

DRAGONFLIES, JIGSAWS & SEASHELLS

by Varsha Seshan

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JIGSAW PUZZLES

A huge colourful mat covered the floor of the living room. Parts of it went under the sofa and the peg stool next to it. Ponies pranced under the window, sports cars gleamed near the fridge, and animals grazed beside the lamp-shade.

Aniket's mother said nothing as she stepped over the mat and made her way across the obstacle course to the bedroom. It was something she came home to often enough, sometimes several times a week.

'Aniket!' called his father. There was a smile in his voice as he called. 'Hey, Aniket!'

'Coming!' Aniket placed one last piece in his jigsaw puzzle and then rose to his feet.

'How come your friends didn't tell you about this?' asked his father, showing him a newspaper called Young Minds.

Aniket stared.

There were pieces of a jigsaw puzzle printed randomly in the paper, and a child below the age of twelve was expected to

cut out the pieces, stick them on an A-4 sized sheet of cardboard, and send the finished puzzle back to the newspaper. The pieces would form a picture that the child had to identify. They were expected to stick a note at the back of the cardboard saying what it was. In addition, the rules said that the child had to send their photograph and a copy of their school I-card as proof of their age.

‘A jigsaw puzzle competition?’ asked Aniket. ‘Really?’

His father grinned. ‘Don’t your friends get this paper too?’

Aniket shrugged the question away. ‘Yes, but they don’t know I like puzzles.’

‘Oh! How come?’

Aniket met his father’s gaze. ‘It isn’t special! Making jigsaw puzzles isn’t exactly a talent, is it?’

His father gave him a smiling frown. ‘But you have 22 puzzles that you play with all the time.’

‘And Ramesh has 25 electric trains that he plays with all the time,’ replied Aniket. ‘It isn’t special!’ He turned back to the paper. ‘Is this real?’

His father laughed. ‘Of course it is! It’s a competition after your own heart!’

Aniket smiled. ‘You can’t make fun of me for taking care of the pieces here!’

His father rolled his eyes. ‘You’re obsessed with that. Honestly, I think you’d bring the roof down if you lost a piece.’

Clutching the newspaper, Aniket made his way across the puzzle mat to his room. He put the paper carefully in his top drawer and went back to put his jigsaw puzzles away. He had

just finished making his favourite one, the one he always left for the very end. It was a 250-piece puzzle of Bambi. He loved that one, and constantly competed with himself as he tried to put it together faster and faster.

Aniket counted the pieces as he put them away — every piece was important; Aniket hated the ugly holes that were left when pieces got lost. A mosaic tile peeping through a horse's head or a car window made Aniket cringe. However, his mind was on something else, for once: A jigsaw puzzle competition!

Finally, after dinner, he took out the newspaper once more and stared at the pieces.

'Are you going to try?' asked his mother, standing at his shoulder.

'Of course!' Aniket grinned. 'It's not as if I'm going to get a second chance like this! I never knew a jigsaw puzzle competition was possible!' He looked at the time. 'I won't begin today, though. It's too late, and I don't want to do this wrong.'

The next day, after school, the boy spent the whole evening cutting out the pieces. One piece tore slightly and the torn bit was too tiny for Aniket to find and stick. He gritted his teeth. Counting the pieces carefully, he put them all away in a pencil box. 'I'll do it slowly,' he told his father. 'That way, the whole thing will be neater.'

The next evening, Aniket examined each of the pieces, figuring out which piece would go where before he started sticking the pieces. As he saw the picture taking shape in his head, he smiled.

Laying his sheet of cardboard on the table, Aniket concen

trated on making his jigsaw puzzle perfect. The torn piece made him wince once more, but everything else was exactly the way he saw it in his head.

The way the pieces came together to create a whole picture was what fascinated Aniket whenever he put together any jigsaw puzzle. Even if there was just a single piece missing, the picture was incomplete. It was almost magical. Putting together a jigsaw puzzle was like creating something real and understandable out of little pieces that made no sense by themselves.

The Taj Mahal slowly took shape under Aniket's hands. Even his parents were impressed.

'There are so many white pieces; how did you know what had to go where?' marvelled his mother.

Aniket explained how there were always little clues to help you if you looked hard enough. 'You just have to look at each piece really carefully,' he said enthusiastically, pointing out small differences that helped him. 'Like this little crack here, see? This crack continues on the piece that has to be attached to this one.'

'If you win, you'll get a cheque for three hundred rupees!' said his father. 'Plus a "surprise gift" sponsored by Innovative Printers.'

'I'll keep the cheque forever!' dreamed Aniket, happily.

His father laughed. 'Don't you want the money? If you keep the cheque with you, how will you put it in the bank?'

'You mean the bank will take away my cheque?' asked Aniket.

His father nodded.

‘Then what’s the point?’

‘The money goes into your bank account and even collects interest!’

That made no sense at all to Aniket. What was the point of a prize that he could not keep? If his cheque was just going to become a number in his passbook, he did not want it at all!

As it happened, Aniket heard nothing from the newspaper for ages. He even wrote a postcard to them asking what had happened. There was no response. Two months passed and he gave up, more than a little disappointed.

But one day, the doorbell rang.

‘Mr Aniket Dasgupta?’ asked the courier boy, a parcel in his hand.

Aniket’s eyes lit up. He had never been called ‘Mister’ before. ‘Yes?’ he replied.

The courier boy looked a little curiously at Aniket as he handed him the parcel.

Aniket practically snatched the pen held out to him, signed hastily and accepted the parcel. Slamming the door behind him, he tore open the package, and a letter fluttered out.

Dear Aniket,

Congratulations! Your entry has won the first prize in our jigsaw puzzle competition! We apologise for the delay in responding to you. Due to the lack of response from our readers, we regret to inform you that we are

unable to enclose the promised cheque. However, Innovative Printers continues to offer you its surprise gift!

*Heartiest congratulations and best wishes,
The Marketing Team
Young Minds*

Aniket did not care about the cheque. How could he care about a cheque that he could not keep? Using a blade, he cut open the brown paper wrapping of his surprise gift. It was a rectangular box; he was sure it was a jigsaw puzzle.

As he opened it, his face broke into a smile. It was not one, but two jigsaw puzzles. Aniket's face shone as he saw what they were.

The first was his Taj Mahal printed and converted into a puzzle. It even had a small brown piece where his puzzle had torn.

The other was a picture of himself — made from the passport-size picture he had sent Young Minds.

THE GLASSBLOWER'S DAUGHTER

What about you, Saima?’ asked Priya, tucking her hair behind her ear and wriggling to sit straight on the uncomfortable bus-seat. ‘What do you want to be?’

‘Haan?’

Amrita rolled her eyes. ‘What do you want to become when you grow up?’

‘Like I said, I don’t want to be a doctor like my father, yuck!’ Priya gave an exaggerated shudder. ‘I don’t want to cut things up! And if I think about doing computer engineering like my mum ... nah!’ Priya leaned back into the seat until the shoulder straps of her school-bag came all the way up to her ears. ‘Astronaut. That’s what I want to be.’ She turned her head to look at Saima. ‘What about you?’

Saima shrugged. ‘I don’t know.’

‘How can you not know?’ asked Amrita, making a face. ‘You must want to be something!’

Saima licked her lips.

‘I remember you wanted to be a road-roller driver once!’ Amrita giggled. ‘Remember?’

‘And another time, you wanted to be a Hindi teacher,’ said Priya, grinning.

Saima clicked her tongue. ‘Not anymore. I don’t want to be a teacher, that’s for sure. I don’t want to spend my holidays correcting papers!’

From the distance came the tinkling of an ice-cream bell. The sound always made Saima smile. It made her think of the urgency of catching the ice-cream man before he passed by, summers with cousins, chocobars melting down her fingers...

‘Then?’ prodded Amrita. ‘Glassblower like your father?’

‘Mm, I don’t know,’ repeated Saima. Amrita rolled her eyes.

Saima had been brought up surrounded by glass. She loved it, but it did not speak to her. It looked beautiful, that was certain. She thought of movies where people tapped their wine glasses with a fork to get everyone’s attention for a toast. The sound glass made when struck lightly, even more than how it looked, was lovely.

‘Well?’ asked Amrita, impatiently. ‘What’s your plan?’

Hugging her school-bag so that it did not bump its way down to the floor, Saima replied slowly, looking at Priya rather than at Amrita, ‘I think I want to be a musician.’

‘A musician?’ Amrita wrinkled her nose. ‘Why? You won’t get any money!’

Saima sneered back. ‘Do you really think Michael Jackson had no money?’

‘But you’re not Michael Jackson!’ Amrita pointed out with a shrug.

‘Do you play any instrument?’ asked Priya.

Saima nodded. ‘Jaltarang.’

‘What?’ asked Amrita, her eyes mocking Saima. ‘What’s that?’

‘Jaltarang,’ repeated Saima, loudly. ‘I play the jaltarang!’

Priya and Amrita exchanged glances.

‘World-famous instrument, I’m sure,’ said Amrita. ‘That’s why we haven’t heard of it.’

‘A jaltarang is a set of bowls with water,’ explained Saima. ‘The bowls are all different sizes, and different bowls have different levels of water. When you hit a bowl with a wooden stick, it makes a lovely, clear sound.’

‘You play bowls of water?’ Amrita looked sideways at Priya and snickered. ‘I can see you becoming a famous musician!’

Saima gritted her teeth and turned away. Amrita laughed again, and Saima licked her lips, her breath heaving. She struggled to find a response, but gave up. She just rolled her eyes and turned to look out of the window.

Priya and Amrita continued to exchange loud whispers. Saima stared out of the window. Notices for tuition classes and other services lined the streets, all sporting incorrect spellings of words. Saima tried to smile at a sign that read ‘LUXURY ROOMS AVAILABLE ON COT BASIS’. Her eyes skimmed over a nylon banner advertising ‘HOLE SAIL SHOES AND CHAPELS’. She saw the sign every day and