on us and only incurred a few scratches.

We were disoriented, so we took a seat on the side for a while. After having some water and inspecting our bruises, which didn't seem too severe, we felt better and headed towards the school.

The roadside had yellow soil, moist from recent rains, and it clung to our blazers when we fell. Sandhya and I attempted to dust it off, but it was stubbornly stuck.

"Oh dear, our blazers are soiled," exclaimed Sandhya.

"What should we do?" I whimpered. "It looks so filthy."

We were hurt and disheartened, too; we did not want everyone at the school to know we had fallen off.

I made my way to my classroom, hoping no one would notice. I greeted my class teacher, Ms. Nidhi, then walked straight to my desk and settled in.

"I am already at my desk, and there is no mention of the dirty blazer; it's good!" I was relieved.

A few more minutes passed by.

I turned back to find the planner in my backpack, and Ms. Nidhi asked, "What happened to your blazer?"

I heard those words, and without a mention of my name, I knew it was for me. I stood up.

Ms. Nidhi and everyone in the class was looking at me. I was embarrassed; I did not anticipate this coming from the teacher in front of the class.



"Did you fall off?" She inquired.

"Yes, Ma'am. It was a small accident."

"Hope you are alright?"

"Yes, I am fine. Thank you." I hoped the conversation would end quickly, but I was bombarded with more questions, "How did you fall? Was the road wet?"

As much as I wanted to stay quiet, I couldn't. "A car zoomed past; I got startled and lost the balance of my bike."

"Were you biking in the middle of the road? With your friends?"

"How does she know everything?" I pondered, shaking my head in agreement.

"Biking in a row is very dangerous; always bike in a single file," she added. "I am glad you are not hurt. Please be careful in the future."

I nodded and sat down. "What an awkward start to the day! I did not want anyone to know; but now the whole class has noticed, all thanks to our super observant Ms. Nidhi. Nothing could escape her sharp brain and keen eyes; neither the math errors nor the dirty blazers." I thought.

Ms. Nidhi's class ended, and I took a sigh of relief. Unfortunately, luck wasn't on my side that day, in each subsequent class, teachers couldn't help but notice my stained blazer. I wished I could disappear under a blanket, shielded from everyone's gaze. The day felt like an eternity, and I just couldn't wait for it to be over.

## The Neem Juice

PAPA GRUMBLED TO himself as he arranged the chairs and cot in the corner of the verandah, which he picked from the yard. "So many thunderstorms this year. The rain God, Indra, must be angry at us," he muttered.

Mom joined him, placing the cushions on the chairs and covering them with a tarp. "Yes, it's raining cats and dogs. Hope it is over soon," she added.

It was late morning on a Sunday. I finished my breakfast and had a quick nap. When I woke up, the house was bustling with activity. I looked out of the window. The sky was bright and sunny when I fell asleep, but now it was shrouded in darkness. There was a heavy downpour accompanied by howling winds; the rain ferociously crashed on the ground while the wind tossed things around.

The fast-blowing wind amused me. I longed to go outside and feel it on my face. But, the storm was raging, and Papa strictly told me to stay inside. I couldn't think of anything else to do, so I took a bag of chips and sat at the window of my room, watching outside in the backyard.

We had three trees in the backyard: a guava tree, a mango tree, and a neem tree. When we moved into this house ten years ago, Papa had planted the mango and guava trees. They had grown up and got fruits in their respective seasons.

The neem tree was young; Mom had planted it last year. It was thin and tall, with its trunk still tender. While the mango and guava trees stood firm in the storm, the wind gusts battered the neem tree, nearly bending it all the way to the ground.

Finishing my chips, I got a glass of water. I had hardly taken a sip when a powerful gust rocked the neem tree. It snapped one of its big branches, tearing it almost in half.

"Papa! Look, what happened? A big branch from the neem tree broke off!" I shouted.

While working on paperwork in his room, Papa heard me and came to the window. "This is not good," he said as he looked out.

"This storm is awful. Can we check if the tree is okay?" I asked.

"Yes, let's go out when the storm is over," he replied, returning to work.

After an hour, the rain stopped, and the wind calmed down. We went out into the yard. I picked up the broken twigs while Papa raked up the leaves to prevent them from blocking the drains.

After I picked up twigs, I ran over to the neem tree. "Papa, look here. It's a very big branch."

"Sure, it's one of the big branches. Fortunately, the tree itself seems okay," said Papa, picking up the broken branch and placing it on the verandah.

Most days, I would go out to play with my friends after the rain, but that day I didn't. Instead, I decided to work on an art project assigned by my art teacher at school — a painting of a folk lady. This project intrigued me because it allowed me to explore the vibrant colors and intricate details that define traditional art. I contemplated the color choices, looking for vivid combinations to bring the folk lady to life on my canvas.

While I fiddled with the paint box and brush, Papa knocked on the door. He entered with a glass tumbler in his hand and asked me to have a few sips of the juice.

I looked up. The juice looked weird. "What is this green juice?" I said.

"Neem juice."

I couldn't believe my ears; I thought I must have misheard.

"Neem? Who drinks neem juice? It must taste terrible," I confirmed.

"No dear, this won't be bitter. I made it from the sweet new leaves of the branch and added sugar too. It's sweet," Papa replied.

I took a sip, and despite the added sugar, it was still bitter.

"A few more sips, my girl? It is good for digestion and purifies the blood," he insisted.

I took two more sips and exclaimed, 'Papa, this tastes terrible. No matter how healthy it is, I won't drink more. It's the worst taste I've ever had.'

Papa burst into laughter. "It is alright. Three sips are brave enough. Mom could only manage two."

I was so put off by the taste that I could hardly pay attention to what he said. I rushed to the kitchen, grabbed the sugar container, and stuffed my mouth with sugar.

Mom was in the kitchen. She glanced at my woeful expression and said, "Oh dear, I am so sorry. Your Papa always comes up with some healthy and weird recipes. The broken neem branch gave him this brilliant idea."

She then handed me some candies. "Enjoy these; they'll help get rid of the bitter taste."

I ate several sweet things throughout the day, and it wasn't until the evening that the bitter taste of neem had finally vanished from my mouth.

By the end of the day, I had mixed emotions. As I looked out at the neem tree, now slightly lopsided with a missing branch, I felt sad that the storm had damaged it. Despite its bitter taste, it had been a part of our backyard, a symbol of resilience and growth.

But then, as I remembered Papa's creative but disastrous attempt at making neem juice, I couldn't help but smile. It was just like him to turn adversity into an opportunity for a unique culinary experiment. Even though I couldn't stand the taste, I admired his optimism and determination to make something good out of a challenging situation.

## The Self-driving Bike

MY FACE TURNED yellow as I watched my sister mount her bicycle and ride off with her friends. I kept looking at them until they disappeared into the distance.

Standing on the porch as a nine-year-old, I thought, "She is having so much fun, I am the silly one for missing out."

I had always dreamt of a shiny new bike and riding without training wheels. It was not that I never learned how to ride a bike; I could ride well with training wheels. Last summer, Papa took the training wheels off, and I practiced with him holding the back of the seat, jogging alongside me as I zigzagged. It was going well until I crashed into a tree and fell. I got bruised arms and scraped knees, but that was nothing compared to the embarrassment when my friends watched me fall. I did not touch my bike after this accident.

All my friends could ride bikes. My sister started riding a bike when she was seven. I was nine, and biking with training wheels was embarrassing, so I decided to challenge my fears and take all the humiliation but learn once and for all.

Summer holidays had begun, and I was determined to learn to ride a bike this summer. I went to Papa and asked, "Papa, can you teach me how to ride a bike?"

"Sure, we can start tomorrow."

"Can you buy me a new bike?"

He fixed my hair and said, "Sure, you learn to bike, then I will buy a new one."

"No! My bike is small; I need a new one."

"You can use your sister's bike; she will gladly give it to you."

I was furious. I did not want my sister's old stuff.

"No! I want to learn on my new bike," I insisted.

"It's not a good idea to learn on a new bike. Learn on your sister's bike, and then I will get you a new one," Papa tried to explain.

I knew what Papa said was right, but I was frustrated. I often got hand-me-downs from my sister, and she was always the lucky one to get the new things. I feared the same would happen again.

I sulked all day and kept thinking all night. I wanted to learn, so I agreed to use her bike by morning. I dressed up in a full-sleeved shirt and trousers in case I fell; it would not hurt much. I drank water and took out my sister's bike from the garage. Papa and I walked to the open ground near our neighborhood park. This ground was for playing cricket matches, and kids practiced biking when there were no matches. The path from home to the

ground was a bit of a stretch and had a slope, so Papa suggested walking up there.

On the first day, I practiced for half an hour; I pedaled and tried to keep the handlebar steady while Papa held the seat from the back. It was tiring, the handle often wobbled, and I was imbalanced almost every time I stopped.

The next day, I biked for an hour. I had more control over the handle and was better at stopping, with Papa holding the bike lightly this time.

On the third day of practice, I was confident. I wanted to challenge myself. "Papa, can I bike by myself?" I asked.

"Sure, go ahead."

I took a deep breath, held the handlebar steady, pedaled, and there you go. I was biking. I biked for the next hour, stopping several times without falling. I was elated. I had learned to bike; better late than never.

The third day ended and I was riding the bike well. "My awesome girl!" Papa congratulated. "You conquered your fear with determination. I am so proud of you."

I was beaming; I had gained my two wheels of independence.

The next day, we were about to go to the ground when the doorbell rang. It was Anil Uncle, Papa's friend from the office, who needed some help with a form. I sat on the sofa and fiddled with my watch while they talked.

I waited patiently, but their chat was taking too long. "Papa, can I go by myself?" I asked.



"Wait a few more minutes," said Papa. He then thought for a while and said, "Alright, go. I will come soon. Be careful."

I nodded.

Brimming with my newly gained confidence, I walked on the path for some distance. I was not particularly eager to walk when I could bike, so I looked back, and Papa was not in sight. I hopped on and pedaled.

I biked for some time and stopped; the bike kept rolling on the slope. It went faster and faster. I loved it; the thrill of the speed and the brisk air blowing on my face felt amazing. I was enjoying the ride and didn't even think to apply the brakes or try to control the speed.

The bike accelerated relentlessly. Suddenly, the handlebar tilted to the right, and within moments, I lost control, causing the bike to veer off the path and heading into a person walking on the side. I panicked and became so disoriented that I couldn't apply the brakes. Luckily, the person heard the bike's clunky noise, glanced back, and swiftly ran away to save himself. The bike crashed into a rock.

When the bike hit the rock, my left foot was flat on the ground, and before I could get my right leg out, I fell on the ground with the bike.

I was shocked. I gathered myself and sat on the side. The person picked up the bike and put it near me. Just then, I saw Papa rushing to me.

"I'm okay!" I shouted at the top of my voice. "Just a few small bruises."

"Are you alright?" Papa asked as he sat down beside me, checking the bruises.

"I'm fine, it's not too bad," I replied.

"Let's go home and clean the bruises," said Papa.

Papa thanked the person for his help, held the bike with one hand, and extended the other to me.

I grabbed his hand and pulled myself up. "I am sorry, Papa. Are you mad at me for not listening to you?"

"Oh dear, I understand your excitement. But do a bit more practice, and you'll be able to ride on this path confidently," he replied with a smile.

Mom heard the door open and came to us, "What happened? Why are you back so soon?"

"I am alright. Just had a small tumble from my self-driving bike," I replied.

Papa looked at me. "What a clever girl!" and we both burst into laughter.

"You and your Dad's hi-tech jokes," Mom shrugged and went inside to get the first-aid box.

Years passed. I grew up, and self-driving vehicles became a reality. However, the pride I felt in mastering biking is unparalleled. That day remains etched in my memory as the moment when I biked my fastest, the wind rushing past me as I raced down the road, an exhilarating experience I will cherish forever.

## The Case of the Missing Peanuts

THE DELICIOUS AROMA of freshly roasted peanuts filled the house when Papa opened the paper bags. My brother, sister, and I ran to the bed and snuggled under the blanket. Papa spread a newspaper on the blanket and emptied the peanuts from the bag. We were all set for our favorite wintertime family tradition.

During winters, Papa often got fresh roasted peanuts on his way back from work. The taste of roasted peanuts with black salt or green chutney is a feast for the taste buds. The family would sit together and savor the peanuts. Sometimes, Papa told stories about his school days or childhood friends. We could not relate much to those, but Papa was a fine storyteller, and listening to his stories was fun.

Mom finished her work in the kitchen and joined in. We started to eat. My sister could peel off most peanuts and passed the stubborn ones to Papa, and he artistically peeled those with his fingers. I could open only a few by hand and put others in my mouth to crack them open. My brother was the fastest, he grabbed several peanuts in his hand and broke open one after another.

Papa told us about the school trip to Haridwar when he went with his friends. One of his friends was eating a banana when a monkey started chasing him. He kept running to save the banana until the monkey jumped and snatched it from his hands.

We were enjoying eating and talking when the power went off.

"Not now!" my sister shouted.

My brother groaned, "This ruins the fun."

"Let me bring the emergency light," said Mom. She got the emergency light from the kitchen and put it on a table in the corner, and we were back to eating and chatting.

We ate some more, and the peanuts were finished.

"The peanuts finished so fast, I barely ate anything," my sister whined.

Mom asked Papa, "But you got more today?"

"Yes, I did. But I guess the peanuts were so delicious that we finished them but did not realize," said Papa with a smile.

"This is weird because I also ate only a few," replied Mom.

I agreed, nodding my head.

To add to the confusion, my brother started nagging, "I want more. I want more. I did not eat anything; you all finished it."

My sister was busy licking the black salt. "This is the first time the salt is left while the peanuts are finished," she said.

Amidst all the chattering, I slid my hand under the blanket and found two peanuts.

"Oh, wow! I found two peanuts," I exclaimed and gave them to my brother. He was happy.

"Ah! Found one more," and I gave a peanut to my sister.

"How did so many peanuts fall in your lap?" My sister frowned.

"I guess these fell while eating," I replied.

She ate the peanut I gave her, but she was skeptical. She looked at me for a while and then flipped the blanket. Everyone was stunned, my frock was full of peanuts.

"My goodness, you were hiding peanuts," she yelled. "No wonder we did not get to eat much."

I turned red with embarrassment. It became more awkward when the electricity came back on, and everyone could see more peanuts in my frock than all we ate.

I did not know what to say.

"Surprise! More peanuts for everyone," I tried to cover up my mistake and put all the peanuts in the newspaper. But that did not help. My brother and sister were more frustrated.

"You're greedy!" My brother screamed.

"We will keep an eye on her next time," my sister added.

I felt incredibly foolish.

Papa observed us quietly. I turned to him, my guilt evident. "I'm sorry, Papa," I said. I was concerned that he might be upset with me.

"But, the peanuts are so delicious," I added, trying to explain. Papa smiled. I felt relieved.

"I know you really enjoy peanuts," Papa said gently. "But if you want more, just let me know. Don't sneak them."

"I won't do it again, Papa."

"It's good that you realized your mistake. Always remember to share," he advised.

"I promise I will, Papa."

While Papa and I were discussing this, my brother and sister stared at the peanuts on the newspaper.

My sister couldn't wait anymore. She cheered, "Let's enjoy the newly discovered batch of fresh roasted peanuts before it gets cold."

"Yay!" My brother joined in.

We were back to eating peanuts, and I enjoyed it more than before.

"Wasn't this a good surprise?" I giggled.

"Sure, it was!" my sister grinned. "But don't try this again; we know your tricks now," and I cracked up with laughter.

## The Genie

AS THE STUDENTS settled in and the hustle-bustle faded, Mrs. Leena announced, "Kids, we have a new student in our class, Ragini. Please welcome her."

Flipping through the pages of my planner, I looked up. Ragini was a tall and lean girl standing next to Mrs. Leena. She appeared kind with a friendly smile. Her family had recently moved from a small town, and several things in the city and school were new to her. When Mrs. Leena asked for someone to be her buddy, although I was not the most social, I volunteered.

We all were excited to start Grade Six, particularly looking forward to the opportunity to work with computers. In our school, students began studying computer science in Grade Six. This was the 1990s, a time when computers were still a novelty in India and weren't a part of the curriculum in most schools. We were fortunate. Our school had acquired its first set of computers just two years ago. Mr. Rao was the computer science teacher in the school.

In the first computer class, Mr. Rao divided the students into groups. Arya, Ragini, Anu, and I were in one group, and we were thrilled to be the

first to visit the computer lab. Mr. Rao instructed us to proceed to the lab, while he had to join us shortly after assigning tasks to the students in the classroom.

The computer lab was an air-conditioned room on the school's main floor. Everyone had to follow specific instructions to access the lab, including removing shoes, refraining from bringing in food or drinks, and avoiding disruptions. Entering the computer lab felt like stepping into a temple. As we walked inside the lab, it was cold and dimly lit. Ragini and I hurriedly occupied one computer, while Arya and Anu took another.

Ragini saw the computer and exclaimed, "It is like a TV."

"Yes, the monitor looks like a TV," I said. "But a computer works differently."

Ragini had never seen a computer before, whereas I had visited the computer lab with my sister the previous year. She was in Grade 8 and had shown me how to use it. With my limited knowledge, I acted like a self-proclaimed computer wizard.

I powered on the computer, and lines of text began scrolling rapidly across the black screen.

"The computer is booting up right now, isn't it interesting?" I said.

Arya and Anu joined us at our computer.

"It looks mysterious," Ragini murmured.

Anu nodded, "I feel the same."

"Can I touch it?" Ragini asked, reaching her hand toward the keyboard.



I pressed a few keys, "Look, it's all good."

Ragini gained confidence and pressed a few keys, even typing her name on the screen.

"Wow! It's amazing," she said. "I've heard computers can do anything. Is that true?"

"Yes, we can program computers to perform various tasks for us," I answered.

"Can it make a cup of tea?"

I was surprised and thought I might have heard her wrong; I confirmed, "Tea?"

"Yes, a cup of tea?"

I responded abruptly, "No, silly. It's a computer, not a genie!"

Ragini's face turned red. She quickly added, "I was kidding; I know it can't."

I wasn't sure if Ragini was joking or was innocent, but I felt I had over-reacted.

"But wouldn't it be nice, if it could?" I said, smiling to make amends.

Arya's eyes lit up, "Wow, that would be awesome. I would get an ice cream sundae," and we all laughed.

Soon, Mr. Rao arrived, and we had our first official introduction to computers.

Thirty years passed. We completed schooling, university and started our jobs. I lost touch with Ragini when we joined different universities. Thanks to Facebook, I recently discovered that Ragini and I are living in the same city and working for different technology companies. I was delighted to learn that my friend from school days is living in the same city.

We quickly reconnected and decided to meet. One Friday afternoon, I visited Ragini's office. She was waiting for me and welcomed me with her friendly smile. We were elated to meet after such a long time. There were countless things to talk about, from family and friends to careers and hobbies.

"Let's go to the cafeteria," Ragini suggested. "How about some tea?"

"Sure."

We went to the cafeteria, and got a table. While chatting, Ragini opened an app on her mobile phone and ordered tea. In a few minutes, she reached the 'teabot' (an automated tea robot) in the corner and got two cups of tea. I watched her with amusement.

"Here is our refreshing ginger tea," she said, placing a cup before me. I glanced at the tea and then at her.

"So, the computer finally made the tea for you," I winked.

She looked at me with surprise, and we both burst into laughter. Without a word, the memories of our first visit to the computer lab came rushing back to us.

## The Unknown Route

SHALINI OPENED THE door. "Wow, you're here! We were waiting for you. Come on in," she said and hugged me.

Taru took the suitcase from my hand and dragged it inside. "It is heavy; there must be a lot of snacks from home," she giggled.

The day was 15 November 2003. It was my first visit to Bangalore, the center of high-tech industry in India and a city of opportunities. Although Bangalore struggles with issues like heavy traffic and exponential population growth, the city welcomes everyone with an open heart.

Taru, Shalini, and I had been friends from college. I had come to Bangalore to start a new job, and they offered me to stay with them until I found an apartment.

After lunch, Shalini made tea. Taru crashed on the couch, wrapped a blanket around herself, and suggested as she sipped her tea, "How about going out in the evening? Let's have fun like we used to in our college days."

"I'm looking forward to it," I replied.

Shalini looked at me and said, "It's wonderful to see you after three years. We're going to have a lot of fun. But you might be tired; so take some rest today."

"I'm not tired, just a slight headache," I said, rubbing my forehead. "The road near the house was quite bumpy."

Taru burst into laughter. "Don't even mention that road; it's a nightmare!"

I was puzzled.

"That road is a sad story," said Shalini as she handed me the tea. "It's repaired every year and gets damaged in the rain. Driving on that road after sunset is dangerous. We try to be back home before sunset."

Taru interrupted, "This house is great, but that road is the only reason we'd consider moving out."

The following week was fantastic. We cooked delicious meals together, savored homemade delicacies, and watched our favorite sitcoms every evening. Our laughter filled the cozy living room, and the warmth of our friendship made every moment memorable. We couldn't wait for the week-end.

We had a leisurely start on Saturday morning, followed by a movie in the afternoon and a shopping spree. After our extensive shopping, we were hungry and headed to food court.

When the waiter informed us that our order would be ready in fifteen minutes, Taru suddenly glanced at her watch. "Oh, my! It's twenty past nine," she exclaimed. "By the time we finish dinner, it'll be late. How will we get home?"

We were thoroughly enjoying our time exploring the mall, trying on various outfits, and sharing hearty laughs while shopping. In the midst of our excitement, we had completely lost track of time.

"We've already ordered dinner, so let's eat first. We'll figure it out afterward," said Shalini. She tried to stay calm, even though she was concerned about finding a ride back home that late. We hurriedly finished our dinner and headed out to the street. Taru signaled an auto-rickshaw, and it stopped.

"Where do you want to go, Madam?" The driver asked.

"Benkatapura," Taru replied.

Before she could say anything else, he accelerated and drove away.

We looked at each other. Usually, we would have laughed at the auto-rickshaw driver's reaction, but this time, we stayed quiet, focusing on finding another auto. We waited for a few minutes, and another auto-rickshaw stopped.

"Would you go to Benkatapura?" I asked.

"Oh, not there!" the driver replied and quickly moved away.

By now, it was a quarter past ten. Taru groaned, "We're stuck; no auto will go to Benkatapura."

I looked at Shalini. "Let's wait a little longer," she replied with a faint smile.

Just then, another auto stopped.

"Would you go to Benkatapura?" Shalini asked in a low tone.

"Where is this?" The auto-rickshaw driver asked. "I am new in the city. If you tell me the route, I can drive there."

Our eyes twinkled with excitement; we had finally found an auto. Shalini nodded and we got in the auto without any delay.

"We hit the jackpot," Taru whispered.

Shalini shushed her. "Let's talk later."

The auto-rickshaw driver was talkative. He talked nonstop, sharing that he was a graduate and was looking for a job. In the meantime, he drove his uncle's auto to earn a living. We didn't pay much attention to his chatter; we just wanted to get home.

Shalini guided him along the way. As we approached near our home, she cautioned, "The road ahead is broken in some places; please drive slowly."

"Sure, madam," he acknowledged.

Despite careful driving, the auto driver couldn't avoid navigating through several deep potholes. At times, we were jolted out of our seats. The poor streetlights made driving even more challenging.

Though the driver was patient, he finally spoke, "This road is in terrible condition. How can anyone drive here at night?"

Although we agreed with him, we kept quiet. Now the driver had stopped talking, he focused on driving safely. We reached home and breathed sighs of relief. The ride was bumpy, but we were just relieved to be home. We decided to tip the auto driver well.

"Thank you so much for driving carefully," I said, handing him the money.

"Appreciate your generosity," he replied. "Sorry, but if I had known about the road conditions here, I wouldn't have come."

"Yes, the heavy rains have damaged the road," said Shalini. "But this is how Bangalore is; we must accept these challenges along with the rewards."

Taru chimed in, "At least now you know where Benkatapura is. Imagine if you hadn't driven us here; you wouldn't have known."

"Yes, madam, now I know Benkatapura," the driver chuckled. "But this is my first and last visit to this place."

With that, he started the auto-rickshaw and drove off to his way, leaving the unknown route behind him.