

*The Bookworm Chronicles*  
THE HOSTEL DIARIES



## Preface

I, have always had these faint images of unfamiliar characters running across my mind. Normally I would dismiss them all as ramifications of so many characters I come across in movies and the ones that my mind had spawned while catching up on a book by my favorite authors.

I strongly believe in the legendary Paulo Coelho's statements in the most awesome creative pieces of modern times "The Alchemist" where he speaks something about 'Beginner's Luck' when everything goes right with people who dive into nebulous areas, but perhaps only the truly gifted and the lucky ones survive the nebula and come out to see fresh light on a new world. In his words, it is the 'principle of favorability', a force which exists that wants you to realize your personal legend and it whets your appetite with a taste of success.

For me, coming up with a story line that was something different from the millions of plots that are already out in the market, the television, the internet and the movies; itself was the taste of success. I would not claim to have found my personal legend as it is always an eternal quest of the entire evolving species called the human race to discover their personal legend.

I would not say that my characters ever came to life and spoke to me about any difference in opinions they might have had. Maybe, many of the characters hate the way I have portrayed them, but I know I will be forgiven, for I am a man searching for my soul; and a traveller, hunter, gatherer are always seen in different lights by the controlling force.

I have always been intrigued with the imagination of little children. These sweet little people are reflections of everything that's good about humanity – innocence, trust, innocuous curiosities, and sense of adventurism, aptitude for conjuring new tools and an unshakeable faith in the self. These are the very attributes that have gone into the writing of this short story.

It takes off from where it had stopped earlier, in the little hamlet in India's Scotland, Coorg. A tiny play of destiny had triggered a great characteristic in my story's lead protagonist – Chavi, The bookworm. This story is about the journey she takes to a distant place and in between she adds along friends who would be her driving & guiding forces and also realizes that the Universe had planned something very special for her.

I have been extremely conservative with the language of narration as I do not want to taint the innocence of childhood with the corrupting forces that a bold and expletive laden narrative style often carries. Of course, you do find some depictions of gore and violence but I have tried to keep them as restrained as possible, without diluting the intensity of the plot.

I am a very strong believer in the cause and effect relationship of the world of which fate & destiny are major components. I presume that for every 'cause' there is an 'effect'. This theory underscores the latent philosophy in my narration.

I am an amateur and I agree that my work would be riddled with deficiencies and short comings. I have only created this work by putting myself in the shoes of the average reader & not the uber intellectuals.

I take pleasure in offering my first 'real' work of fiction and I hope you all enjoy.

*Vinay Palsamudra*

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## Chapter 1 – The Migration

"**Brave local girl accosts security guard turned thief at St. Patrick's** - reported by the *Mercera Mirror* correspondent Neethi Holla"; read the headlines of the largest circulated local tabloid; lauding Chavi's little adventure the previous day.

"I gotta get this thing framed", Sunil exclaimed as he proudly read the morning newspaper along with a hot cup of Coorg coffee and biscuits from *Tiffany*.

"Have a look Anu, go read it for Chavi and Teju. Tell them we are going to Bangalore this weekend. A grab all you can shopping extravaganza, courtesy, yours sincerely" Sunil was committing the most common mistake of making a promise when happy.

"Are you sure honey?" asked a puzzled Anitha.

"Why? of course dear! go spread the news! Chavi and Teju can start preparing their lists" confirmed Sunil.

"Sunil, honey, just think about it, Chavi just finished her middle school at St. Patrick's and we have to now find her a new school, is it right to make her so happy and then suddenly break her the sad news?", Anitha was right; St. Patrick's Convent was a very good school indeed but since it did not have upwards of middle school, its students had to move out to other schools for their senior high school.

"I know Anu, I have spoken to one of my ex colleagues, you know Vishesh right? Vishesh Arora.. We were on the same project team"

"I guess I know, he was from Chittorgarh right? Nice fellow; what about him?" asked Anitha

"Nothing about him, it's about Chavi, her school to be precise; I had recalled that his family was part of a trust that ran an International resident school on the outskirts of Bangalore and they have classes right up to twelfth" explained Sunil.

"Oh! so you have already decided that we are sending Chavi off to Bangalore?" Anitha was very worried to let go of her dear daughter to a place so far from herself.

"I haven't yet Anu, that's why I am discussing this with you" Sunil was trying to control the situation.

"Why can't Chavi take private tuitions here itself? she will be here with us and we don't have to worry about her safety either, moreover she will have Teju for company and Teju will do good at school if Chavi is here to guide him" Anitha knew in her heart that her method would not be in favor of Chavi's academics & her fear of separation from her beloved daughter was growing strong.

"You very well know it is not possible Anu! It is for her own good that she will have to move to Bangalore. I planned this weekend to Bangalore so that Chavi understands what she would be getting into. It is unavoidable".

"We will be meeting up Vishesh & his family at their home and then he has promised to take us to this International residential school outside of Bangalore" Sunil had planned everything well in advance as would any responsible father and he was only executing his plans.

"Well it seems like you have already decided everything by yourself, what's the point of this so called discussion" fumed an upset Anitha who was not ready to come to terms with the impending separation, though temporary.

"Oh Come on, Anu! don't be a child! I am sure you know what I am doing is absolutely right! You just go over to the kids, read them the article and just take a power nap! Sleep over the issue. OK? No need to rush up things; weekend is still a good 3 days away. I shall be at the house in case you need me for anything" signed off Sunil to supervise the work at the green house.

"I should have never agreed to leave our jobs and move here" grumbled Anitha complaining about the latest turn of events in her life. It is always most hard for the mother to let go of their children and sometimes become very selfish in their thoughts forgetting that a momentary separation might in fact be instrumental for the holistic development of the child.

"Wake up kiddo!" Chavi woke up a sound asleep Teju.

"Get up Teju, it's already 8 o' clock! see, what I have in my hand" coaxed Anitha

"noooo... mumma...go away..close the curtains.." mumbled little Teju in his sleep as Anitha started opening the curtains and the windows to let the sun and some fresh air in.

"Teju, get up, see akka's name is on today's newspaper..don't you wanna see it?"

"ummm.. what? akka's name? you tell me later mumma... let me sleep for a while now.. no school remember?" Teju would make it hard for Anitha.

"Ok..you sleep as long as you wish, then don't blame me if the three of us eat all your pasta that I cooked this morning" Anitha was resorting to shock treatment.

"Pasta! you made pasta!" Teju's eyes lit up like the Olympic flame!

"Well kiddo, now that I have got your attention, come with me to akka's room and we will surprise her with the newspaper"

"Ok, but you **have** made the pasta right?" Teju would not be hoodwinked that easy.

"Of course, now come with me" Anitha and Teju walked up to Chavi's room to see Chavi was already up and had just finished her morning calisthenics.

"Good Morning dear, slept well?" Anitha was still a little worried and frankly stunned to know that her little Chavi was the town's new hero!

"Good Morning mumma, Morning Teju" smiled a radiant Chavi. Anitha then shared the bit of news on the *Mercera Mirror* and then Chavi also elaborated a bit more on her little adventure, how she had felt and what was going on through her mind.

Later that morning, the four did have delicious pasta just like Anitha had promised little Teju.

"Guys!we are driving to Bangalore this weekend! Mumma wanted to do some shopping and then we will go to a special place" Sunil side glanced at Anitha who had squeezed her eye lids just a little in a naughty taunting fashion, when Sunil accused her for the shopping when it had been solely his idea.

"We are going to the malls?" casually questioned Chavi.

"Whoohooo! I want a PSP2 &an PS3! now I will show that Monukabachcha that even I can play *The Droid Dozen*, why! I will even better his best score! awesome!" Teju went ballistic and was all over the place. The

little piece of information from his dad was just too much for the little boy to handle and he just could not contain his joy over the anticipation of his dream gadgets!

"okok! now rest your **tuchi** and finish your pasta!" chided the quasi - disciplinarian Anitha.

Teju hardly had ears for her mother's 'stern' warnings which were only those and nothing more and went on for a little while with this happy repertoire until his adrenalin exhausted.

The day passed on without any event and Sunil was back from the green houses after a hard day at work.

"I have confirmed about our weekend drive to Bangalore to Vishesh" Sunil told Anitha who was busy cleaning up after dinner.

"hmm.. hmm.." was all Anitha could reply.

"Have you spoken with Chavi about this?" queried Sunil

"I don't know, its your idea, why don't you go speak to her yourself " every time the subject was brought up, Anitha began to lose her composure.

"Damn It! Anitha! you are still not convinced about this, are you?" Sunil thought that she was taking this a little too far.

His outburst was answered in silence for a good 30 seconds.

"Ok, I will tell her" Sunil thought he saw Anitha wiping off a tear that had fallen on her cheek, but he decides to let it be since he understood it as a natural process and was sure Anitha would soon come back to her senses and would even make it easy for Chavi to understand.

When Anitha approached Chavi's room she felt a lump down her throat. Words would not come out easy for this doting mother who endeared her daughter more than her own life.

She was probably unaware that Chavi had already anticipated that this had to happen to her eventually. She was very mature for her age possibly due to her proximity with her parents, her love for her solitaire status and her deep bond with her books.

"I don't how to say this to you, dear. I am not sure if you can understand. But papa and I always do what is best for the both of you. You do know that, don't you?" Anitha had thought breaking the news to her daughter would be the best way to get Chavi realize the gravity of the situation.

"Of course mumma, but why are you talking in riddles today?" asked a bemused Chavi.

"Your papa had spoken to his friend in Bangalore earlier this week..hmm.. about your senior high school.." Anitha was taking it very slowly since she hadn't planned this conversation at all and now she had to tell Chavi, thanks to Sunil's short little tantrum after dinner.

"ok. Is it about me moving to Bangalore to study high school?" Chavi sounded totally cool! Anitha was surprised, not because Chavi knew about it, but she sounded so okay with it.

"Yes dear, it is about that. But how did you know? and aren't you a little worried?" Anitha was confused.



"I overheard you guys this morning, you know I don't oversleep like Teju. Don't worry mumma, I will be back home for the vacations before you even know it. Moreover, Bangalore is hardly a 4 hour drive from here. You can come over any time you want to see me, yes?" Chavi sounded like the elder one among the two in this conversation and she was taking a mature stand and was convincing Anitha!

"That's my girl!" roared a proud Sunil who had eavesdropped on the entire tetetete from the door itself.

"I wonder who my little girl is here" teased Sunil just as Anitha slapped him on his shoulder.

They all had a good time and little Teju too joined the trio in his akka's room. He will be told later about Chavi leaving for her studies.

The next morning, Sunil and Anitha had a few visitors. In fact, they had come over to see brave young Chavi. They were members of the Indian Women and Child Welfare & National Upliftment Coordination Committee or 'IWANACUCC', Coorg chapter.

IWANACUCC's plenary body had decided to felicitate Chavi for her rare display of courage & presence of mind that would incidentally happen during the grand conglomeration of its members across the state that would include colorful performances by girl children replete with fiery speeches by well-known feminists and social activists.

"Madam" addressed the petite lady in a dapper Salwarkameez looking at Anitha only and choosing to completely ignore Sunil who was right beside his better half. Apparently these IWANACUCC members were fierce feminists and refused to acknowledge any of Sunil's contribution towards Chavi.

"Madam, we are from IWANACUCC, Coorg Chapter, hope you know about our organisation, the activities that we are involved in, blah, blah, blah..." she went on for a good 5 minutes pausing in between to introduce herself as one Ms. Dhaniya and her associate as one Ms. Swati, no surnames were given out.

The duo behaved as if they had taken an oath to completely renounce their associations with their male counterparts, though it was well known that Ms. Dhaniya's husband of 10 years Mr. AshwinCheriappa had dropped her to the IWANACUCC office the same morning.

"We are both glad to have you at our home" Anitha was polite in her response after a patient hearing.

"What can we do for you Ma'am" quipped Mr. Sunil Kumar oblivious to the fact that he was addressing a couple of ardent man haters.

"Madam, we are here to invite your family to IWANACUCC's 5th annual Woman power celebrations and this time around we are proud to announce that this grand event is being organized in Coorg itself. We heard about your daughter's brave act and decided to felicitate her on the occasion. That would serve as an example to all men who take us women folk lightly" Ms. Dhaniya again chose to ignore the presence of Sunil and continued talking only to Anitha.

Anitha was enjoying this as was evident from the faint grin that she sported throughout the conversation, imagining Sunil's growing discomfiture. The poor object of hate was in a conversation and could not walk out as it would mean disrespect to the 2 fierce feminists lurking around and it would also add to their already burning fire as being un - chivalrous.

"Why! it is our pleasure that you have considered our family for this honor. Chavi would be ecstatic. I am so glad that IWANACUCC has organized the event so close home this time around, aren't we Sunil?" Anitha mocked at Sunil.

Sunil replied only in kind, by meekly pursing his lips and nodding his head briskly up & down.

"So when is this grand event?" inquired Anitha.

"This Saturday evening Madam! you will be expected to come latest by 7 o'clock" quipped petite Ms. Dhaniya without even waiting for the Kumar's acceptance of her nearly hostile invitation.

"But..." Sunil was about to commit *Hara Kiri* by elaborating about his earlier plan for the weekend, just when Anitha saved him from impending mortification at the hands of Ms. Dhaniya and Ms. Swati.

"We will be there at 7 o'clock; Thank you. Would you like to have some coffee?" Anitha proceeded to be host to her new acquaintances from IWANACUCC while grossly ignore Sunil slipped away from the scene.

A good 30 minutes later, when the mercurial lady walked out of their property, Sunil slowly regained lost ground.

"Anu! why did you?..."

"Because Chavi needs it.. If she is going to Bangalore for a long time, then she better have a farewell befitting her act in the school. You know... something for the family album" winked Anitha & winced Sunil.

"Suit up! Chavi, we are getting late for the function..it's a 45 minute drive, hurry up, Uff.. stand still Teju.. let me tie the tie.." the Kumars were getting ready for Chavi's grand felicitation event.

"But I don't wanna come mumma, akka also said she doesn't wanna go! aren't we supposed to be in Bangalore today?! what about my PS3?" Teju's dream looked like they were fading away and his ambitions of making Monu jealous with his boy toys were fast losing steam.

"Tejooo, stand straight, don't act like a monkey! we are already late, thanks to you" Anitha was in no mood to be receptive to her son's annoying antics.

Teju was a smart kid and he did not say much when Anitha was on the threshold of catching a lousy temper. Perhaps he had learnt the silent art by observing his father. Sunil had always chosen silence over reason whenever Anitha lost her cool. This was just one of those days! Like father like son.

"Ok, guys, I am ready" Chavi stepped down to the living room, where Anitha was busy with Teju's tie and Sunil had just stepped inside after getting the car out of the garage.

"Gosh!" gasped Anitha. She could not imagine that her little child had grown so fast and so beautiful. Chavi was looking divine in her sequined lehanga ensemble with matching ear drops and necklace embedded with mock diamonds. Her hazel eyes and long flowing hair would catch everybody's attention in the function and moreover she would be taking center stage too.

Teju gave a happy smile at his beloved akka. Since they were born 7 years apart, there was never any chance of sibling rivalry. Chavi was more of a second mom to Teju and he loved his sister just too much. After struggling to get the knot right and Teju stand straight, the Kumars finally arrived at the grand ceremony, thankfully on time and Sunil just avoided the torture of a dozen ferocious feminist eyes had he been late for the occasion.



"These men can never do one thing right. I really wonder if they have bricks for brains" Ms. Dhaniya would have insulted poor Sunil. Thankfully, that did not happen and the event went on well.

For much that they claimed, the dance & song & speech routine went off without glitches, but the food wasn't something to talk home about, at least this was what Sunil felt while little Teju stuffed his face with the *panipuri* that was being served at one of the stalls.

Chavi was called on stage and after a few words of praise and a few words of man - insult, she was given a commemorative plaque bearing IWANACUCC in bold red letters and other details of the event. The local *Mercera Mirror* photographers could be seen clicking away a lot of photographs, a select couple of them would grace the inside pages of the popular tabloid.

The Kumars were a tired foursome when they returned home and they hit the sack almost immediately.

They had to get up early tomorrow to visit Vishesh Arora and the shopping could be done in the evening.

The Kumars started before the break of dawn and was able to reach his friend Vishesh's apartment block just in time for breakfast.

## Chapter 2 – The Liaising

"NamaskarNamaskar! welcome to the software farmer family!" Vishesh Arora, a tall 6' 2" fair skinned, bespectacled man with a thinning hairline that seemed to be more partial to the sides near his ears than the center of his scalp, came around as a warm person, ushered in the Kumar foursome to his apartment.

"Mridulaaaa!" screamed Vishesh to call his wife who was busy with her kitchen obligations preparing delicious Rajasthani cuisine for the South Indian Kumar family.

"Meet the Kumars! the farmer family" at least Vishesh thought this was funny.

"Shh...Vishesh, hello ji, he keeps talking about your family all the time. It is something great that you are doing. If all of the people move out of the village to work in front of computers then in a few years' time we all will have nothing to eat!" Mridula Arora was just playing courteous hostess.

"Sunny grows flowers Mri" corrected Vishesh.

"Ha haha.. I Guess we will have at least flowers to eat if everyone decides to become software engineers" snorted Vishesh in his own inimitable style which was quite endearing actually.

The atmosphere of laughter and cordiality immediately broke ice and both Chavi and Teju were found laughing along with Vishesh. Not because they got his satire, but they found his snorting when he laughed, quite funny.

"You have very beautiful children ji" Chavi and Teju had caught Mridula's attention. The Arora kid was an 8 year old boy who was still sound asleep as it was a Sunday and all the raucous laughter that his father emitted did not disturb the 8 year old's slumber as he was used to such noises.

"Baba is still asleep, we had been to a late nighter at the multiplex last evening and he had quite a heavy dinner. The poor fellow deserves some sleep, especially in the vacations. God knows what the schools burden our children with, these days!" Vishesh explained his son's absence from the living room before being questioned about it.

"These two here are no early birds either and they have no interest for the juicy worm" Sunil likened their kids to Vishesh's son just to normalise the situation.

While the ladies huddled up in the kitchen, the 'men'; Little Teju inclusive went about their usual discussion & contemplation over the world situation.

'Baba' was woken up and after freshening up, joined the Kumars at the table for breakfast. Delicious *Pyaz & Gobi Paranthe*, *dahi and saag* to go with it.

After a fillip, Sunil and Vishesh broke away from the crowd to discuss on more serious issues. Chavi's school admission.

"Sunny yaar, I have spoken with my dad and he has spoken to his friend Mr. KaustabTiwary who is a trustee of the school"

"what was the name of the school again? it slips away from my mind every time" queried Sunil.

"The Aaradhya Center of Excellence or ACE. Quite cheeky eh? actually its named after the founding member's eldest son" clarified Vishesh.

"It is a co - ed, but has separate hostels for the girls and the boys. It is quite safe actually. There is a police outpost just about a kilometer from the school premises and the police regularly do rounds near there. The school has also entrusted the security of the campus to an acclaimed private security company. Bilkull tension nahi hai Sunny bhai!" assured the boisterous Vishesh Arora.

"Moreover you shall take a look yourself when we go there after lunch!".

After a pleasant morning in front of the television and a sumptuous lunch served by Mridula, all of them leave for ACE which is a huge campus overlooking a private lake and a bungalow by its side. There were piers leading to less shallow portion of the lake where a small fishing boat was also tethered.

The Kumars and the Aroras later learn from the hostel warden that the bungalow belonged to an old widow who went by the name of Ms. Lily Mary D' Cousta whose husband was a self-made millionaire who had made it big in the early 60's with his business of dealing with exquisite works of art. The D'coustas did not have any heirs for their huge property and only had a motley group of domestic helps who were appointed by the family trust that her husband had bequeathed his entire property before he died. The Kumars could also notice a couple of burly Rottweiler hounds that howled at the sight of strangers near their mistress's property.

The school building was a built like a giant horse shoe with sharp corners replacing the round U bend. They were three storied blocks and each block looked exactly same as the other. The whole building was given a generous coat of white both from the inside and the outside with a striking coat of Violet on the borders where the plinths and columns crossed each other with a streak to give the structure a contrasting effect of Vanilla and Black Currant shades.

At the mouth of the U shaped structure was a concrete ground large enough to house the school's entire population for the morning and post lunch assembly sessions. There were two masts on which the flags of India and the school were hoisted.

The school flag had a violet background with an emblem emblazoned in bright orange. The emblem was remarkable, more like a coat of arms and had a white Pegasus on its hinds and wings spread wide, a phoenix with its claws in seizing position and a giant mythical turtle on which what seemed like the sun rested with the Pegasus and the Phoenix on its either side.

The school's motto was written on a scholar's ribbon in usual Latin as is the fad with all schools that liken themselves to the schools of Oxford and Cambridge.

### ***Gloria Fortitudo Victoria***

The Pegasus of the Olympians represented eternal Glory as it was immortal, the turtle supporting the sun represented stupendous strength and the mythical bird Phoenix which rises from its own ashes represented Victory under all circumstances.

The school's management had quite aggressively promoted this International residential all across the country as well as abroad by sponsoring various Indian cultural programs by the huge expat community. It was well rewarded with people from many parts of the world evincing interest in the school and since then the school had gone from strength to strength churning out quality students who came in as pupils but went out as ladies and gentlemen.

Like most International residential schools, ACE's brochures were full off attractive shots of the school's sprawling grounds, main structure, lab facilities, equestrian courses, Olympic grade swimming pools, a fully functional state of the art athletic track with a football & hockey grounds, tennis court and a huge Indoor gymnasium. Vishesh had brought along the brochure of the school which he had received from his father.

"Oh My Gosh! Sunny! I should have admitted Baba too here!" an astonished Vishesh remarked while an unimpressed 'Baba' looked at his father with suspicious eyes.

"It is indeed a fantastic school! Isn't it Chav?" Sunil was happy that his decision was turning out to be the right one.

"I will survive Papa!" was Chavi's way of expressing her excitement in a more suppressed manner.

"Good, then! since the admission itself is not a problem, I guess we can fix up a meeting with the school's princy, a one Mr. Aadarsh Prasad for an F2F with Chavi! What say Sunny boy?" Vishesh asked.

"Of course" Anitha was fast in her response. She had fallen in love with the school and had now begun to think like a responsible parent.

"Will I also be coming here papa?" little Teju was feeling left out of the conversation.

"No, baba, you are now too small to be staying away from home! don't you like your home better?" Mridula was trying to convince Teju in her own style.

"But papa, if akka is coming here, then I also want to" Teju was getting restless with the idea of his separation from his akka.

"No Teju, you will be with St. Patrick's till your seventh grade!, you can come over in the vacations when mumma and papa will come here to pick me up. Ok?" Chavi was more direct and drove home the point straightaway.

Teju usually did not throw tantrums while with company so he just stood silent sulking to be attended by his caring mumma as well as Mridula.

"Well, then let us go have a look at the facilities here, dad had asked me to call up one Ms. SadhanaTalapatra. Wait up, let me try her number, I only hope the reception is good around this place" Vishesh had been asked to contact Ms. Sadhana who was the warden of the girls's hostel.

"Hello! Mrs. Talapatra? this is Vishesh, Vishesh Arora.. I am a friend of Mr. KaustabhTiwary..yaya.. ok.. we are here.. ya...correct... ok" Vishesh got off the line with Ms. SadhanaTalapatra.

Originally from Paradip in Orissa, now Odisha Ms. SadhanaTalapatra had settled in Bangalore with her family. Her husband, Mr. SandipTalapatra was also a member of the school's faculty and taught gym classes as an assistant gymnastics coach. Their daughter was also admitted into the same school and they all lived in the faculty quarters just a stone's throw away from the boys' hostel which was in fact about the quarter of a kilometer from the girl's hostel.

"Hello Sir! I hope I didn't keep you waiting for long!" Ms. Talapatra was in her mid-thirties and bore a pleasant outlook unlike the stereotypical wardens of girls' hostels portrayed in most of Indian movies. She was dressed in a violet track suit with the school emblem embroidered on the top. She was a petite woman

and would have been around 5' 2" in height, she was quite fit as she doubled as gym instructor for the girls and also had her husband's assistance in maintaining a tight fitness regime.

"Not at all, we were just appreciating the school campus!" Anitha replied.

"Great! Aadarsh sir had called my husband earlier this morning and had informed us about your arrival. Sandip, is engaged with the boys' on the equestrian course and I shall be obliged to give you a tour of the school campus" Ms. Sadhana was very cordial and guided the two families to follow her for a campus tour.

"We shall now be going towards the grounds, the labs and classrooms are all closed today and only the gym, pool, the open grounds, the auditorium and the equestrian course is accessible on weekends and national holidays" said Sadhana.

"Ok. No problem Madam, we shall be pleased to see whatever is available now" reassured Sunil.

After she showed them around the football & hockey grounds and the tennis court where a small group of kids could be found engrossed in their games, they proceeded towards the grand Olympic grade swimming pool.

"Some of our students have been representing the school at district, zonal and state level swimming competitions, In fact a couple of them have been champions and have got the school significant recognition. We have a national level swimmer who coaches the students thrice in a week. He comes down every Sunday, Wednesday and Friday" one could see the sparkle of pride in Ms. Sadhana's eyes when she spoke about the school's accomplishments.

After showing around the splendid campus and leaving the two families gaping in sheer admiration, Ms. Sadhana took leave to carry on with her duties in the gym.

"Wow! Sunny boy! what luck! Chavi will not learn swimming, dancing, singing, horse riding and what not!these guys probably offer flying lessons too!" Vishesh was at his jovial best.

"haha, right Vishesh, anything is possible! so when do we meet up with the principal, Mr. Aadarsh?" Sunil was eager to close the deal and confirm Chavi's admission into the school

"What say Anu, Chavi and Teju?, shall we go ahead huh?" Sunil realized he must fulfill the formality of consulting the remaining members of his family, though it was obvious from his behaviour that a decision was made already.

"Sure Sunil" Anitha smiled at Chavi.

"Ok then, I will give a call to Mr. Aadarsh, he probably lives with his family in the faculty quarters as well, he should be here any minute" assumed Vishesh

The phone went dead after a very brief conversation and after a 15 minute wait near the hockey ground, Mr. Aadarsh met the two families.

"Hello everyone! Ms. Sadhana appraised me of your arrival. I would have come myself but was preoccupied with some other work, so I requested the nice lady to attend to you" Mr. Aadarsh was not hesitant to readily get acquainted.

Mr. Aadarsh Prasad had been an academician all his life and had made quite a good name as a teacher and principal of a very well renowned school in Bangalore city. When ACE was established and its founders were scouting for the best faculty, some one proposed Mr. Aadarsh as an ideal choice to head the faculty and the management soon found out that they had made the right decision appointing him. He was a middle aged man with dark curly hair, hairy forearms, large broad shoulders and a slightly protruded belly which was acceptable for his age. He was married and had a single kid who was studying college in Bangalore & the wife was a master at home management.

"Not at all Sir, she was very courteous and happily showed us all around the campus, might we say we are pretty impressed by what we see" Anitha responded. Such niceties were her forte.

"Very well then, so where's your child who wants to get into ACE?" Mr. Aadarsh queried with a light smirk on his slightly wrinkled face, rubbing his hands in animated anticipation.

Chavi was introduced and after a few informal questions and few serious questions, Mr. Aadarsh seemed quite convinced to allow Chavi's admission into the school. Her grades were testimony to her intelligence and her little brave act preceded her and the so called 'interview' was a mere formality. ACE would have been proud to admit Chavi.

"The semester begins from 10th May, we plan to start early and complete the portions well in advance for our students to get sufficient time to revise and master the subjects. As you know we follow the central board syllabus here and the classes are going to be quite rigorous" Mr. Aadarsh had come down straight to the point and directed Sunil about the fee structure, the progress reporting structure, ward monitoring, hostel fees etc etc.

"Ok then! WHO WANTS TO GO SHOPPING!" Sunil was setting the mood right after bidding good bye to Mr. Aadarsh and getting inside the car!

Tejus was quick in grasping the opportunity and his hopes of getting his gadgets soared high again.

The two families reached the city and spent the rest of the evening wandering through aisles and aisles of clothes, perfumes, sun glasses, toys and what not! After a mega shopping spree, Sunil seemed to have wiped off a small portion of his hard earned fortune in one single evening!

"Thank you Vishesh, Bhabhiji for the wonderful weekend. I insist you come over to Coorg while we can try to repay your hospitality in kind" Sunil & Anitha bade farewell to the Aroras and the Kumar foursome proceeded to their hilly abode in the dark of the night.

It was soon 30th April, and Chavi had just 15 more days at home.

Chavi was quick to escape into her world of books and the wonderful tales that her companions would spin. Chavi was trying out different genres and was soon in the clasp of *Adrien O Toole's* horror thrillers. The tryst with the supernatural & the paranormal would send shivers down her spine when she would read the books in the privacy of her cozy room with a view. The large French windows and the Venetian blinds provided her no consolation during times when she just wanted to tightly clutch on to something.

All of you might have heard of Deja Vu when things strangely feel like they have happened with you before. It's that feeling in the mind that sometimes leaves exasperated & short of breath! Chavi's life at the school hostel was about to take a much unwanted drastic turn when something unearthly begins to happen to her and the people around her.



"Chavi!go to sleep! you need to give your books a break! you have the whole day tomorrow!" Chavi could hear Anitha shouting from across the living room.

"Hmm.. I guess I must give it a break now.." Chavi turns of the lights.

The next 15 days are quite hectic for the Kumars and they are busy getting Chavi's school uniforms, gowns, equestrian suits, fencing gear, swim suits, books, stationery etc etc. Time flew by and before she could sit back and relax, Chavi was standing in front of Mr. Aadarsh Prasad's office at the ACE campus.

"Good Morning Sir"! Chavi's voice sounded like chimes caught in a mild breeze.

"Good Morning Ms. Chavi! please come in" Mr. Aadarsh Prasad was extremely formal and he looked quite different that day and was quite a departure from the smiling and warm person that she had met along with her family some time back.

"You will have to meet Ms. SadhanaTalapatra who is the hostel warden, she will guide you to your room and brief you about the house rules" explained the celebrated academician.

The International residential school had houses - 4 of them and was a mixture of girls & boys. As is the case with all schools, the house would be given points for their effort in academics, sports and other extracurricular activities. This was most essential to imbibe senses of team work, owner ship, pride, reliability,mutual trust, competitive spirit and leadership qualities among the students.

The 4 groups were named after creatures of Indian mythology: *Uchashrava* (The celestial horse), *Garuda* (The Bird King), *Airavatha* (The celestial elephant) and *Mayura* (the divine peacock)

There was no particular means of classifying students into the group and the faculty randomly selected students for the houses to try make the teams as even & balanced as possible. Chavi was 'randomly' selected for Uchashrava, the celestial horse which is described as being pure white & was most difficult to get hold of, may be a metaphor for man's highest desires which are almost impossible to get hold of.

"Hello mumma? haa..I have been given a room in the hostel, it's on the fourth floor,haa.. no.. yet to set up my stuff.. I gotta get ready for the morning assembly..will talk to you later mumma.. love you.. bye.." Chavi got off the line with her mom.

Chavi would be sharing her room for the first time in her life! her roommate would be in the same class as she.

### Chapter 3 - Legacy

"Hello, I..my name is Chavi, I have just joined.." Chavi initiated the warm up session while the roommate looked hardly interested in making acquaintances.

"I am sure you have.." curtsy roommate replied.

"God! it's gonna be harder than I had imagined" contemplated Chavi.

After a couple of minutes of uneasy silence, the curtsy roommate having felt a little sorry for the newbie spoke up in a less hostile manner "I am Peeya, Peeya Mukherjee" just as she reached out to Chavi to shake hands out of formality.

"Nice to meet you" Chavi was as sweet as always.

Peeya just replied with a wry smile. "So which house have they put you in?" queried Peeya

"*Uchashrava*"

"Well that's sad. Those losers have been bottom dwellers all their life. Tough luck girl" Peeya was back to her tomboy attitude.

Chavi was wise not to respond to such loose statements. "Well that's something time will decide" she promised herself.

"Come on let's move! you don't wanna be late to the mess hall" Peeya marshaled Chavi out of the room.

The large mess hall could accommodate all the 500 students and the fare served for breakfast was standard. Military standard. The school was built on the lines of discipline and was modeled on the military norms. Hence, it was mandatory for its students to eat only with the cutlery provided and hands were a strict no - no!

There was one boiled egg, plain milk with sugar, 2 loaves of toast, a cube of butter or a small dollop of jam. Fruits were mixed dices of papaya, apple and pineapple and sometimes watermelon depending on the season.

On rare occasions when the faculty felt generous, local delicacies were also included in the fare much to the delight of the students. All sorts of food that the students would have thoroughly enjoyed at their homes were all forbidden here.

"You don't have to follow me all around the place, go find your own friends" Peeya wanted to brush off her new unwanted baggage, her roommate Chavi.

Chavi had loved it at St. Patrick's. She would have Teju for company during their 30 min drive from home to school and during lunch as well and the students there had never been rude to her. This was all very new for poor beautiful hazel eyed Chavi.

Peeya rushed towards a group of kids who looked just as angry and destroyed from inside just as she did. It was a depressing group. Peeya was in the house of *Airavatha*.

"You can come here if you want" a pair of welcoming eyes invited Chavi to share the table. It was the head girl of the *Mayura* house.

"Thank you" Chavi let her smile mesmerize the group of *Mayurans*.

"Oh my God! Isn't she just so pretty?" gushed Praneethi Darshan, a 9th grader.

"Yes she is! I am Disha Gowda and I am the head girl of *Mayura*. You can call me Disha. What's your name?" Disha came around as a very nice person to Chavi, but in fact was quite vain herself since she was the head girl and *Mayura* had been ranking second for two consecutive years.

"Hello Disha, pleased to meet you, my name is Chavi and I am from Coorg. I am in *Uchashrava*" Chavi answered a bit nervously.

"Wow! you mean you are with the champion house! cool" again gushed Praneethi Darshan.

"*Uchashrava* are the champion house? I had heard otherwise!" Chavi was a little perplexed.

"Of course they are, but we will beat you guys this time around. you know what they say, third time lucky!" Disha Gowda sounded very confident in this rebuttal of hers.

"Who is your roomie?" asked another 9th grader, Pawan Siddhaiah.

"It's Peeya Mukherjee"

"Oh shit! that *Airavatha* loonie! I wonder what Sadhana ma'am was thinking putting you two together! you seem like a nice girl" Pawan did not have anything nice to say about Peeya, who was apparently notorious in the school for her rebellious & devil may care attitude. Moreover she belonged to *Airavatha* who were many times found resorting to cheat tactics during annual sports competitions.

"I am sure she is a nice girl once I get to know her" Chavi had hardly been exposed to anybody who had ever been rude to her and she had faith in the goodness of people.

"Don't worry, you'll find out soon, she won't privilege you with a long wait" Pawan promised her.

"Shut up guys! it's her first day at school! there's no need to go all hoohaa about her roomie" Disha Gowda intervened to control the situation. It wouldn't reflect well on her if her group of friends were back biting on someone else.

After the morning prayers were recited by a trio of sixth graders, everyone had their breakfast in stark silence and proceeded towards their respective classes.

The classes were more like operation theaters where you could cut the silence with a knife. The students of this residential school were extremely disciplined and many a times bordered on stoic and eerie. There was an uneasy calm in the school.

Chavi found her way to the classroom where all of the students were already in their positions leaving very little choice for Chavi to select her chair.

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