

Vol 6, 2023/24

# Opening Doors Through Stories: Home

Writing from Newcomers to Regina





# Opening Doors Through Stories: Home

This chapbook is made possible through  
the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild and  
Regina Open Door Society. 2024



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## MESSAGE FROM RODS

It's true that writing goes hand in hand with exploring one's connection to home and the dynamic relationship between writing and the concept of home is a unique and rewarding pursuit. In the year 2023, *Opening Doors through Stories: Home* celebrated the exceptional accomplishments of our creative writing contributors. For the fifth consecutive year, the Regina Open Door Society (RODS) Welcoming Community for Newcomers (WCN) program, in collaboration with the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild (SWG), organized the creative writing program. This initiative has proven to be a successful platform for supporting newcomers in their goals and aspirations to learn, improve, and share stories about their experiences of finding a home in Canadian multicultural society.

We warmly welcomed a group of talented and ambitious newcomers from the community, encouraging them to learn, innovate, and narrate stories that resonate with their notions of home. During October and November 2023, these newcomers engaged in four sessions with the well-known local author, Marie Powell, to refine their writing skills and storytelling abilities. The resulting Chapbook for this year reflects the contributors' resilience and creativity in exploring the theme of home. We express our gratitude to all the newcomers for their valuable contributions to this Chapbook, recognizing their dedication and enthusiasm in learning and enhancing storytelling skills through writing. Our hope is that *Home* brings you joy, happiness, and memorable experiences related to the concept of home. If, along the way, we can be a source of support or an opportunity for newcomers to achieve their goals and aspirations of feeling at home and expressing their narratives, then we consider our mission accomplished. We highly value and appreciate everyone's contributions and efforts in creating an environment where Canada feels like a true home for newcomers to learn, write, and share their stories.

Keith Karasin  
Executive Director, RODS

## MESSAGE FROM SASKATCHEWAN WRITERS' GUILD

In the fall of 2023, author Marie Powell led newcomers to Regina through the creation of new writing that has become our sixth chapbook, *Opening Doors Through Stories: Home*. There is a home for all voices with the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild (SWG). In this collection, a diverse library of voices writes their way to stories that inspire, entertain, encourage, and educate. These stories carve a route home for all of us, regardless of where we are, and introduces us to new neighbours whose stories become entwined with our own. This community connection is worth welcoming, nurturing, and celebrating. Enjoy.

Cat Abenstein  
SWG Program Manager

## INTRODUCTION



The word “home” can mean many different things. It can be a personal sanctuary and a refuge from the chaos of the world. It may be the place where we begin to build our personal experiences, memories, and identity. A home can be a space for self-expression and reflect our personal taste and style. As we move through our lives, the concept of home

can also sustain us, or encompass the customs and cultures of the communities we participate in and value.

For newcomers, the journey from a former home to a new home in Canada can be an intensely personal and even challenging experience. As an instructor in the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program, I’ve had the privilege of learning about my students’ former homes, and also of helping them establish a place for themselves here in Canada.

As the editor of this issue of *Opening Doors*, it has been my honour and my pleasure to work with these authors. We came together for four workshops, using writing prompts and images to explore “home” as a theme and to move beyond it. As Maya Angelou says, “The ache for home lives in all of us.”<sup>1</sup> The writing and discussions that resulted have broadened my own definition and my appreciation of the ways in which the notion of home can shape our perception of the world.

Neil Gaiman calls short stories “tiny windows into other worlds and other minds and other dreams.” The stories and poems in this issue offer a glimpse into the idea of home, in all its different aspects, through the windows these writers have chosen to open. As readers, we also have the opportunity to reach a greater understanding of the place—or places—we call home.

Marie Powell  
Editor



## HOME SWEET HOME

by Alina Shylan

I was fifteen years old when my father took me on an archaeological expedition. For me, the very atmosphere of the expedition was filled with a Carpathian aura, and I made incredibly interesting acquaintances with people, mostly three or more years older than me.

We all lived in one old wooden house at the edge of the village of Urych, Lviv Region. The village was founded in 1369, and only 289 people live there today. Every day two people were chosen to do the work for all the participants of the expedition, which included about fifteen people. The girl cooked the food, and the boy carried water from the well and chopped firewood for the stove to prepare for the evening. We collected and brewed tea from Carpathian herbs: thyme, chamomile, mint, and blueberries.

Every morning we walked to the medieval rock fortress-castle of Tustan, a 12th to 16th Century customs house in the Ukrainian Carpathians in the Eastern Beskids. This was an important region for salt mining, and the trade routes went through the Tustan fortress. Every week we gathered by the fire near the rocks in Urycha, and drank tea from Carpathian herbs, cooked something on the fire, maybe *Hutsul banosh* with cheese and crackling Carpathian mushrooms, and sang Ukrainian folk songs. That song echoed among the Carpathian mountains and was etched in my heart for the rest of my life. I still remember that singing, those fires, and that emotional comfort. The forest was filled

with spruce trees and the smells of nature. Near our fire, we could hear the sound of a running river. And the sky, filled with stars, so bright that under their light you could walk home on the road without a flashlight.

The foundation of my Ukrainian identity was laid that summer. I was surrounded by people who would later create history, each in their own place. For example, one was Andriy Parubiy, who became the head of the Society of Heritage, and later one of the leaders who defended Ukrainian rights and freedoms on the Maidan square in Kiev, and the creator of the first territorial defence called the Teroborona. Another one was Dmytro Katsal, who became the conductor of the Dudarika boys' choir, which glorified Ukraine throughout Europe, the USA, and Canada.

The expedition was led by historian Mykhailo Rozhko, the main Ukrainian researcher who made the first reconstruction of Tustan. Today, traces of wooden beams remain from the fortress, from which a three-dimensional model was made, completely recreating the fortress. However, because of the current Ukraine-Russian war, this recreation project has been put on hold.

But at that time, we were all fifteen to eighteen years old. We did not know that after thirty-five years there would be a war in Ukraine, and that this summer would seem like such a heavenly comfort to us. I was surrounded by students who loved Ukraine, knew its history and culture, and studied ethnography and archeology. They were students of the history faculty of Lviv University, Lviv Conservatory, and the architectural faculties of Lviv Polytechnic - the elite of the Ukrainian nation. Brotherhood, freedom, friendship, sincerity, openness to the world, and love for Ukraine was the spirit we shared among us.

That expedition opened the door to a new portal in my life. Since then, I have been with this society at various meetings, whether at lectures on history, or at the special theatre presentations called *Vêrtep*, acting out the nativity scene at the Christmas celebration and Easter traditional celebrations called *Gaivka* in the groves of Shevchenkivskiyi. In summer camps on Mount Makivka, we participated in projects to restore riflemen's graves, or commemorate the heroes of the Rebel Army who fought for Ukraine in those forests from April 29 to May 4, 1915. As a result of this heroic defense of Makivka, the strategic plans of the Russian command were completely disrupted.

As well, there was a period when we traveled to the villages of the Ternopil Region and looked for historical embroidered Ukrainian clothing, such as shirts, vests called *keptars*, and decorated shoes called *postoly*. We studied our history, and we wore these clothes on Christmas and Easter to honor our culture. And even now, when I wear these clothes, I feel immense pride for my Ukrainian heritage.

\* \* \*

My grandmother worked in the ethnographic museum in Lviv. She used to create many decorative things at home with her own hands, such as *keptars* with leather appliques based on Ukrainian motifs, which she saw while working in the ethnographic museum, where there were samples of Ukrainian folk clothing from all regions of Ukraine. She

also embroidered a lot of tablecloths and bought Ukrainian woven carpets. We have those Ukrainian tapestries hanging on our walls at home.

In general, I was born amid the paintings by my brother Volodymyr Shylan. He was twelve years older than me, but he lived only twenty-six years. He was an architect, restorer, poet, and artist, who still inspires me to develop, to discover myself, and to create something interesting, original, Ukrainian, and enriched with world history, through my travels and life in Canada and on the American continent. He had several personal exhibitions of paintings in Lviv in the architect's house and in private collections. He also restored the Ukrainian Church of St. Michael in Lviv and painted a wall in the boarding house of the Lviv Polytechnic in the Carpathians.

He published a collection of poems. He also graduated from a piano, guitar and violin music school and performed in a musical group. At that time, Ukraine was part of the USSR. Unlike many others, my brother could speak and read English, and he listened to English music, including the Beatles. He left a big mark on me and is probably the reason why I started working in the advertising department of a radio station. I even won an internship to an American radio station in Columbus, Ohio. I keep his memory in my heart to this day.

## FOUR POEMS

by Volodymyr Shylan

Translated by Alina Shylan

Aline came and the dream blossomed,  
and I was happy with her.  
I felt that happiness so long ago,  
and the feeling of it never disappeared...  
Fly, fly—the fire beckons you,  
and you are careful or clumsy,  
and I don't give you wings  
and the fire, by the way, does not burn forever.  
In irony to happiness and to torment.  
I will bear everything easily  
and it is a pity that that thrill will not be repeated  
from the touch of her little hands.



When you grow up and learn all the prices,  
and you will not be disfigured by this price list,  
when you find and hone your talent,  
like a razor blade - maybe you won't die.  
We see through fake stained glass windows  
the price for them is only for the glass, in which they punch holes,  
unfortunately, they were dishonestly made  
and the signatures were put by others.  
Someday, I'd love to take a look  
for your successes, sympathize with your failures...  
Wait for the enemy, do not believe in the eternity of values  
and come up with your own someday!

You are like a star!!! Your beauty  
the fragile light brings the stone to life.  
You grew up!!! A stream broke out of the rock.  
And in the spring I heard a nightingale.  
You grew up - and colors came to life,  
you looked - the portrait spoke.  
Don't disappear yet, even though the West burns out  
behind the spiers of the Cathedrals,  
but the Moon will steal the shine from the Sun  
for artists.

When I see you, I hear the sound of a string...  
I am full of happiness—there, again  
there are these unique sounds,  
passionately touch my whole being—  
and the dream, pure girl, gets up,  
and stretches out a hand in supplication,  
and the voice, the voice is getting stronger, ringing...  
And the whisper of the mouth is a secret word,  
a lustful moment  
and the song is ready!



## MULTA REHJO (SEE YOU SOMETIME)

by Ananta

“Ahh! This feels so invigorating.” Vinod shuffles along the line of tall coconut trees on the shoreline. “Glad I mustered up some courage to explore this neighborhood. I felt so trapped inside that apartment on the eighteenth floor.”

Priyadarshini Park, nestled among sky-scrapers in the posh Nepeansea Road area of Mumbai, teems with park visitors.

“Ahh, there. An almost empty bench.” Vinod spots a bench tucked away in a corner of the park and starts walking towards it. “I can watch the sunset.”

An elegant woman wearing a crisp white cotton *saree*, with all over *katha-work* embroidery in light pink thread, sits on the far side of the bench.

“Excuse me,” Vinod says. “Do you mind. . .”

“Huh?” The woman, with a miffed expression, turns her head to look over her left shoulder at him. Vinod stares at her, suddenly more aware of his walking cane, and his brown trousers, which seem a bit too loose.

“Sush...is...is that you Sushila?”

“Vinod...Vinod, you here?”

Vinod lowers himself to the bench. Slightly imbalanced, he has to support himself with his walking cane. “My knee is still healing,” he mutters. “I fell last year. I hope you don’t mind!”

“No, not at all.” Sushila gestures with her hand towards the bench. “Please.”

They sit in an awkward silence, staring out at the Arabian Ocean in front of them, watching its strong waves continuously crashing on the massive bed of black lava rocks closer to the shorefront.

Questions whirl around in Vinod’s mind, and many old and almost forgotten memories rise within him. He didn’t know where to start or what to say.

“Vinod?” Sushila says. “I’m so surprised to see you here.”

Vinod gestures dismissively with his hand to avoid answering. “I...I never thought that I would ever meet you again. I am so glad to see you. What are you doing here, Sushila?”

“Oh, I live here.”

“That’s not enough of an answer. What are you doing these days?”

“There is nothing much to tell. I live close by in Meghdoot Tower. On my own. It has become a daily routine for me to come here and watch the sunset.”

“On your own?” Vinod says. “Don’t tell me that you didn’t marry?”

Sushila laughs at this question before she replies. “Of course, I got married. I have two boys.”

“They both will have a name, I suppose?”

“Of course. Premal and Swapnil.”

“Ah-ha! Premal and Swapnil. Lovely names. Aren’t you living with them?”

“Just leave it, Vinod.” Now Shushila makes a dismissive gesture. “Tell me about you. What brings you here, from Jamnagar to Mum—?”

“No, no,” Vinod jumps in. “London to Mumbai, actually.”

“London to Mumbai?” Her voice rises in surprise.

“That’s right. London to Mumbai. We all have come here for Purva’s cousin’s wedding.”

“Purva?” asks Sushila.

“Purva is my daughter-in-law, Anish’s wife. Anish is my son. We all live in London. Anish has got a very well-paying job there.”

“Okay. That makes sense. So, you now live in London with Anish?”

“I used to live with him,” says Vinod.

“Used to live? What do you mean? I am more confused now.”

“These days, I want to get away from all the noise and crowd in London. I have recently purchased a small cottage by the beach near Littlehampton, about an hour from London.”

“How long has Anish been in London?”

He shrugs. “Anish was born there.”

“Born in London? So that means you have been in London for—”

“—the last forty-one years,” Vinod finishes for Sushila.

“Forty-one years,” Sushila repeats after Vinod, unable to hide a bit of shock in her voice.

“After you left for Mumbai, Jamnagar became unbearable. I couldn’t live there. After my Bachelor’s, I somehow managed to complete my Master’s, on the advice of Bapa.”

“Bapa? Didn’t your father pass away when you were very young? I am confused.”

“Ahh... yes. I mean Mamaji, my mother’s brother. I always call him Bapa now. He was really impressed when he saw my Master’s results, and immediately took me to London. He had a small pharmaceutical manufacturing facility, and I started working with him. Bapa didn’t have anyone before or after him, so left everything to me when he passed away. Whatever I have achieved today is largely due to Bapa and you.”

“Due to me?” Sushila asked, with surprise in her voice.

“Yes. Didn’t you always want me to pursue a Master’s? It was your love that gave me strength and courage. Bapa supported me through the shock of losing you. I never returned to Jamnagar after I left for London. And you? Are you happy, Sushila?”

“I have been living alone for the past seven years. Happiness or sadness does not seem to matter much to me anymore.” Sushila lets out a faint laugh.

“Your boys, Premal and Swapnil—where are they now?”

“Premal lives here in Mumbai. He has a spacious apartment at Bandra. Swapnil is a government employee and gets transferred from time to time. He’s in Ranchi.”

“Hmmm, since Premal is here in Mumbai, do you meet him often?”

“Well, Premal is so busy with his litigation practice that he almost has no time for anything else in life. It’s been long since I met him last.”

“Premal had dropped in two years ago on his fortieth birthday to touch my feet and take blessings. I haven’t seen him since then. Maybe he has forgotten his own birthday.”

Sushila’s voice is thick with emotion, and Vinod prods gently. “Do you like to live alone, Sushila?”

“Even if I don’t like it, I have to make it so. My daughters-in-law and I didn’t seem to get along. Soon after Jagdish passed away, my daughters-in-law started showing their true colours. It was obvious that they didn’t like me to be staying with them, and that meant each month, I had to keep moving between different places, according to their whims and fancies. Finally, I proposed to live away from my sons, and since then I live here, on my own.”

“Alone, lonely, sad and unhap—”

“Alone, for sure.” Sushila cuts Vinod short. “But not at all sad or unhappy.” She turns her face towards the Arabian Ocean to watch the crimson sun touch the horizon. “I am done with crying over it all. To be frank, Vinod, it is better this way. My sons are happy with this arrangement, and if they are happy, I am happy. This feels a lot more peaceful, and I live very comfortably because my sons send me a lot of money. I am content with my life the way it is.”

“And what happened to your husband, if I may ask?”

“Jagdish, you mean? Jagdish died in a train accident ten years ago.” Sushila looks down at her feet, unable to mask the pain in her voice.

“Oh! I am so sorry,” replies Vinod, feeling a little guilty for asking.

“Why are you buying a cottage away from London? Does your daughter-in-law have some issues with you, too?” asks Sushila.

Vinod raises both his hands as if dismissing the idea. “Oh, no, not at all. Anish is my only son and my best friend. After Sapna was gone, I was the only one to take care of him while he was growing up. He and Purva have a love-marriage. Both used to study together too, like we did. Purva is very understanding and takes very good care of me. In fact, I have never felt unwanted. And well, now I am a grandfather to two-and-a-half-year-old twin girls, Annie and Saara.”

Sushila smiles. “And how did you happen to marry your wife. . .Sapna? Right?”

“Yes, Sapna. She was the daughter of Bapa’s close friend. Of course, I did not want to get married at all, but Bapa really wished to see me married and was persistent for years, in his efforts to find me a life-partner. I met Sapna for the first time in her father’s backyard. She was busy gardening, and she walked up to me wearing this white and sky blue flowy sun-dress. She said, ‘Hi,’ extending her hand with the dirty gardening glove still on, to shake my hand. I was sold there and then. Her dusky bronze complexion, big brown eyes, and long black hair sure did some magic on me. I immediately said ‘yes’ to the marriage. Earlier, I used to wonder, after your sea-green eyes, would I ever like brown eyes?”

Sushila laughs at that. “Were you happy?”

“Yes, very. Sapna taught me how to live again. She would often say, ‘Life is short and there are two ways to live: we either laugh and live or cry and live. The choice is always ours.’” Vinod glances at Sushila. “Sapna was very open minded. She came to know about you too, and she took that so gracefully. She said to me, ‘Sushila was your past, and I don’t care about your past. You are true to me in the present, and that is all that matters.’”

“What happened to her?”

“Three years after our marriage, along came our son Anish, and within four years, Sapna lost her battle with cancer.”

“Oh! I am so sorry to hear that, Vinod. I shouldn’t have even asked.”

“Sapna was really a magical woman. The only regret I have is that she did not live with me for long. For the last twenty-nine years, I have been on my own. First, it was me and my son Anish, then came along Purva, and now Annie and Saara. Out of the loneliness before you and after you, I have managed to create this little happy world of mine, and it is truly a blessing.” Vinod was unable to hide the emotions swelling up in his throat.

“You never thought of remarrying, even for the sake of your son?”

“No, and not that I never felt any need for someone. To be truthful, except for those seven lovely years with Sapna, and sometimes even during those years, my soul still used to feel lonely. Sapna knew about it and had even told me that, after she passed away, I should find someone and not live alone. But it was all too overwhelming for me.

I honestly did not have the capacity to handle any more losses.”

Sushila turns her face and looks up, to soak in the evening sky. Beautiful colours in shades of pink, purple, orange, and red have suddenly appeared, filling the entire sky after the sunset. Vinod hesitantly tries to change the topic.

“Umm. . . your husband, Jagdish, right? Were you happy with him?”

“Yes, Jagdish. Yes, I was happy. When I fell in love with you, a poor boy from a different caste, Foibaa, my father’s sister, immediately arranged a marriage which was a more suitable match, according to her. I was too scared of her to protest. It was not that difficult to find a match for a pretty, young girl from a well-to-do and respected family, and that’s how Jagdish came into my life. But I have no regrets. He loved me in every way that a woman could be loved by her husband. After getting married at the age of twenty and coming here to Mumbai, my eyes have never shed a tear because of him.”

“I am glad to know that you were happy.”

“Yes, those thirty-four years that I spent married to Jagdish have truly been the happiest years of my life. Jagdish was a really good man. Financially, we were well off, and he loved me and our boys Premal and Swapnil a lot. He had the foresight to buy this apartment in Meghdoot Tower because I love the ocean. While he was still alive, he transferred the apartment to my name. It is said that a woman never forgets her first love, but under the cascade of Jagdish’s selfless love, I had forgotten you.”

“But I have thought of you often, Sushila. I still remember our meeting as if it happened yesterday. We were in college when you walked up to me and talked to me for the first time, asking for my help to solve a math problem. All my friends went crazy! In that light pink *Kurta-Churidar*, with your deep-sea green eyes and fair complexion, you looked like an enchanting fairy from the heavens. No one, no one could believe that. . .” His voice trails off, but Sushila continues for him.

“. . . that soon we would give our hearts to each other. You were such a handsome young lad, but so very shy, all my girlfriends used to be crazy about you,” Sushila ends with a bit of an adolescent giggle, her cheeks take on a rosy tint, as if blushing.

“Really?” Vinod says, and immediately adds, “And you had made me crazy!” He lets out a bit of a chuckle, and Sushila joins in—both of their eyes smiling—while reminiscing about those days.

“Hey, don’t you people have to go home?”

A rather loud and harsh voice suddenly disturbs their secluded corner of the park. Sushila and Vinod turn their heads to see a tall Park Security personnel, towering right behind their bench.

“It’s so dark now, it’s time to lock the park gates,” he says.

“Oh my God!” Vinod looks at his wristwatch, unable to believe how much time has elapsed. “Let’s get going now. Anish and Purva will be searching for me.”

They make their way out of the park gates together. Vinod raises his hand and calls out, “Taxi,” as he waves one down.

“*Multa rehjo*, Vinod.” Sushila starts to walk away toward her apartment, without waiting for Vinod to get into a taxi.

Will he see her again, Vinod wonders, as he gets into the taxi and directs it to the family apartment where they are staying during their visit to Mumbai. Anish and Purva are waiting at the door.

“Dad,” says Anish. “Where were you? We were so worried about you.”

“Thank God, you are safe,” says Purva with relief. “Pops, I had seriously thought that maybe you met with an accident or something in this completely new city.”

“Anish and Purva, I am sorry. I am just tired. I want to be alone,” replies Vinod, sitting on a small stool to remove his shoes.

“Sure, Pops. Won’t you eat something?”

“No, Purva, I don’t feel like it today.”

“Can I get you some warm milk, Pops?” Purva persists.

“Umm... Yes, that’s fine. But a bit later,” replies Vinod, as he makes his way over to his temporary bedroom and plops on a chair. “I don’t know why I am feeling sick in my stomach and my head has also started to hurt now. Ahhh!”

He turns on the dim table lamp and soon gets lost in his thoughts. He can almost feel the worry lines that have appeared on his very tense forehead. He plays back his chance meeting with Sushila, over and over in his mind.

“Dad,” Anish calls, loudly. Anish and Purva have appeared in Vinod’s bedroom doorway. They must have been standing there for a few minutes already. Purva has a tray in her hand.

“Ahh, come in,” he says, as he sits up on his chair.

Anish turns on some more lights in the room, and Purva sets the tray on a small table next to Vinod’s chair.

“Pops, I have got you a cup of your favorite masala milk and your medicine.”

“We have been calling to you for the last ten minutes. Where are you, Dad?” says Anish as he pulls up two chairs for him and Purva to sit close to Vinod.

“Oh, I... seem to have this odd headache.”

“Pops, something surely happened when you went for a stroll this evening. We both noticed that you were not yourself when you returned tonight. Is everything okay?” Purva prods.

“Ohh, no, nothing like that. I am perfectly fine. Everything is okay,” says Vinod, trying to reassure them.

Anish pulls his chair a bit closer to come face-to-face with Vinod. “Dad, there is something that is bothering you, and its written all over your face.”

Vinod shifts uncomfortably in the chair and looks the other way, to break away from Anish’s piercing gaze.

“Come on now, Dad. You can’t hide it from your best friend,” adds Anish, with a little smirk.

“She must be lonely,” replies Vinod, with a distant look in his eyes, still avoiding eye contact with Anish or Purva.

“She? Who’s she? Your new girlfriend?” asks Purva, teasing him a little.

“No. The old and only one,” replies Vinod as his face gets gloomier.

“Sushila?” Anish and Purva exclaim in one voice.

“Yooooou mean, Sushila?” Anish is unable to contain surprise in his voice. “Did... did you meet Sushila?” His right hand involuntarily goes up to cover part of his forehead, gesturing in disbelief.

“Yes, in the park. I had been chatting with her until now. I had never, not even in my dreams, imagined that our paths would ever cross again in this lifetime.”

“Tell us more, Pops,” says Purva, as she puts her palm on Vinod’s left hand and gently squeezes it.

Vinod lets Anish and Purva in on how he met Sushila in the park that evening, and all the discussions he had with Sushila. After almost an hour, Purva and Anish are still listening attentively.

“And it was only when the Park Security came and announced that they were about to lock the gates, that I realized so much time had passed. I got a cab and rushed back here. But I don’t know why... why... I felt so bad leaving Sushila in the end and saying goodbye. I have been feeling heavy in my chest since then.”

Anish has his left arm crossed over the front of his body and his right arm resting over the left, and he has almost chewed nails off his right-hand. Purva has both her hands over her heart and looks as if she might cry.

The room is suddenly very quiet, yet a lot seems to be going on within them, as all six eyes in that room are wet. Vinod quickly wipes one or two tear drops that have trickled down his cheek and hopes that Anish and Purva don’t notice. Anish and Purva look at each other for a minute or two, and their eyes seem to have had all the discussions they needed to have.

Anish turns to Vinod and says, “Dad, you need to find Sushila.”

“Find Sushila? For what? Why would I want to do that?” asks Vinod.

“Dad, we know that despite all of us around you, you are still so alone. You need a companion.”

“Oh, that’s... that is utter rubbish. Are you both out of your minds?”

“Pops, Sushila is also living alone. Maybe she too needs a companion?”

“What nonsense are you both talking even? I cannot...cannot even think of something like that. It’s wrong. It’s just so wrong.”

“Why is it wrong, Pops?” asks Purva.

“Well, you both know very well that such things do not happen in our society, not at my age!”

“Pops, I think we need to grow up. We cannot continue to follow some absurd society rule. Why should wanting and finding a companion, after a certain age, be a problem for society?”

“Oh, no...No. No. No! What...what will others say? Everyone will laugh at us!”

“Dad, since my childhood you have always taught me to only listen and follow what my heart says and not care much about what others will say or think. What is your heart saying right now, Dad?” Anish leans forward and takes Vinod’s right hand between both of his.



“But I . . . I . . . don’t know how Sushila will react. I will look like a fool, approaching her with something so absurd. What if she says a complete ‘No’?”

“Unless you meet her again, Dad, how will you know? We both are asking you to meet Sushila one more time.”

“She can be very upset you know. What . . . what if she gets very angry?”

“Pops, after the wedding tomorrow, we all will be flying back to London this weekend. So, even if she is upset, you will be off to London in no time and won’t have to face her ever again.”

“What is your heart saying right now, Dad?” Anish repeats his question.

“Just once, Pops. Once.”

“But I . . . I don’t know where Sushila lives.”

“Meghdoot Tower. You yourself told us this, Pops. I think we should go to Meghdoot Tower tomorrow.”

“What? How can we go tomorrow? We have this wedding to attend.”

“Pops, the wedding is tomorrow evening. We can go to Meghdoot Tower first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Oh! Tomorrow morning? No. No, no, no! I . . . can’t, I can’t.”

“Yes, you can, Dad. You very much can. Tomorrow morning,” says Anish, sternly.

Vinod raises his hand and puts both his palms over his face, covering his eyes and forehead. He leans back against the chair and tilts his head up. “Oh, God! My head is hurting so much now.”

Anish and Purva decide it’s time to leave Vinod to himself. Anish gets up from the chair. “Let’s all sleep now. We have to wake up early tomorrow for the wedding ceremonies.”

Anish leads the way out of Vinod’s bedroom, but as Purva gets to the door, she pauses for a second. “First thing tomorrow morning, Pops. Don’t forget.”

“But what . . . what reason will I give for showing up at her door in the morning? Sushila didn’t even invite me.”

“We will figure something out. Good night, Pops,” Purva says with a gentle smile as she walks away.

Vinod tosses and turns for hours, trying to get some sleep. His heart is still unsettled and heavy. Finally, he sits up in his bed.

“Maybe Anish and Purva are right. So many rules of society do not make any sense. I don’t even know who made them. I can’t believe these societal traditions and cultural conditionings are so deeply rooted within me. I feel so powerless to break free from their grip. I don’t know why I lack the courage to listen to my heart. Maybe there is nothing wrong in wanting . . .”

Vinod decides to get some fresh air. As he steps out on the small patio adjoining his bedroom, he notices that many happy and healthy plant pots are lined up against the patio walls, and there is even a small swing in one corner. The whole patio has been beautifully decorated with strings and strings of yellow and orange marigold garlands and gold twinkle lights, like the rest of this eighteenth floor apartment.

"This whole ambiance is so inviting," Vinod thinks, as he walks to the patio edge and leans into its railing, admiring the bird's eye view of the city. "The city beneath looks so different at night." Vehicles are still zipping by on the streets below. "It seems to be true when people say: this city never sleeps."

He closes his eyes and takes some deep breaths. When he hears the creak of the swing behind him, he opens his eyes and turns toward it. Then he freezes.

"You must go to Meghdoot Tower tomorrow," says a translucent figure sitting on the swing. It's so brilliant and illuminated from within. "Live for yourself too, Vinod. For once. Be happy."

Vinod is transfixed. The angelic figure looks so very familiar. Before he can manage to get out the words, "Sa...Sapna?" the figure disappears. Now only the empty swing sways on its own.

Vinod gets goosebumps all over his body. He closes his eyes again and puts his left hand over his heart. "This is so surreal."

Cool breezes flow from the nearby Arabian Ocean to surround him, soothing his frazzled nerves. He instantly feels very calm and relaxed. "My heart is not heavy anymore." He stays this way for a few minutes.

Eventually, Vinod goes back to bed. He falls asleep in no time, only to be woken up by repeated knocking on his bedroom door. Vinod slowly makes his way over to open the bedroom door and finds Purva and Anish standing there.

"Pops, it's 7:00 am. Please shower and get ready quickly. We will have to be back here before 8:30 for *grab-shantek*."

"Ready for what?"

"Come on, Pops. Ready for Meghdoot Tower. We discussed this last night," says Purva, rolling her eyes.

"Oh, no. No. I am not going anywhere. Please." Vinod tries to retreat to his bedroom, but he's stopped by Anish's hand on his shoulder. Son and father look into each other's eyes for a few seconds.

"All right, give me twenty minutes." Vinod gives up.

\* \* \*

"Meghdoot Tower please," says Anish as he, Vinod, and Purva get into the iconic black-and-yellow Mumbai taxi.

"I still don't know what I will say. Why have I showed up at her doorstep at 8:00 in the morning, unannounced and uninvited? Sushila will be shocked." Vinod's anxiety grows, and the smell of stale cigarette smoke and tacky red velvet seats and interior of the taxi don't help. Purva shows Vinod the invitation card for her cousin's wedding.

Vinod finds himself standing with Purva and Anish, in front of this twenty-floor building called Meghdoot Tower.

"Oh my god, I don't even know which apartment she lives in. Let's just go back."

"There's usually a list of names displayed near the front entrance. Let's go check."

says Purva, as all three enter the main lobby.

“Umm...Sush...Sush-ahh. Yes. Sushila Jagdish Shah, Apartment 604.” Anish looks at Vinod to confirm the name.

“Ohh! That’s the sixth floor. I cannot climb up and down so many floors with this knee.” Vinod points to his left knee with his walking cane.

“Dad, there are two elevators here.” Anish grabs Vinod by the arm and starts leading him into one.

“Oh, she might not even be home,” says Vinod.

“Pops, where would someone go at 8:00 in the morning? We have come so far. We might as well ring the doorbell and check.”

The elevator stops on the sixth floor and all three of them get out.

“601, 602, 603. Ahh. There...there is 604,” says Purva, pointing to their left.

“I...I...really don’t think this is a good idea at all. This is going to be so embarrassing. Please, let’s go back.” Vinod starts walking towards the elevator but Anish and Purva block him.

Vinod faces the apartment again. Anish and Purva stand a couple of feet behind him, trying hard not to burst out laughing at his antics. But, instead of ringing the doorbell, Vinod stands for five minutes, staring at the front door.

“Can you both hear my heart? It’s racing so fast, it seems to have moved to my throat. Maybe I am having a heart attack. We need to go to Emergency, seriously,” says Vinod in a last desperate attempt to abort the mission.

“Come on Dad. Just ring the doorbell.” Impatient, Anish reaches out, rings the doorbell, and steps back behind Vinod.

“Who is it? Wait a minute,” says a female voice from behind the door.

“Oh, God. I am going to faint anytime now,” Vinod thinks. Then the front door opens, and there is Sushila, standing in a light-yellow *Kota saree*.

“Vinod? You, here, at this hour? How did you find this place?” asks Sushila.

“Aaaaa...Ummm...” Fumbling for words, Vinod starts scratching the back of his head. At that moment, Purva hands over the wedding invitation card to him.

“Ummm... Purva and Anish want...No...I mean I want. No! No... I mean We... Yes! We—I, Anish and Purva—we all want to invite you to the wedding this evening.” Vinod puts the invitation in Sushila’s hands and points with his thumb towards Anish and Purva, standing behind him.

“It’s at the park clubhouse, not that far from here,” says Purva, as she steps out from behind Vinod.

“We hope you can make it. It’s at 6:30 this evening.” Anish also steps out from behind Vinod.

“Yes, I know it,” Sushila says. “It’s a beautiful venue overlooking the Arabian Ocean.”

“Wo-Would you be able to come?” asks Vinod, as he wipes off tiny bits of perspiration from his forehead.

“Thank you. But I’m not really sure.” Sushila smiles into Vinod’s eyes and shrugs.

\* \* \*

At 6:00 that evening, Vinod fidgets on the chairs, waiting for the ceremony to begin. He's unable to sit still, continuously shaking his legs, and he's adjusted his necktie at least thirty-seven times by now. He looks at his wristwatch for the umpteenth time and even checks the time with a few other wedding guests, to make sure that his watch has not suddenly stopped working. He checks his wristwatch again. The wedding will start in five minutes.

"The time has never been so slow before," he thinks. Then there is a gentle tap on his right shoulder, followed by a familiar voice.

"Hello, Vinod."

He turns to look over his right shoulder to find Sushila standing there. Vinod smiles and gestures to the seat beside him. "Come and join me."





# FINDING HOME

by Marwa Abu Eita

She stared out the small glass window of the space craft, marvelling at the beauty of her planet swimming in the purple hue of its massive sun. She watched it growing smaller and smaller as the craft gained speed and carried her further away, deep into space.

It was the second time Roxie had to leave her whole world behind and start a new life in another place. She had only been five when she had to leave the only place she knew. Her father tried to comfort her as they stood in line on the space dock.

“Home is not where you live, it is where you belong,” he told her. And they had found a new home together on the purple planet, where the elders welcomed the refugees from Earth after the last catastrophic war. This time, it would be her choice to leave this new home and embark on a scientific adventure.

“Meet in the main bay immediately.” The voice of the captain over the speakers took her out of her memories. She stepped into the airlift to meet her teammates for their first meal on the ship. She could hear Alex and Jasmine arguing even before entering the mess hall.

“I can assure you, growing potatoes will be the easiest to start with,” said Alex, the agricultural expert. “They don’t need a lot of maintenance and can give high crop

yields in less time.”

Jasmine immediately shook her head.

“Potatoes can suffocate other growing plants in the area,” Jasmine said, her comment showing why she became a botanist. “We need to establish a clean climate for people to live. Food can come later.”

“You two will never agree on a thing.” Roxie joined their conversation, smiling fondly at them. She had always enjoyed their fun arguments, ever since they met in the preparation camp.

“I’m glad you’re all here.”

Roxie turned around to face the piercing black eyes of Xavier, the captain of the spaceship and leader of their group.

“We can take the opportunity to review our mission now,” he barked, before he strode to the food processing machine. His arrogant smile had always annoyed her. He was the only combat trained person in the group, who would be able to protect them if things went wrong. He took his time choosing the flavours of his lab-prepared food and brought a plate of it back to the table.

“As we all know, our mission is to discover if Earth is ready for the return of our people,” Xavier said. “We have specific goals, and I don’t want anyone to wander from them. Earth is a dangerous place. There could be mutants or at the very least, civilization as we know it would have disintegrated long ago. We need to keep safe!” He directed his gaze to Roxie and continued, “I know you have personal motives for joining this mission, and I will do my best to keep you from harm.”

Roxie swallowed hard. She always hated when he brought this up, but he knew her very well. It was a sensitive subject between them, and she nodded her head to avoid another argument. She knew from the way he stared at her now that he was going to keep an eye on her. He would be the only obstacle in her carefully prepared plan.

Five years ago, Adam, Roxie’s husband, the love of her life and the father of her only child, embarked in a similar mission. As soon as his ship landed on earth, it was attacked, and the video footage showed the crew being captured. Since then, she had been working steadily to convince the elders to allocate funds for another mission and to let her take part in it.

Xavier was her husband’s friend and had supported her in preparing for the mission. But he had a different point of view. He advised her to focus on the research she and Adam had been doing to help the human race return to Earth.

“I’ll find a way to locate Adam, no matter what he thinks,” she promised herself.

\* \* \*

As the days passed, all four of them were busy with their own research and calculations. Roxie scanned many satellite pictures of earth to determine the potential for settlements, based on her long studies of anthropology. She shared her findings with Xavier to choose the safest place for landing. Jasmine confirmed through her studies of the plant distribution that their landing area was far away from any human presence.

\* \* \*

After landing safely and constructing their camp, they set up a protective dome. It blended with the surroundings to camouflage their base. The machines were collecting samples, testing, and analysing them. The results were astonishing.

Earth had recovered in the absence of human technology and the constant consumption of resources. In only 50 years, many endangered animal species had repopulated with plenty of natural food around. They could see rhinos and orangutans, and even a striped tiger. The greenhouse effect had disappeared along with air pollution. Rivers were running with pure water. They tested it and discovered it was drinkable again.

“The environment is ready for human life, but are people ready to treat Earth differently?” Jasmine wondered.

“I believe the human race has learned its lesson,” said Alex. “The elders made sure that everyone did.”

Roxie was following the conversation absentmindedly. She was preoccupied with the recent report of her secretly developed machine. It was a DNA tracker that she had connected to the main satellites before leaving the spaceship. After uploading Adam’s DNA, she finally located him. It appeared that he was still alive.

She wanted to tell the others, but she was sure Xavier was so focused on the mission that he would prevent her from even looking for Adam. She had to be patient and wait for a chance to prove it. Whenever she got close to the edge of camp, he pounced on her.

“Where do you think you are going?” Xavier’s angry voice made her jump.

“I was going to take a walk around the camp for fresh air,” she snapped.

Xavier sighed and said, “That’s a good way to reduce tension. I will accompany you.”

He had already managed to catch her three times, before she could get of the camp. He was around all day, so she was convinced that she had to find another way out.

\* \* \*

One night, she had the chance to sneak into one of their camouflaged capsules. She flew out of the camp silently. Finally, she would be able to rescue Adam.

Arriving over the exact location her DNA tracker showed, she was surprised to find it empty of any traces of human life. She started doubting herself when her expert eyes discovered the edges of a dome similar to the one they were using.

“Can this really be possible?” she asked herself. “If civilization has disintegrated, how can people be using this advanced technology?”

She landed the capsule cautiously a few kilometres away from the dome, in an area hidden by thick trees. Her mind raced with possibilities. She got out of the capsule and walked toward the dome. The yellow sun warmed her, and she was amazed at the variety of colours it reflected. Was it like that when she was little? She couldn’t remember.

When she finally reached the dome, her experienced fingers found the entrance

pad quickly, but she needed a passcode to open the lock. She followed a gut feeling and typed in the date of their anniversary. It had been their shared password and it worked.

An opening appeared in the dome. She was taken aback when she saw a figure waiting in the dark.

"I was confident you would find your way back to me." Adam's voice vibrated through her whole body, spreading warmth and relief. She couldn't recall how she found herself in his strong arms, crying and laughing at the same time.

\* \* \*

When Roxie entered the city, she was surprised by how clean and bright it looked. Adam held her hand as she stared around her. He led her to a smart house with environmental controls.

"Lights on," he said, and the house lit up around them. The furnishings reminded her of their home on the purple planet.

"How can this be?" Roxie said. "Why didn't you try to contact me over all those years? You have all this technology."

"I destroyed all the communications gear," Adam said. "When we landed, we were so fascinated by the beauty of nature, we didn't notice people approaching until they were standing outside the doors of the spaceship. We panicked and thought we were being attacked. My first instinct was to protect Nova-3 from a presumed invasion if they managed to take over the ship."

"I saw that on the video you sent," she said. "Everyone thought you were dead."

"After I erased all the route information and destroyed the communications, we decided to go out and meet our fate. To our surprise, the people welcomed us and explained the rules of their life. They were scared we were bringing back war and destruction."

"But why would they think that?"

"They were afraid of us, just as we were of them. But I was even more afraid that I would never see you again." Adam reached out to her, and she fell into his arms.

\* \* \*

After their reunion, Adam walked Roxie back to the capsule to send a message back to Xavier and the others.

"Hello, hello?" Roxie spoke into the transmission machine. "Please come in."

Xavier's angry voice burst over the sound waves. "Where are you? One of our capsules is missing. Did you take it?"

There was a slight pause and Jasmine's voice came across. "I woke up and found your bed was untouched. I searched everywhere for you. The radar didn't receive any signals either."

"I'm sorry you went through that," Roxie said. "But I have a real surprise for you all."



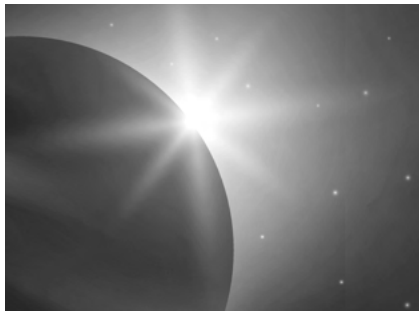
Adam then took the microphone to explain the situation.

“Adam!” Xavier’s voice came back to them. “You are alive!”

Adam gave the coordinates to Xavier, and before long the team was reunited. They gathered in a large board room in the new city and were soon joined by a group of well-dressed men, women, and children of different age and races. Adam went to the front stage and started to explain the new world order to everyone.

“First, a group of scientists, artists, and writers who chose to stay on earth protected our human culture,” Adam said. “In every country, some of them collected useful inventions, books, scientific papers, and art. They kept hiding underground until they could make sure the war had ended. Then they rose back up and discovered that everyone was ready to rebuild earth together. There were a lot of meetings. All destructive materials and beliefs were destroyed. I have been honoured to be a part of this, but my only wish was to see my wife and son again.”

Roxie looked at him with pride. She was witnessing the rebirth of humankind on Earth. She had accomplished her mission and found home. Now it was time to send messages to every planet that hosted the human refugees, inviting people to come back to Earth. It is where they were all meant to be.





# SILENT BONDING

by Munit Vikram

It's tough to be empty, and I'd been empty for a couple of months. I was edgy, irritable, and impatient. Every now and then, I took it out on my walls, floors, or roof. It's hard to be a house, let alone a vacant house. Never did I realize until now that loneliness is the harshest punishment.

One day, just like every day, the sun was shining on my two walls to show it was already 8:30 am. I saw the landlord approaching with two other men, obviously workers, in their truck. My heart was fluttering in anticipation when they opened my locked door. With a lot of noise and cleaning stuff, they marched into my hall.

"Start here," said the landlord, pointing to the living room. "You'll need to clean everything, including the walls, before you start."

He walked around, inspecting every room, and then returned to them.

"This family will be arriving Wednesday," the landlord told them. "They have to move here for Ted's new job as supervisor at Superstore, so everything has to be ready."

My joy had no bounds, and I could hear the walls, ceilings, and floors laughing and chatting and whispering to each other.

"Now the house will have someone else to get angry with," said the ceiling, giggling.

My thoughts were interrupted by the flash of water thrown by the workers all over me. I was glad to be bathing and getting all decked up, after months ignoring the reluctant voices from my family.

Two days went by as I endured the cleaning, painting, and fixing in anticipation of love, laughter, and mirth. Holding on to my nerves, I was patiently waiting to welcome the new family and to create wonderful memories.

When the family finally arrived, I heard the car engine coughing and pulling over a driveway in front of my gate. A couple in their late twenties with their little son stepped out of the car. They unloaded the vehicle repeatedly.

“Tristan,” called the mother. “Stay close!”

That was the first time I heard his name. Tristan was a young boy of six years, full of life, running around the house. The lovely couple tirelessly worked the entire first day, putting their stuff away, and rearranging the house a few times. They seem to really like me. And why not? After all, the workers spent two days beautifying me. That night was very peaceful and satisfying for all of us, as now we were one big family.

Morning came earlier than usual. Ted walked into the kitchen as his wife was busy fixing breakfast for the family. “What do you think of the kitchen, Brenda?”

Brenda smiled at him and gave him a quick kiss before continuing to butter the toast. After Ted left, she got herself and little Tristan ready. There was so much happening at that hour that, for the first time in years, I forgot to wish my babies a “Good morning.”

The ceilings, walls, and floors couldn't stop chattering about the new family. Interestingly, Tristan had already become the favorite for all of us. Later, as I was taking a nap, Brenda and Tristan must have come home. The steps running toward me woke me, but the floors, ceilings, and walls were still napping.

At lunch, Brenda was chatting with her mother on the phone, and Tristan was playing with his food. She signaled him with her hand to finish the food quickly. Tristan responded with an angry glare. After fifteen minutes, the food was still on his plate, and he was playing with his cutlery.

“Perhaps you are not hungry.” This curt statement was enough to dampen the boy's spirits. “Go wash your face and finish off the drawing that you are working on.”

Stomping from the dining room, Tristan rushed to his bed and slammed the door. He laid down on the bed, staring at the ceiling, for a long time. Finally, he got up and started drawing, but before long, he shuffled to the window to stare outside until Brenda called him to come for supper.

He was happy to see his father home and ran to tell him about his new playschool, only to be asked to finish supper quickly, and hit the bed. Seems like missing lunch had made him hungry, because he finished his supper in silence, occasionally looking at his parents, who were arguing over something he could not understand. He wanted to hug them goodnight, but they were too busy arguing, and they didn't notice him going back to his room. I didn't feel good about the whole situation. My heart went out to Tristan.

Helplessly, I watched silent tears roll down his cheeks. He was sniffing softly, pinning his face in the pillows, trying hard not to wake his parents, who were sleeping in the next room. If only I could talk or take him in my arms.

\* \* \*

The next morning was no different than the previous one. Ted and Brenda were still rushing through their chores to reach their offices on time.

“Please, Tristan, can you make it quick,” said Brenda.

Tristan obliged by taking a big piece of sandwich in his small mouth, which made Brenda chuckle.

“Oh, boy, no no. You will choke if you take a big piece of sandwich in one go. Chew it slowly. Guess we can wait a few minutes.”

All three of them left the house around 8:30 am while talking and laughing all the way. It's refreshing to hear the loud laughs of human beings, which are so different from ours. And my chain of thought took me down memory lane. Visual pictures flashed through my mind of various tenants who have lived in me. A total of seven families in a span of twenty-six years was not much, but I was carrying these memories. I had mixed emotions, more inclined to sadness, because we all look for permanency. However, the only truth is change.

I heard the car pulling up in driveway and the clinking of keys in the lock. It was around 4:00 pm, later than yesterday. Tristan beamed with joy. His face was all flushed pink, and his hair and clothes were a little wet. It seemed like he and his mom had a detour after school. Brenda went through her phone and called after Tristan.

“Oh, the sports club operates three days a week, so the next time we can go is Wednesday.”

“But I want to play daily,” Tristan said, while running back towards his mom.

Brenda took her son in her arms and placed a kiss on his forehead. “We will find a good club that operates daily.”

Both finished their meals and went to their rooms, only to hear a doorbell and come back to the hall. Both exchanged a puzzled glance, since they were not expecting anyone, and Ted did not return before 5:00.

To their surprise, Ted was early and was holding out a brown bag.

“Your favorite blueberry muffins, son,” he said, as he took Tristan in his arms. Before Brenda could tell Tristan to eat them in the morning, the boy started to open the bag in excitement.

“You can have one now, and keep the other for tomorrow,” Brenda reminded him.

Three of them chatted and laughed all during dinner. This day was so much more pleasant than yesterday had been. I felt glad to see them happy. It's a natural belief among us houses that our families should be contented, because we have strong motherly protective instincts for the family that resides in us. We always care, protect, and stand up for them.

Laughing to myself, I thought, “If only they could realize that years of my prayers and sacrifices have created a nourishing home for a living family to be flourishing and growing.” With that thought, I dozed off.

The next day, these happy moments did not carry through. The couple were arguing about a call they got early that morning, which I missed as I was asleep. From the discussion, I could make out that Tristan's playschool would be closed for a week. They were arguing about the details and how they could work through this. The discussion ended with Brenda taking a leave from work to look after Tristan.

This sudden change of events, and Ted's unreasonable arguments, made Brenda angrier than usual. She ordered Tristan, “Go to your room and make some drawings.”

Tristan came back to his room, but instead of taking out his drawing book, he sat on the floor and started to play with a ball. After a few minutes, he came out of his room to talk to his mom. He saw his mom on the phone. She signaled him to be silent

and go back in his room.

He marched back to his room and this time took out his drawing book. He was not even halfway through the drawing when he must have felt hungry. He came out to see lunch on the table, but his mom was still on the phone.

The whole day was super boring for Tristan. He spent most of the day in his room, which made him crankier until he finally dozed off.

The next day was worse. Brenda continued to ignore Tristan, and he spent his days alone in his room. Finally, the little boy started to throw his toys around the room, and then he threw the pillows from the bed. He laid down on his bed and wept for a long time. It felt like ages to me. I couldn't help myself from trying to soothe him.

"It'll be okay, Tristan."

Tristan opened his eyes a little bit and looked around to see who was speaking. He looked from left to right and back. He closed his eyes again. I called his name once more, and that startled him.

He stood up and started to inspect the room. The voice was not of his mom or dad, so he asked, "Who are you? I can't see you." He looked around some more. "You are scaring me. Tell me who you are."

I gave a little laugh. "I'm your house, son."

This time, it was Tristan's turn to laugh, as he said, "Houses don't speak. You are messing with me."

He started to run across the hall to the other rooms, searching for another human being. He came back to his room, and asked, "Can you really speak? And where is your mouth?" With his hands he touched the wall. "Is it here? Or here, or here? I can't see it."

"Well," I said, "I talk, but not to everyone. Only to a few chosen people. My mouth, ears, eyes, nose, and hands are the walls. The ceiling is my head, which does all the thinking for me, like yours, and my legs are the floor on which I stand."

The ceiling, walls, and floor started giggling out loud at my explanation. I ignored them and focused on Tristan.

"So, I can talk to you and see you as well."

Tristan was surprised at this whole thing, while I was enjoying his disbelieving look – wide opened eyes, thinking lines on his forehead, and little hands rubbing his temple.

"I have to tell Mom that our house can talk!" Tristan said.

"You can try, but your Mom won't be able to hear me."

"Why not?"

"I'm not sure, but adults never can hear me."

Tristan laughed at that. It was an affirmation of our silent bonding. Tristan was excited now, so he got out his toys and books. It was the beginning of our endless conversations. He would show me his special things, with a story to go with each of them, to which I occasionally responded with, "Ohh!" and "Ahh!" I had to intervene in his chatter, to ask him to have his meals. These were fun days for both of us.

Brenda did not expect her son to be happy and all smiles when she checked on him in his room. This made her more puzzled. When she asked him why he was in such a good mood, he said, "I had a really good time today with the house."

Brenda just shook her head and smiled. She mentioned it all to Ted, who suggested keeping calm as long as Tristan was enjoying himself.

Every day, Tristan was quick to start a conversation. "Hey, house, tell me what I'm wearing today?"

“You are wearing blue pajamas and sitting at your desk.”

Tristan chuckled and asked, “Can I also become invisible, like you? That’s so cool.”

I explained to him how getting a human form is the biggest blessing, and he should be thankful for the way he is. We had loads of fun the entire day, and I also took the responsibility of getting Tristan to finish his drawings and studies.

While we talked about endless things, I took it upon myself to teach little Tristan the importance of family, love, compassion, sharing, and much more. When playschool opened again, Tristan had to go back, which made both of us sad. However, we agreed to spend time together after school.

After lunch one day, Brenda and Tristan were watching a kids’ show, when the doorbell rang. It was Ted, home from work early, with his bag sliding down his shoulder. He slouched against the wall. I could sense that something was terribly wrong.

Brenda told Tristan to go to his room and play with his toys. Then she went into the kitchen and got Ted a glass of water. The atmosphere was tense, and I was holding my breath. After a few fearful seconds of waiting, Ted spoke in a grim whisper.

“I have been fired. The company is cost-cutting. They don’t need two supervisors and only want to manage with one. I have fifteen days to find another job.”

“Don’t worry,” Brenda told him, her voice wavering. “Fifteen days are enough to find another job.”

Ted did not speak for a moment, and then said in a heavy voice, “I will take a quick shower and head for bed.”

Tristan could hear a long discussion between his parents through the wall. He did not feel good about this day because his instincts told him something was not right. He could feel fear and instantly got up to knock at their bedroom door.

“Mom, I’m feeling scared,” he said.

Brenda opened the door, looked into his eyes and while taking him in her arms, asked softly. “Why are you scared, baby? Did you dream something bad?”

“Mom, did Dad lose something?” he said. Brenda was startled.

“You are right,” she whispered, to pacify her little son. “Dad lost something today, and that is why he’s sad. But it will get better. God is there to help us.”

She was not prepared to have a long talk with him today. She placed a kiss on his forehead and motioned him to go to his room.

“Don’t worry, you need a good rest for tomorrow. Goodnight and sleep tight.”

Even after going to his room, Tristan was thinking aloud. “I did not like it when I lost my favorite toy. It’s sad to lose anything. What could Dad have lost?” Tristan’s chain of thoughts was making him restless.

“You don’t need to worry so much,” I told him. “It’s a big problem, but ‘this too shall pass.’ Go back to sleep, and tomorrow we will talk about it.”

The next morning was grim, as Brenda, Ted, and Tristan silently finished their chores and left for office and school. I kept thinking about the family the entire time while they were away. It was unfortunate that they all moved in here for a job, and now they must move out because the job did not need them anymore.

When Tristan came home again, he was full of school stories, completely forgetting about his Dad’s situation. Brenda seemed visibly upset, but seeing Tristan chirp continuously brought a smile to her face. The positivity was contagious, and she felt strong

enough to be a pillar of strength to Ted. I also kept the house feeling positive. In this difficult time, I was glad to help give the family the required strength.

\* \* \*

Before the two weeks were over, Ted had still not found another job, which made him appear tense. He worked through all the options available to him and yet nothing seemed to work out. The next morning, with a heavy heart, he decided to break his decision to the family.

“We are going back.” His words fell like a loud thud on the ground. Brenda looked questioningly at Ted. Tristan’s response was unexpected.

“No, I don’t want to leave this place. I like living in this house.”

Both parents exchanged a worried look, but with nothing to say that could pacify him, they kept their thoughts to themselves. All of them got ready and left for work and school in silence.

After they gave notice to the landlord, I counted the days that they could remain with me. Finally, I said to my walls, “Three more days to go, and then they will be gone.”

There was a long, dead silence, and I decided I had to do something.

\* \* \*

That day, after school, when Tristan began his stories, I did not respond to him at all.

Not getting a response, he said, “Are you listening to me?”

Again I made no response. He repeated the question, again and again. I was silently crying. It was tough but I had to do it.

He got angry and shouted, “Why don’t you talk to me? Have I been a bad boy?”

Then I could not stop myself and said, “You have not been a bad boy, but now I cannot talk to you. You must leave.” The last words were forced out of me.

His world was shattered. I had been his only support till now, a true friend.

“Please don’t ask me to go back,” Tristan said, crying. “I love you and want to stay with you.”

I had to be tough for the family, and for him, so I kept quiet. Tristan tried again to talk to me, as if nothing had happened. I was determined and so was Tristan. He went on and on for hours. Finally, he gave up.

“I hate you,” he said. These were words I never thought I would ever hear from someone I loved so much. Tears rolled down my walls and I wiped them quickly so Tristan wouldn’t see. He sat on the couch and started writing something while I stood there watching him.

After a few minutes, he threw the paper on the floor and left the room.

“What does the note say?” I asked the floor. “Did he write something?”

“It only says, ‘Dear House,’” the floor said, gruffly.

\* \* \*

Two days later, Brenda entered the living room with a lot of cardboard boxes and tape.

“I don’t want to live here anymore,” Tristan muttered sadly. “Let’s go back to our old home.” Brenda hugged him and assured him that it’s in his best interest.

The house was in a mess as the couple packed their things. Tristan sat and stared at the walls. He could not see that I was looking right into his eyes and talking volumes to him.

“It’s time, Tristan,” Brenda called. Tristan went to the wall with tears in his eyes and open arms. Brenda looked at his son in surprise. He was crying and hugging the wall.

“I will miss you,” he said.

Then he turned and ran to his mom. He asked if she had a pen, and when she gave it to him, he went back to the wall and scribbled. “I will miss you! Love, Tristan.” Then he ran outside.

The car rumbled down the driveway. Tristan stared through the back window of the car, waving goodbye.

I stood there, crying and cherishing the moments, reassuring myself, “This is how it was meant to be.”





## CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES



**Alina Shylan** was born in Lviv, Western Ukraine and arrived in Regina, Saskatchewan on July 4, 2022. Alina holds a Master’s of Business Administration Degree from Lviv Institute of Management and is a business professional with over 10 years of experience in customer service, marketing and business development. Alina has working experience in several industries including Banking, IT, and Media Business. Now Alina works at the City of Regina.



**Ananta (Dimple Mehta)** hails from India and calls Canada home now. Writing, for her, was an escape into a different world as a very shy teenager. Soon after joining law school, she stopped writing. She speaks Gujarati, English, Hindi, and a bit of Marathi. She enjoys furniture painting, dancing, and procrastinates by tending to her plants when not working. She thanks Marie for her guidance, which allowed her to tap into lost creativity after two decades. This first publication will make one person the happiest—her 19-year-old self.



**Marwa Abu Eita** was born in Cairo, Egypt. She is an architect with more than twenty years of experience in the design of villas and buildings. She had been working in Dubai and arrived recently in Regina working as a designer in an architectural firm. She is taking steps towards being a registered architect in Canada. She is passionate about reading and writing fictional stories and likes swimming.



**Munit Vikram** was born in Allahabad, a small city in Uttar Pradesh, India. She currently lives in Regina, Canada and loves the quietness and calmness of the place. She has a Master’s in Human Resources and Psychology with huge experience in Human Resources. She has an innate interest in human behavior which motivated her to write her first book *Embrace Yourself, a book* about human behavior within the corporate world. Apart from writing, she enjoys baking and crocheting.



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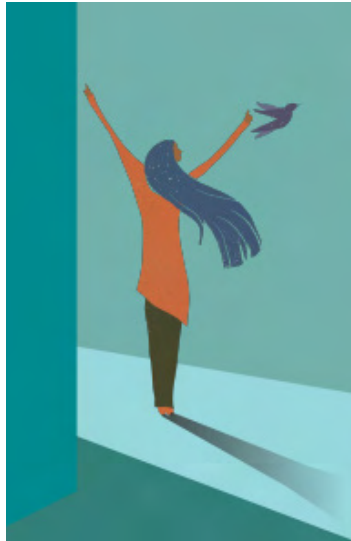
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A black and white photograph of a woman with long, dark, wavy hair, smiling slightly and looking off to the side. She is wearing a dark hoodie and is standing in front of a rustic wooden fence. The background is slightly blurred, showing some foliage in the foreground.

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