

The Bookworm Chronicles

Schools, can sometimes be strange little blocks of space. While the whole agenda of a school is to get the child to read and write, there is a stigma attached with the few kids who actually take it seriously. While rote learning is the order of the day and a most guaranteed way to get through to the next semester with flying colors, kids seldom make books their pals.

And the few who do, are awarded a lot of ingenious titles - Teacher's pet, Geek, Nerd and the most ignominious of them all - "The Bookworm" or the dwellers & feeders of the books.

This is the story of one, a bookworm whose books rocked her world, well almost.

The Kumars - Sunil & Anitha were first generation aristocrats who had made quite a large fortune for themselves when they had decided to renounce their high paying jobs as Software professionals in Bangalore and pursue floriculture in India's own Scotland - Coorg. The booming domestic wedding scene at home in India and the strong demand for exotic flowers in the west, proved their decision right and it yielded them most favorable returns very soon. The young Kumar couple, soon established themselves as a name to be reckoned with in a sleepy coffee estate hamlet of Coorg.

Sunil & Anitha always yearned for a child. "Anu, I have always thought that I have not thanked Him enough. He has been so kind to us all this while. I never could have imagined that our little idea of becoming farmers after leaving everything back would have met such great success".

Anitha was an eternal optimist "have some faith, my love, when He has blessed us with all that we have, I am positive that our prayers for a child will not go unanswered. We just have to keep believing".

Their prayers were answered. A couple of years later, on a cold November evening, Anitha was the bearer of great news "Sunil!!" she exalted, "Guess what!!".

Sunil had had a particularly hard day at work that day and frankly wasn't in the mood to play the guessing game.

"Honey, did you meet an old friend?"

"No".

"Hmmm, well then did you get a new dress?"

"No".

"Heck how do I know? those were the best two guesses I could make".

"Oh Come on!! don't be a kill joy!. You can do better than that".

Sunil was getting restless. He was not known to be temperamental. He was generally calm, especially with Anitha whom he courted since college before popping the question. But he was losing it. Fast. Gulping in, he consoled himself. " I give up, Anu. Please don't torment me like this. You know I am not good at this kind of stuff".

"Aww, I hoped you could guess, my love. But maybe you need a little push". She placed 2 small woolen mittens she had been knitting for a while now. Women usually have precognition capabilities in such cases. Anitha had recently got herself examined at the local physicist and had got the news confirmed.

It took Sunil by total surprise. "What!!!you are not... I am going to be... oh my God I love you Anu, I love you so much". Sunil was ecstatic. He took his beloved Anu in his arms and they shared an intimate moment which words cannot describe. It was Sunil's way of thanking Anitha and God through her.

Their wait was getting longer and both Sunil & Anitha were desperate to have a look at their precious first born. A good 2 weeks before the scheduled arrival date, Anitha broke water. Sunil drove her to the town hospital himself. 30 pensive minutes later, Sunil & Anitha were proud parents of a perfectly healthy, beautiful pink girl. She was born on the 20th of May. No special day for the rest of the world. A day of great bearing for the Kumars.

"Thank you, Lord". Sunil had found inner peace.

The little child was the cynosure of all eyes even while at the hospital. The doctors, nurses and the midwives alike all showered their affection on this girl who seemed to bring about a smile on everyone who saw her.

"She glows like an angel" - admired one of the hospital's nurses.

"She will always keep you both very happy" - remarked an aged midwife.

Sunil's business associates and some of his employees had arrived at the mansion to congratulate the blessed couple & to bless the child themselves.

The Kumar family's bundle of joy was soon transported to the most wonderful nursery one could ever imagine in the sprawling Kumar mansion. Sunil & Anitha had the best interior designers hired and created a fantasy land for the apple of their eyes.

Since only happy faces seemed to reflect in the girl's eyes, Sunil & Anitha decided to name the child - Chavi, meaning reflection.

"Anu, you have made me the most fortunate man on this planet. All I could wish for, Chavi symbolises that. I promise you Anu, that I will always keep you both safe and happy".

"I know, my love. You are a great hubby and will be a great father. Now don't get all mushy and start crying. Then we will have 3 girls in the house" lovingly chided Anitha. It was a happy picture.

It was most rewarding for the happy couple to just watch Chavi slowly take toddler steps, covered in divine mirth and absolutely innocent. Chavi had hazel eyes that made her all the more beautiful. Maybe, it was the cool breezes and the balmy weather of Coorg that gave Chavi's skin such a pleasant glow. She had grown curly hair and by her second birthday, her locks were already waist length. Chavi was a darling and the whole small hamlet loved her.

Sunil & Anitha had lost their parents early and had come up on their own right. So, little Chavi was never introduced to the love & affection of her grand parents. Her parents were all what she had.

Anitha had always made it a point to read Chavi, bed time stories ever since she was just a tiny toddler. The dotting mother wanted her only child to sleep in heavenly bliss and dream only of unicorns and small pink piglets and bunnies. Both Sunil & Anitha observed that their daughter was exceptionally brilliant & skillful because she had spoken her first words at a very early age and had even many a times ingeniously found out ways to get out of her creche undetected. Little Chavi could identify the characters of the dozens of fantasy tales her mum would narrate to her every night.

Throughout her formative years, Chavi was exposed to the adventurous lives of Winnie the Pooh and his little friends Tigger, Rabbit, Owl and Donkey and soon graduated to fairy tales of Rapunzel, the little Mermaid, Snow White and Little Red Riding Hood. Anitha had transformed little Chavi's world into a world filled with talking animals, gnomes, dwarfs, elves, fairy princesses and the victory of good over bad. From a very tender age, Chavi started believing that no matter what the situation and the condition, the good will always prevail over the bad. It was her little secret.

Chavi was precisely 4 1/2 years of age, when she was admitted to a well renowned International school, 'St. Patrick's Convent for Boys & Girls' in the nearby hill resort town of Marcera. The school was an old English convent, now taken over by Indian educationists but had retained its old world charm, ethos and discipline nevertheless. This was a co - ed school, which meant both little girls and little boys would be studying together. Good. The school was residential, which meant it had a hostel for the boys and school. However, since little Chavi's mansion was just a couple of miles away, she would not be burdened with the separation from her lovely parents. Sunil, had a chauffeur driven car always ready at her daughter's disposal and his only responsibility was to take her to the school and drop her back home.

Sunil, Anitha & Chavi had met the school's stern looking headmistress, who seemed rather impressed at first by Chavi's amazing beauty but stuck to her hardened iron lady look since she had to 'interview' the poor little girl before admitting her into the school.

Headmistress Leela, forced a smile upon her huge face and looked pretty different to the little Chavi, because of her hair tied in a bun, her huge sun red kumkum bindi.

"Chavi, hmm, could you tell me about your parents dear"

"Aunty.."

"Ma'am", corrected the headmistress. "Call me Ma'am".

Chavi shared glances with her eagerly looking parents and continued. "Ma'am, my parents are fori..flori.. floricutarits, they sell flowers and get money for it. We have red roses, water lilies, tulips and and..."

"Ok. thats good" interrupted the headmistress. "Do you like school? what do you like to do?"

"Yes ma'am, I like school. But I like our house more. I like to play in our garden & listen to the bed time stories mumma tells me every night" she turns to see a smiling and nodding Anitha.

Pretty little Chavi, however had no problems with the few other simple questions the headmistress had put forward and passed the interview with flying colors to bring broad smiles upon her parents' faces.

Little Chavi, had a small problem though. Socializing.

For the past 4 years, she had been all alone in their family mansion smothered by the attention of her attentive mother and proud father. Sunil & Anitha in their fondness for their daughter had missed to give a thought to Chavi's socialising. Since they were living in a small hamlet away from the hustle and bustle of the town & since they had no relatives or friends who were particularly close, they focused their energies completely for the maintenance of a fledgling business and the upbringing of their dearest daughter.

Chavi, could not make friends easily. The other kids easily mingled along and began with their usual repertoire of flinging paper, chalk and rubber erasers at each other. All she could think of was her friends in the books that would come alive in front of her every time her mother would narrate those stories to her. Chavi, unconsciously had cut off from the normal world and had slowly seeped into her own fantasy world where no one else could enter unless she allowed them to.

Chavi was a special kid who was exceptional at academics and always garnered top grades and was the favorite of all the teachers, may be because, she was silent and kept away from mischief. While the other kids were busy eating boogers, Chavi was in the cozy folds of her books which she always carried along in her cute little backpack.

Lunch time was a solitary affair, when little Chavi moved away from the cafeteria towards the fringes of her school's enormous grounds, to eat a sandwich and to read her book. The teachers never minded because she was always so good, attentive during the classes and was never ever involved in a fight with her classmates. She was nearly perfect.

While, at the Kumar mansion, Chavi was in for a surprise. A good 7 years after Chavi was born, Anitha had conceived again. It was great news for Chavi since she was about to get a little brother or a sister and most importantly her own little friend with whom she could share all fantasies and they could together go frolicking in her land of talking animals, gnomes, dwarfs, elves, fairy princesses and where there was always victory of good over bad.

"Oh! he is such a darling Anu. You have done it again. He is a perfect gift for Chavi. How much we longed for Chavi to have a little brother. Chavi will be over the clouds".

After a patient wait, Chavi had her present wrapped in soft woolen blankets who looked as pink as she had 9 years ago. It was a boy! Chavi had a baby brother to play with. Sunil & Anitha were all eyes for the boy as is the case with all things new. Moreover this was a boy. An heir to the small empire of the Kumars.

Both Sunil & Anitha had never been biased and initially tried to pretty much give equal attention to both the new born and their first born. But the baby boy's roof shattering cries and tantrums had them tending to his each and every demand with rapt attention. The busy Kumars had slowly yet unconsciously started ignoring the pretty, demure - hazel eyed Chavi.

Chavi was never hurt. She loved her parents & her little brother so dearly that jealousy had no place in her heart.

Chavi would follow Anitha to the nursery and would silently listen to the sweet lullaby that Anitha would sing for her tiny bundle of joy.

"Can I share my stories with him too, mumma?" innocently queried Chavi.

"Well of course, dear. He is your brother. He would like it a lot if you could share your fairy tales with him" said Anitha reassuringly.

Chavi always found solace in her books, her nursery was remodeled for the boy and Chavi was given a cozy new room with a magnificent view of the garden and the wooden gates. Her request for a wooden shelf where she could arrange her dozens of books were immediately complied and Sunil got made a wonderful teak wood shelf for his lovely daughter.

Chavi, loved her little brother dearly and was beginning to develop a motherly attitude towards him. She even suggested the name for the boy - Tejus which was the halo or the aura that emanated from divine beings.

"Well, isn't our pretty princess a clever little one!" Sunil beamed with pride.

"Obviously, my love. She has taken on to me, don't you see?" teased Anitha.

She had read the stories of Gods and demons in one of her books and her little brother seemed to emit a radiant glow whenever she saw him all cuddled up in the warmth of the oak wood cradle Sunil & Anitha had specially shipped in from Bangalore. So Chavi had thought of this name for her kid brother.

Years passed and little Chavi soon blossomed into a very pretty pre - teenager. Her cute curls were straighter now & her hazel eyes looked all the more deep and tranquil than ever before. She had developed quite a reputation of herself as being a loner, an introvert and a rich snob! Little, did her other class mates realize that Chavi was living in a world of her own and she had little role to play in theirs. The prolonged hours she spent in the school's old library earned her the title of Miss Bookworm and it soon caught up with the entire school. Not that it mattered to her anyways.

*"See our princess, In the little pink dress,
Always in the library, biting on a cadbury,
She comes in a car & stays a little far,
Bookworm, Bookworm, here does she come".*

Her envious pre teenage classmates had painstakingly formed this connundrum to make fun of the most beautiful and most intelligent of their mates. Maybe it was the children's way of getting Chavi to react and to try and open up with them.

She was 12 and Tejus was now 5 - the right age for him to join the school as well. Tejas was a brat! He was a hyperactive kid who always exhausted his energy reserves picking up petty fights with his classmates, though all in jest. He was not a bad student either because he had his brilliant sister for his home tutor. Tejus was an effervescent kid and he loved his parents and sister more than anything.

"So my Shaherzaade, how is school? you are not being any trouble to your teachers are you, kiddo?" Sunil tried to sound fatherly and strict and it had very little impact on the naughty little Tejus.

Wearing the look of a hermit, Tejus explained "Papa, ask Akka, She is my witness. I did not lock the door to the teachers' room. It was Monu. It was all his fault. Then, Rajappa came running towards us with his stick and all I did was run fast". Chavi, introduced the characters to an amused Sunil & Anitha.

"What made your friend Monu lock the teacher's room, Teju?". Anitha asked before Sunil could lose his temper.

"Well, mumma, Monu's dad had got him a puppy yesterday and Monu was busy building a home for it all evening. He could not do his home work & he was scared. So he thought if the teachers cant come out, then he need not have to get punished".

While Anitha sniggered softly, Sunil had a more sober look and gently admonished his naive kid to stop his friends from doing such mischievous things and to always tell akka of such things.

The morning breakfast and the dinners at night always filled the Kumar family mansion with great laughter, when Tejus narrated his day to Sunil, Anitha and Chavi. Tejus would bug his sister the whole 30 minutes that took their car to drop them to their school.

The car took the brother - sister duo through scenic landscapes filled with thick woods, pepper creepers, orchids and flower laden trees.

"Akka, akka, what is that around the tree?"

"Its a pepper creeper".

"Akka, akka, how tall are those trees there?"

"Umff.. very tall Teju".

"Akka, look at me, stop reading your stupid book. What is that bird over there?"

"Oho Teju, do you ever remember anything I say at all? I had told you about the bird yesterday. You'r head has a major leak I think. Always going out whatever I put in. This is the last time ok? that's a wild fowl. I want you to memorize that name".

"Ok. I knew that. Wild fowl. Ha! what a stupid name".

Chavi would roll her hazel eyes and go back to her reading.

After the morning prayers were said, Tejus and Chavi would go their separate ways to their respective classes. At lunch, they would meet and eat together. It was good for Chavi, who got a break from her books and had a real person to interact with. She loved her little brother more than her books. She would do anything for him to be happy.

With the passing years, Chavi had moved out of the fantasy world of talking animals, gnomes, dwarfs, elves, fairy princesses and progressed to the amazing tales of the "Blonde Bullet" a series of books on the adventures of a western dame who kicked butt and emerged victorious in situations filled with grimy villains and plotting vixens. The books were racy thrillers that captured the young adolescent's imagination and she put herself in the Blonde Bullet's shoes, Literally!

With her sharp presence of mind, excellent dexterity, her skills to innovate from scrap and her courage to come out trumps in the face of adversity she was a role model to all girls and obviously Chavi wanted to one day be like her idol.

...."It was a dark & stormy night at Micwen city. A murder most foul had shook the sleepy hill town's confidence in its Sheriff. The cops had reached a blind spot. Was it a perfect crime? asked the deputy to his disgruntled senior. Sheriff Gunther had never been in such a fix his whole life. This small hilly town of Micwen City had just around 2000 people and everyone knew everyone. It was his hometown. How am I going to interrogate my own family, my own friends? worried the veteran Sheriff. His town was all that he had. No! it has to be an out of townner. Old Joe was known to pick up random fights with truckers who would stop by at the town's only watering hole. His body was found near the abandoned wind mill outside the town near Mick's maize farm. It could be anybody. The whole town was suspect. This case was driving Sheriff Gunther crazy & he knew it. Something then flashed his mind, a private eye! yes! this way, the investigation goes on in the back ground and I dont have to smash my head over that lousy lute. This is a case for Blonde Bullet...." Chavi would enjoy reading aloud her favorite book alone in her room.

The International school had classes only till seventh grade and Chavi being 12 already had never realised it was her time to graduate from middle school and move out to senior school. As part of their annual day celebrations the school's

trustees had decided to organize a play that had students from all classes participating. Of course, they had to attend the auditions after school and the drama teacher Ms. Clara would select students for the characters of Shakespeare's "*Taming of the Shrew*". Colorful notices were put up all across the school campus including Chavi's favorite haunt - the school library.

"My dear students, It is with great pleasure that I bring to your notice that the school had decided to organise in honor of the outgoing batch of 09, a reenactment of William Shakespeare's comic play - *The taming of the shrew*. Interested students are advised to enroll themselves immediately with their respective class teachers. Ms. Clara will be in charge of the auditions and her decision would be final. The auditions are open for students of all classes and I would like you all to participate" announced the heaving headmistress Leela after the morning prayers were held.

"As all of you know that our beloved head trustee Mr. Shriram Gupta and Secretary Mr. Sridhar Chellappa have taken on the noble task of contributing to the construction of the paediatric ward to the existing municipal hospital in Mercera, the school will be selling tickets to the annual play. All the proceeds from the sale of the tickets will be contributed to the construction of the hospital's child care wing. Students may approach their respective class teachers to get the tickets. Each student will be eligible to get a maximum of 5 tickets, each priced at Rs 250/-and we expect all of you will work hard towards selling all of them in order to raise maximum money for this great cause" added the headmistress to the impatient crowd of students.

Though, she hardly paid any attention to the fanfare and the excitement milling around the school in anticipation of the play that would mark the farewell of the graduating class, Chavi's little brother Tejus and her teachers all persuaded her to at least try her hand for the auditions.

"Akka, you have to come to the auditions with me. I will be *Petru...Peter.. Petroocio* and you can be *Kathy*" suggested Tejas to his sister.

"Listen Teju, I am no good at any of this acting stuff. You very well try your luck, but please don't drag me into all this" refused Chavi.

But what good is a little brother if he is not able to pester his sister. Chavi finally yielded, gave in to Tejus's persistence and her teachers' requests and auditioned. Ms Clara took an instant liking to the beautiful hazel eyed Chavi and was in awe of her fluent dialogue delivery and her superior command over the stage.

"Very good, Chavi. You have fabulous diction and your English is just wonderful. You must join in for the rehearsals. Please wait, I will meet you along with all those selected after the auditions" said Ms Clara, who had just passed out from Bangalore's prestigious 'Guild of Actors and Stage artists' and had joined this International school as a stop gap arrangement before her application to the world renowned 'Vienna School of Performing Arts' was approved.

However, after she learnt from the other teachers that Chavi hadn't volunteered for the audition & wasn't too keen on the play itself, Ms Clara thought of encouraging Chavi by offering her the much less laborious role of *Bianca* the shrew's sister.

"Oh, what a shame! she has such a pretty face and her stage presence for her age is something I have never seen before! It would have been great if she could spend more time for the rehearsals. I wanted her to be Katherine" said a sullen Ms. Clara who seemed displeased and also felt sorry for Chavi for her lack of interest in the play.

The role of *Katherine - the Shrew* went to another seventh grader and Chavi's class mate - Preethi.

Little Tejus too auditioned for the play and Ms Clara did not have the heart to turn down this cute kid who looked so adorable for his audition of *Petrucio*. She wanted someone older, so she offered Tejus the role of *Peter*, one of *Petrucio*'s servants. It was good enough for little Tejus as it meant spending longer hours at school.

Sunil & Anitha had no qualms about their kids spending an extra hour after school for the auditions since they had each other for company.

"Papa, papa, papa!" the Kumars were greeted by a shrieking Tejus who seemed to be walking on the clouds over his selection in the auditions by pretty Ms. Clara. "I am *Peter*, *Petrucio*'s closest friend in our school play". "You wish my dear little brother" followed his beautiful sister brushing his mop of hair with her hands. She did not go further elaborating the role to her parents as she did not want to belittle her kid brother who seemed so happy.

"Did you audition for the role too Chavi?" enquired Sunil.

"Yes papa, Teju begged me... like through the entire recess. I had to".

"Well?" asked Anitha.

"Umm....Well I got selected. I play *Bianca*, *Katherine's* younger sister. Not bad, I dont have to rehearse much and I can come home sooner". Chavi was not a recluse, her closest friends were her family. She confided in her mother and father & sometimes talked so much to the point of being called garrulous. Guess, it is just the phase in life, many girls pass through.

Both Sunil & Anitha were very glad to hear this since they knew this would give their daughter the much needed chance to make some real friends, to come out of her bubble. They did not want to force her to socialise. They just wanted to see her happy.

After a rigorous audition process that went on for a whole 5 days, Ms. Clara was able to put together her crew to *The Taming of the Shrew* and had sent across the list to headmistress Leela who promptly dispatched special notes to their respective parents. They would all be required to wire across some money for the purchase of costumes. The props and the stage would be set up by the school itself. Though it was a residential school, many kids who stayed in nearby hamlets & towns had the privilege of going to their homes everyday.

So, Chavi and Teju also had special notes from headmistress Leela to deliver to their parents.

The next day, Ms. Clara's final list was put up on the school notice board for everyone to take a look and appreciate. The notice read as follows

"On behalf of the entire teaching staff and St.Patrick's Convent for boys & girls management & trustees, I congratulate all of the students who had auditioned for our school's annual play of *The Taming of the Shrew*. The response was overwhelming and the dramatics department under Ms. Clara has made its decision for the final cast of the play.

The names of the selected students are mentioned below

1. Lord - Karan Mallappa, Class 6, Sec B
2. SLY - Nischit Verma, Class 6, Sec B
3. Hostess - Vidya P.N, Class 7, Sec A
4. Page - Chintan S, Class 4, Sec B
5. Player - Vikas Bidappa, Class 4, Sec A
6. I Huntsman - Manu Sriram, Class 5, Sec B
7. II Huntsman - Vikas C, Class 4, Sec A
8. Messenger - Syed Miraj, Class 3, Sec B
16. Gremio - Venkatesh Balachander, Class 5, Sec B
17. Hortensio - Nimit Suresh, Class 5, Sec A
18. Tranio - Manu Sriram, Class 5, Sec B
19. Biandello - Vikas C, Class 4, Sec A
20. Grumbo - Chintan S, Class 4, Sec B
21. Curtis - Vikas Bidappa, Class 4, Sec A
22. Nathaniel - Nischit Verma, Class 6, Sec B
23. Peter - Tejus Kumar, UKG

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| 9. I Servant - Tejus Kumar, UKG | 24. Joseph - Varun S S, UKG |
| 10. II Servant - Varun S S, UKG | 25. Philip - Tanmay K M, UKG |
| 11. III Servant - Tanmay K M, UKG | 26. Katharina the Shrew - Preethi, Class 7, Sec A |
| 12. Baptista - Bharat Chengappa, Class 7, Sec A | 27. Bianca - Chavi Kumar, Class 7, Sec A |
| 13. Petrucio - Amar A S, Class 6, Sec B | 28. Tailor - Syed Miraj, Class 3, Sec B |
| 14. Vincentio - Suprajith Sukumar, Class 7, Sec B | 29. Headerbasher - Nischit Verma, Class 6, Sec B |
| 15. Lucentio - Vijay Kumar, Class 5, Sec A | 30. I Servant - Vikas Bidappa, Class 4, Sec A |

I once again congratulate the entire cast of the play and I wish them all the best on behalf of the teaching staff, students, management & trustees. "

Verum Solus Valet

The school motto was written in emboldened letters. Truth Alone prevails it said.

True to being a bookworm, Chavi was the first to pick up her lines for the play from Ms. Clara who had downloaded it straight from the internet. This was going to be an abridged version of the original play that was played in medieval English which was obviously beyond normal comprehension for the kids and their parents.

While little Teju had no real lines and was more of a cute property on stage. Nevertheless, he was excited to just listen to Ms. Clara's description of their respective costumes. Since Teju was playing the role of Servants, his costume more or less remained the same.

"Oh man! *Bianca's* going to be in all 5 acts of the play. I think I should have accepted to play *Katharina* instead" complained Chavi to herself. Bianca was the sister of the shrew and she was to be on stage right from the opening act after the brief induction concludes.

*"Sister, Content you in my discontent.
Sir, to your pleasure humbly I subscribe:
My books & Instruments shall be my company;
On them to took and practice by myself".*

These were Chavi's first paraphrase that she would have to enact in Act I of the play. How apt were these lines to the bookworm. Even in the play, her books kept her company.

The next few weeks were very difficult for both little Teju and Chavi as they had to prepare themselves for the coming exams as well as the annual school

play. The costumes were ordered on a specialist in Bangalore who had a knack for preparing costumes for mythological, Victorian and Shakespearean plays. The school looked after all the coordination and the students only had to deposit the amount with the administrative office.

"Whew! what a relief!" told Chavi to herself. The last day of the exams were over. Chavi, wasn't the kind who lingered back at school discussing on the paper with her classmates. What's done is done was her thinking. Teju, however, made Chavi wait an extra 30 minutes at school as he was busy playing with his mates who would all be going away to their homes for the long vacation. The annual play was 15 days from then. Therefore, the cast of the play were supposed to stay back till then. The marks sheet distribution and the graduation ceremony would also be clubbed with the play.

The school had a large open air auditorium which could easily house around 4 - 5 thousand people. It was more of a amphitheater like the ones in ancient Greece and Rome. St. Patrick's annual plays were always a grand affair and the whole town anticipated these.

The new management had done well in keeping up with the school's fundamental ethos and culture.

"You know what? these plays are not so bad either. I think I should have given it thought much earlier" mused Chavi while Teju looked on.

"Whatever akka" shrugged off Teju, busy rehearsing his postures and walks. It was quite funny to watch him do that.

Chavi's Blonde Bullet books gathered dust for a while and the case of Old Joe's murder had still not been solved. Before she had paused reading to concentrate for the exams and now the play, Chavi had poured through some quite exciting revelations in the thickening plot.

".....Blonde Bullet, who's real name hardly anyone knew, was actually raised as an orphan by the US special forces. Trained in deadly martial arts, electronic surveillance and modern day reconnaissance, the Blonde Bullet was designed to specifically target state enemies from the communist regime, who threatened to tilt the balance of power in the world. She was taught to fight for justice and liberty. She was the crusader of truth in the free world.

Years later, the Blonde Bullet had fallen sour with her agency after startling revelations that opened her mind to the nasty truth about imperialist schemes.

"Disgusting sewer dwellers" muttered the angry Blonde.

"The scumbags have been using me for their proxy wars. No more shall the dark cloak of justice & liberty cloud my judgement" promised Blonde Bullet to herself.

She was a renegade. A fugitive in her own country. The state wanted her dead or alive. But she was their best agent. It was impossible for them to smoke her out of her burrow. The people, however knew she was their best bet in times when they had given up hope on the state.

"20:00 hrs, today - Sarge" read the note. Sheriff Gunther knew exactly how to reach the Blonde Bullet. When she was needed, she would find him herself. After all, Sheriff Gunther was her sergeant in the special forces training camp & her closest confidante. They knew each other like the backs of their hands.

"Are you In?" quipped the impatient Gunther.

"what do **you** think, Sarge?"

Chavi quickly bookmarked the page and switched over to her lines in the play. Her's was a significant role and she had quite a few lines and had to be present in all five acts of the play. She would be getting 3 different costumes for the play. One a simple medieval Italian dress, a ball room gown and another Victorian era dress with an excess of frills and lacework. She was in fact, living her childhood fantasies.

After rigorous dress & prop rehearsals on the well designed school stage & under the watchful eyes of Ms. Clara, the cast was finally ready for their grand enactment of the *The taming of the Shrew*.

"Very good guys! you are all natural born actors, I must confess" remarked the visibly happy Ms. Clara to her cast members after the final dress rehearsal concluded much as planned. Her first venture as the director of a play was going to be a grand success of which she would be very proud in her later years.

While on the way out, hyperactive Teju noticed that the school's usual watchman Rajappa was not present on the day before the annual day.

"Akka, where is Rajappa?, who is this new Uncle at the gates?" enquired Teju.

"Donno, Teju, must be a replacement. Who knows" Chavi shrugged him off.

"I don't like the way he looks at us akka, I think he is not a good man" observed Teju.

"Umff", rolling her eyes, "Look Teju, some people just look like that, remember what I told you that day, Looks can be deceptive" clarified Chavi.

The other students had done well selling their tickets. After all, the cause was noble. There were 750 students in the school and a total of Rs 9,37,500/- was collected from the ticket sales which was to be contributed towards the construction of the new paediatric wing of the local municipal hospital.

It was a warm Sunday in the May of 2009. Hundreds of students along with their parents and others who had bought the tickets had converged at the expansive amphitheater of the old English convent. The stage now looked basic with a row of chairs & a table set up in the center while a podium adorned a corner behind an elaborate bronze lamp that was almost 5 ft tall.

Headmistress Leela, Mr. Shriram Gupta, Mr. Sridhar Chellappa and the Chief guest for the valedictory ceremony Lt. Major (Retd) Tanuj Baichappa occupied the row of chairs.

After the invocation song by two class 6 students, the MC for the event Ms. Clara, invited Ms. Leela on to the podium for the welcome speech. A heaving & panting Ms. Leela came on to the mic with a beaming smile and her large beaming red bindi dressed in a bright yellow beach flower saree, most appropriate for the weather that day.

"My dear students, parents and respected guests, It is indeed a great pleasure for me to welcome you all for the graduation ceremony of your wards. As always, there will be a photo session of all graduating students and the photographs will be included in the year book.

Since, we have organised our annual play for this evening, the school has organised a grand lunch at the school canteen hall and all parents and guests are requested to accompany their wards for the feast. I now call upon, a valiant

soldier who gallantly led our forces to victory in the '72 war against Pakistan. A true hero and a son of the soil. Coorg's proudest son Lt. Major Tanuj Baichappa. Welcome him with great applause all of you" Ms. Leela was a pro at such speeches and was at ease with her task of working up the huge crowd.

The crowd listened in rapt attention as the veteran soldier narrated tales of gallantry and valor and exhorted the students to do more for their country when they grow up.

It was Teju's first graduation ceremony and he looked adorable in the tiny black gown and scholar's cap.

"Look at papa here Teju, Smile. You too Chavi and Anu, what are you looking at? Smile everyone" Sunil was trying to capture the moment on his camera.

"Can't we all be in a single photo, honey?" asked Anitha.

"Hmm.. well, I want to too.. Err.. Excuse me, could you take our photograph please.. yeah its that button over there on the top.. just focus us and click gently.." the replacement school watchman had caught Sunil's attention.

"Smile" said the replacement watchman in a dull voice.

Teju could hardly muster a smile, he was preoccupied figuring out all sorts of alternate occupations of this replacement guy.

"Smile chinnappa", grinned the watchman.

"Honey, see papa is in the photo now, say cheese" chipped in Anitha.

"Thank you" Sunil thanked the watchman.

Chavi could see Teju was disturbed. His sight was fixed on to the new watchman. Call it the heightened sixth sense of children, but he suspected something fishy about the new guy. Something was wrong and he did not know what. Teju was never this silent at school before.

At dusk, the stage wore a beautiful look with props and lights and speakers all set up by the dramatics team under Ms. Clara's supervision. The other students, teachers, parents & guest had all slowly taken positions around the amphitheater to get their best view of the Shakespearean comedy.

Backstage, things were hectic. The teachers and Ms. Clara had quite a hard time coordinating the kids and the pre teenagers, sorting out the costumes and supervising the makeup. Kids everywhere vehemently practicing their respective line aloud and it was a clamor out there.

The opening scene was the induction to the story and it involved a tavern, an alehouse. It went on well and Karan, Nischit, Vidya, Chintan all played their parts perfectly. A little later, saw cute little Teju enter the stage playing the hostess's servant, dressed in Venetian servant outfit complete with a pirate bandana, Teju won the hearts of the crowd.

Act I and it was Bianca's entry on stage. Chavi had rehearsed well and she could remember her lines quite well.

"Don't look at the crowd, don't look at the crowd. Look at papa & mumma, look at papa & mumma" chanted Chavi to herself. It was her very first stage appearance and she was slowly developing cold feet. After much self-assurance, she gracefully entered the stage along with Baptista, Katharine & Bianca's father in the Venetian town of Padua.

She was grace personified and delivered her lines perfectly without falter.

Her next performance would be in Act II and it would be some time from now. While memorising her lines, her peripheral vision caught some movement behind the stage. Out of impulse, Chavi turned back to see the replacement watchman talking animatedly with a shady character. After just a couple of minutes, the other person just walked away towards the main school building.

The replacement watchman turned towards the stage and Chavi thought for a moment their eyes met. Chavi now felt that something really fishy was happening indeed. Teju's gut had been right. But she had no clue what was wrong & she had 4 more acts to complete. She had to concentrate.

"what are they upto? who was he speaking to? what were the two of them doing behind the stage when everyone is up there watching the play? Was Teju right in suspecting him? and what happened to Rajappa?" all sorts of questions bombarded the hazel eyed girl's mind.

She excused herself from the backstage and slipped past the replacement watchman who was busy lighting up his beedi. She did not have a friend to confide in. The show was on and Teju had to be on stage for the next Act and

both Sunil & Anitha were enjoying the play blissfully unaware of what Chavi had thought of doing.

"You are really stupid, Chavi" she told herself.

"You obviously are no Blonde Bullet to be playing detective. Maybe there is nothing wrong and I am just assuming things. Maybe it is my excessive reading" Chavi was reasoning with herself.

Just then, she heard a faint noise from the administrative block of the school.

"Sounded like glass breaking. The administrative office has a glass door. I still have time for my next act, should I take a look?" Chavi was puzzled.

After a quick few steps, she was near the administrative block. Chavi proceeded with assumed stealth towards the administrative office & what she saw shocked her. It was Rajappa. But he looked different. He was dressed in black and wore a black blanket over him. The door was smashed to pieces. Maybe the shattering did not make much noise due to the blanket Rajappa had used. He was attempting to open the safe locker in the office where the money from the ticket sales were kept.

"Oh My God! the new watchman is Rajappa's alibi. He is his accomplice. Rajappa must have convinced Leela ma'am for the replacement" Chavi was right. Rajappa had been corrupted. Though the school's annual plays were common and happened each year never was there a fund raising program and the money in question was quite handsome. Rajappa could never have even dreamt of earning so much in his lifetime given his income from his job as a watchman. So he roped in his nephew from out of town to be his replacement and his alibi.

Rajappa was in his middle age and he had hardly made any savings due to his habit of drinking at the local toddy shop every day. He had gained Ms. Leela's sympathy, when one day he put his health situation in front of her and said he wanted at least a month's rest in order to recover. Meanwhile, his young nephew would work as the replacement at the school. It was his plan to scoot away with the money. Ms. Leela would be his alibi and his nephew would be among the crowd so there was no way anyone could suspect him.

Rajappa had befriended the clerk at the school who was also a regular at the toddy shop he frequented. After careful observation and having gained his

confidence, Rajappa smartly made soap dies of all the keys the clerk carried. The clerk was oblivious to all this.

Chavi, in her inquisitiveness tried to get a closer look of things and accidentally stepped on a broken shard of glass. It crackled & made a distinct noise to which Rajappa responded by reflex action only to see a horrified hazel eyed girl near the broken door.

Meanwhile, the Act I was coming to a close and Ms. Clara was worried for Chavi who was nowhere to be seen. She inquired with the other cast members & no one had paid real attention. Unaware of the replacement watchman's antecedents, Ms. Clara called him

"Listen carefully, a girl about my height, fair and dressed in the play's costumes, she might have gone towards the school building. Quick go find her and get her back now" commanded Ms. Clara to the startled nephew of Rajappa.

"What? are you sure Madam. I was here the whole time. I saw no one go that way."

"Just do what I asked you to" snarled the Ms. Clara who had started sweating at the brow.

Rajappa's nephew was alarmed and he did not know how to react. He knew that his Uncle would be busy with the safe lock and he was sure no one had gone back. Nevertheless, he ran straight towards the administrative block.

"Maama, Oh Maama" hissed the nephew to his Uncle.

"Shh" Rajappa motioned at his nephew with a finger on his lips. He had Chavi with him and she had curled up at a corner of the office, too scared to do anything.

"They are looking for the girl. Quick, we gotta send her back, else they will come searching for me" the nephew was panicking.

"Shut up, Idiot! the little pipsqueak will squeal on us if we let her go. We must take her away with us with the steal. Then we will take her to Bangalore for a few days, until things cool down. I cannot be caught like this. I have waited too long for this kind of money".

"Like to play detective huh? little madam! now see what you have done!" growled Rajappa at poor Chavi.

Chavi could only think about her parents and Teju now. She was too scared for her life.

"I should never have auditioned for the play. I knew it was wrong, all along. Oh me and my thick head. I should learn to listen to myself. God! I promise I will never pry on anyone, please help me!" Chavi cursed her fate.

She had been reading Blonde Bullet the day before.

....."Blonde Bullet knew she had come too close for comfort. She had found valuable clues near Mick's maize farm where Old Joe's body was disposed. One of the clues was a piece of a cotton vest and the cops had as usual ignored this clue during the crime scene investigation. The piece of vest smelled strange. It was the scent of an expensive men's cologne. Surely, this small hill town of hard working farmers and lumberjacks could not have afforded such an expensive cologne and it certainly wouldn't be one of those dirty truckers.

Blonde Bullet quickly cross referenced the smell to when she had met Gunther at the tavern by the 66th freeway. She recognized the cologne as the one Gunther had worn.

"Nice Cologne, Sarge. Since when did you become the metrosexual type?" Blonde Bullet had jokingly asked Gunther.

"Oh Come on Blondie. You know I don't have the time & the money for that stuff. I borrowed the vest from my deputy today since Martha forgot to dry out mine yesterday. I don't understand what the boys today have started wearing. Back in my days, I used to get the ladies with my natural musk" boasted the army veteran now nestled in his hometown as the town Sheriff.

"So much for being modest..." they both had a good laugh & had got a little nostalgic too.

Blonde Bullet knew where to go. Gunther's deputy Timothy McNeal had Irish ancestry and was quite a well built man. He was ambitious. A tad too ambitious. He wanted to leave a life of debauchery, gluttony and luxury. His job as a deputy in a hill billy town would not get him beyond Micwen City. He had decided to speed up things.

Micwen City was the last town on the American border and led to Quebec, Canada's most prosperous state. He had received orders from his new masters who were looking for a safe passage to their drug consignments to Canada where there was huge demand for narcotics.

The murder of Old Joe, who had no relatives, no dependents and no real friends was a distraction. While, the Sheriff would be busy interrogating the townsfolk & the peaceful populace of the drowsy little town would be too engaged in discussing the murder for the next few weeks, he would swiftly execute his crime. It was a perfect plan. Make huge bucks and move your gear to either Florida or cross the border over to Mexico. Timothy McNeal had it all planned. But, his cockiness proved costly for him.

The consignment would arrive in 4 boats carrying fish for the Alaskan expedition. The stash has been stuffed in the fish & even in case of a tip off to the Anti Narcotics Squad, the sniffer dogs would be clueless since the fish would be stored in loads and loads of salt. The mixture of smells would drive the dogs crazy. Moreover, the boats would be moving with the special sanction of a top Senator advocating the deployment of American troops to aid the Mexican Federalies in their war against the drug cartels. It had the top order's approval.

Blonde Bullet read clear of the plan since she had been on the senator's trail for some time now and this case provided her the perfect cover to execute her plan of destroying the crime syndicate's nefarious plans to destabilize the NAM region.

"I am on trail Deputy Timothy McNeal on the fringe of the woods leading to the Canadian rockies. The Niagara flows with her full force and I see 4 boats making their way slowly towards the river bed. McNeal is alone with his patrol car and he is armed & dangerous".

It was dusk and the visibility was getting poor. After a series of coded signals from the speed boats, one of its crew hands over a backpack.

"I guess it is his cut for treason".

Blonde Bullet calls up Sheriff Gunther through her satellite phone. Gunther is quick in summoning the national guard without wasting time on bureaucratic procedures and approvals from the magistrate or the Governor. It was now or never.

In a swift action, Blonde Bullet calls up her energy and packs a punch to the startled McNeal's groin. The deputy falls to the ground writhing in pain.

"You have the right to remain Silent" Blonde Bullet reads out the Miranda warning while handcuffing the murderer and the traitor.

Back at the administrative office, Chavi had to think fast and has to act now.

Back stage, Ms Clara's impatience was growing and when she could not see Rajappa's nephew back with Chavi, she pressed the panic button. While Act II of the play had commenced, Ms. Clara, along with headmistress Leela, Shriram Gupta & Sridhar Chellappa quickly went around the stage towards the administrative block & noticed the shattered glass door of the office. What shocked them more was something else.

Blonde Bullet's feat had lifted Chavi's spirits. Her sudden move completely took Rajappa by surprise. Rajappa had kneeled before the safe attempting to open it with the dozens of keys he had got made from the original bunch the clerk had in his possession. Chavi's scream seemed like a war cry and she raised her knee with such a force that it struck Rajappa in the jaw. The shock of it, made the aged Rajappa collapse on the floor, blood oozing from his mouth & before his nephew could react, Chavi pushed him aside with all her force and ran out towards safety into the safe hands of Ms. Clara.

The Headmistress and the trustees raised an alarm and soon both Rajappa and his nephew were apprehended. The safe had not been opened and the fund raised was saved due to the inquisitiveness, presence of mind and courage of a bookworm, Chavi was a hero.

Ms. Clara quickly consoled a shaken Chavi and convinced her to resume her act on stage. After a quick dash of make up, Chavi transformed herself to *Bianca* and Act II, III, IV and V were all received with resounding applause from the huge audience.

After the curtains were put down and the entire ensemble cast came on stage greeted by a synchronized applause, Ms. Leela was quick in making an announcement. An announcement of Chavi's remarkable little adventure that had saved a precious sum of money.

"Dear Students, parents and guests. We sincerely hope that all of you thoroughly enjoyed the play by our dear students. I personally thank Ms. Clara

for her amazing guidance and directorship without which this play would not have been such a grand success.

I would like to hand over the Cheque for Rs 15,00,000/- to the Chief Medical Officer of Mercera Municipal Hospital as a contribution from St. Patrick's convent for boys & girls for their paediatric wing annex.

I would like to thank Lt. Major Tanuj Baichappa for taking time off from his busy schedule & honoring us all with his presence today. Thank you Sir.

But students, I have one very special announcement to make. The one which will make you all proud to be students of this great institution. Ms. Chavi Kumar of Class 7, Sec A who played *Bianca* so very well today has showed exemplary courage and presence of mind today and saved the school from a major embarrassment. For her act of valor, I have recommended to the trustees that the year book of 2009 will have Ms. Chavi Kumar's portrait for the cover". Chavi's brave act was narrated to the mesmerized audience.

Both Sunil & Anitha were both scared beyond wits.

"Chavi, are you alright dear?" asked the caring parents.

"Never do such a thing, my love, you are too precious for both of us" Anitha almost was in tears.

"For me too akka" added Teju

"Never mind your mumma dear. I am so proud of you darling" a proud Sunil hoisted up his beautiful daughter up in the air, who was still dressed in the beautiful Venetian dress with lots of frills and lace work. She truly looked like a princess that day.

This was a farewell ceremony that the Kumar family and the St. Patrick's faculty would remember all their lives. It was the day when a bookworm became a hero.

This has been a chapter from the amazing Bookworm Chronicles.

- *Vinay Palsamudra*

Disclaimer: This has been a work of my imagination. No character depicted in this story is based on anyone living or dead nor have I cognitively adapted the plot of any other author, contemporary or otherwise. Any resemblance to any person, incident or any other plot is purely coincidental.