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THE NEIGHBOUR'S HOUSEEnami Chopra

“Wake up, Nina! It’s time for school, *guriya*.”

Nina’s mother shook her little girl from slumber. Her voice was deep and affectionate. Although she was not in the habit of rousing Nina from sleep every morning, she did it today.

The little girl in question was about eight years of age. A darling of the household, she was the first-born of the family and the only child of her parents. She was thin, pale and a few inches less than five feet. Her eyes were the strongest attraction in her face – they sparkled with intensity and intelligence. Her limbs were supple and her body always engaged in quick movements. She had quite a reputation among her friends for being restless and overactive. Not that she was a popular child at school or in the neighbourhood, but she possessed a vivid imagination and was a good sport. At home, she was obedient and adjustable.

‘My daughter is the best of the lot,’ Nina’s mother would proudly exclaim. ‘I am the luckiest mother on earth! Do you know Nina studies all by herself and finishes homework on time? She loves to drink milk too, otherwise normally children create such a fuss over milk,’ she would click her tongue. ‘But Nina is a nitpicky eater. It takes a lot of effort and cajoling to feed her,’ she would knit her brows with concern.

‘Hmm,’ Nina’s aunt would agree in a concerned tone, occupied with thoughts of her own. For a few moments their conversation would digress to different topics and eventually return to the same subject. ‘Do you know Nina irons her school uniform by herself and polishes her own shoes? And the best part is that she wakes up early in the morning. I have seen mothers getting worked up over sleeping children but my daughter is just the opposite. She wakes *me* up in the morning!’ And as she would speak she would give such a merry laugh that all those listening to her enthusiastic accounts of her cherished daughter would end up laughing too.

Today was different though. The eight-year-old was unusually exhausted since the previous night, so that when she lay on her bed, she was not able to wake up at the usual hour the next morning.

‘Nina!’ her mother tried to rouse her again; this time a little loudly.

‘What?’ Nina tossed in the bed, steadily rising from slumber but unable to completely shake off her drowsiness.

‘It’s six thirty! You are getting late for school.’

‘What!’ Nina sprang up on the bed almost terrified at the thought of running late. For a few seconds she was not able to hold her thoughts together. She had just been dreaming about a mysterious house in darkness and a deluge of colourful twinkling light emitting from lamps hung on a vibrant tree. She had sauntered on a lush walkway in a garden and almost touched one of the lighted lamps, when her mother’s voice interrupted the dream and bit-by-bit tore her away from the sparkling world.

‘What is happening?’ she thought. Muddled with the jumble of illusion and reality in those few seconds, she was not able to think clearly. She felt a little dizzy. People forgot she was physically weak, since she ate much less than what a girl of her age ought to have eaten.

Nina quickly jumped from the bed and rushed to the bathroom to brush her teeth. Then she walked towards the door of her bedroom, where she had hung the school uniform that was ironed with a lot of care the previous night. After scratching and bathing for a good seven minutes, she appeared in the bedroom to dress up. One-by-one she started donning the several distinctive pieces of her uniform – necktie in the stiff collars of a perfectly white shirt, belt within the tucks of the skirt, and braces that buttoned up neatly on the waist. It was a matter of distinction, a source of pride to be associated with her school. She ended the ritual by sealing it with a knot on her shoe-strings. She was ready! The four-foot something frail girl was ready to carry a school bag twice her own body weight. But she was happy – happy to know she was a no-nonsense and focussed daughter, who posed no difficulties to her single mother. She was also content to know that she was the centre of attraction not only for her affectionate and cajoling mother but also for the entire maternal family. Yes, she was a happy child.

Nina’s mother placed a glass of milk in front of her, which she drank in a gulp.

‘Bye, mummy! I have to go. The *rickshawala* is here.’

‘Eat something, child,’ her mother persisted producing two slices of bread sandwiching red jam, along with a metallic lunch box. Nina grabbed the box ignoring the sugary sandwich and ran down the staircase.

‘*Beta*, don’t go on an empty stomach,’ Nina’s mother beckoned her. ‘Your stomach will pain, *beta*. Eat the bread!’

‘I don’t want it!’ Nina replied with irritation and fled to the rickshaw.

It was half past one when the school bell rang. Nina knew she had to go to the neighbour’s house because her own was locked. She was to wait at the neighbour’s till one of her aunts came to pick her up. Her grandmother was out of town, so there was nobody to feed her lunch. She had no choice but to wait at the neighbour’s.

‘The main gate will be locked and so will the gate at the stairs. How will I enter the house?’ thought Nina while on her way home.

She dragged her tired feet to the quadrangle where she lived. Not that her school was far from her place - it was hardly half a kilometre away. And considering she could take a rickshaw anytime she wanted, conveyance was never a problem. But Nina was tired, and more than hungry, she was sleepy. ‘How shall I sleep at Shammi aunty’s?’ Thinking thus, she made her way to the neighbour’s door.

‘*Aa gaye, beta?* Come,’ an old lady greeted her at the door. ‘Why don’t you sit here and relax till someone comes by?’ she said pointing at an old and dusty sofa.

‘Okay, aunty,’ Nina replied courteously.

It was a small and crammed space, crowded with furniture. The sofa was kept on the passageway that led to the adjoining room, but because the room had not been regularly

aired, the doors and windows of the sitting-room being tightly shut with little natural light to peep in, the whole place reeked with a distinctive and overpowering odour.

Nina dismounted the school bag from her shoulders and placed it on the sofa. She sat beside it and the whole frame of the wasted furniture creaked softly. She sat very quietly, conscious of even the tiniest sounds around her. What could she do at an unfamiliar place? Neither could she ask for food nor a bed to sleep on. And even if she had been asked whether she would like to eat something, which she definitely would, she would have to politely decline such offers. She was a well-mannered girl. She was not to bother anyone, especially not the aged. And while she sat thinking thus and other things, she could not stop herself from feeling drowsy. She tried to rouse herself to attention but physical exhaustion so overcame her that her eyes started drooping; and with those half-shut sparkling eyes, her pretty little head tilted on the schoolbag. In no time she was sleeping heavily.

An hour later the aunt arrived to summon the sleeping child. She looked at the tiny lump of a girl, who, adult in so many ways, looked like a baby while asleep. She roused Nina back to wakefulness and out went a pair of shoe-clad feet, happy to have survived the ordeal at last!

A few days passed away like this. Nina had to repeat the after-school routine, although each time her reluctance to visit the neighbour grew stronger. She had to stoically endure the discomfort of waiting at the neighbour's smelly house till her grandmother returned to Delhi. She was eagerly awaiting her grandmother's arrival, for that would mean comfort food and familiar lodgings. Until then she would have to continue visiting the neighbour's.

The bell rang at the usual hour. Nina walked past the school entrance and waited for the rickshaw. Within five minutes the rickshaw pulled her back home. It was three in the afternoon. Nina's aunt knocked on the neighbour's door and an elderly voice answered the query.

'Yes?'

'*Namaste*, aunty. I've come for Nina.' The aunt greeted the aged with politeness and a genuine smile on her face.

'Nina?' the neighbour looked perplexed.

'Yes.'

'But Nina didn't visit today,' replied the neighbour still more confused.

'What! She didn't visit today? But how is it possible? I had asked her to wait for me at your place till I returned. Where could she have possibly gone?'

'I have no idea, Sarita,' the neighbour grew concerned. 'Believe me, Nina did not drop by our place today. And since I usually stay indoors in the afternoon, I did not have the opportunity of sighting her in the vicinity.'

The aunt grew alarmed and rang another neighbour's bell. Was she there? They lived next door.

'No,' came the answer.

‘The Guptas! Surely, the Guptas is where she must have gone! Their daughters are Nina’s friends,’ thought the aunt. She expectantly rushed to the Guptas and enquired with rising concern over the missing child, ‘Is Nina at your place by any chance?’

‘No,’ mumbled Mrs. Gupta. ‘What happened? Why do you look so scared? Is she missing?’

The aunt explained the situation to Mrs. Gupta and her husband. Then after much sobbing, she recounted the entire story to them, blaming herself for trusting the girl’s wisdom about her own security. It was then that the sanguine Mr. Gupta intervened.

‘Have you looked for her in your own house yet? May be she is in there, hiding from the fear of being caught at her mischief.’

‘Indeed!’ brightened the aunt. ‘You may be right. She can be an awfully naughty child sometimes. I will look for her at our place right away!’ So saying she directed her feet to her own building, which was thirty steps away.

The aged Shammi aunty was also standing outside. She was genuinely concerned for Nina and had no idea that it was in fact her stuffy house that could have contributed to this confusion. It was no fault of hers that her house was secretly disliked by the presumptuous girl.

When the aunt peeped into the entrance of their own building, she found the missing girl to her relief. It appeared Nina had hurled her heavy bag to the other side of the main gate, which was almost the same height as her own. Then she climbed the gate and jumped inside. Doing so, she had successfully gained entry into the house. But she could not go past the second gate, for it was locked and of the same length as the wall to which it was hinged. There was no way she could jump over it or squeeze beneath it.

So when the aunt inspected their own house, she breathed a sigh of relief, but contrary to what Mr. Gupta had suggested, the scene to behold was something unimaginable. Far from hiding her mischief from an annoyed aunt, Nina was sitting on the staircase, and her pretty little head, like how pretty it looked when carelessly placed on a pillow, was resting on the school bag propped on her lap. Nina was fast asleep, but this time her face looked far more peaceful than what it had seemed while sleeping at the neighbour’s house.



BIO-NOTE

Enami Chopra has taught at several colleges affiliated to the University of Delhi, primarily at Delhi College of Arts & Commerce and Sri Venkateswara College. She completed her MPhil from the Centre for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. Currently, she is focussing on her doctoral thesis on E. M. Forster from the same university. Her areas of interest include British Modernism and Indian Aesthetics.

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