

Name Me Not

FROM PAGE 5

The bridge over the lake connected their part of the area with the west side of the town. The rail station was a few kilometers away up in the north and the Buddhist temple was right in the southern end of the big road. All the children from the neighboring areas spent their afternoons in the big playground across the bridge. Adults took their leisurely walks by the lake, and vendors crowded the sidewalks of the bridge, selling ice cream, *jhalmuri*, and mango pickles. The ice-cream man was the most popular of all vendors. He came every afternoon, paddling his Igloo ice cream van, and stayed surrounded by the thirsty children. On his way home, he stopped by Kheya's house, where he would find Kheya—sitting in the corner of their big boundary wall—waiting.

It was their daily routine. Every afternoon, the old man had to stop under the big tree by that house. Kheya would come running and ask, "Igloo uncle, which flavor do you think I will buy today?" In response, the old man had to say, "chocolate bar," because that was the only kind she liked, and he always made sure to save one chocolate ice-cream bar for this last customer of the day. Then the old man

would sit on his van, and Kheya would go back to her usual spot at the corner of the brick wall. She would then chatter about her daily life, and in return, the old man would tell her some stories of his dead-old days. The old man was really old. His long beard went white, his face wore wrinkles of the bygone days, and his eyes were almost out of their brightness. But those dull eyes shone like sun when he started telling stories.

That day, when Kheya was telling him about her encounter with a strange woman who did not like wearing clothes, the woman herself appeared from nowhere and started shouting.

"What's that you are eating? Give me that. Give me now!"

Kheya handed her the half-eaten ice cream. The woman sat on the stairs by the porch and slurped it in one big bite. Then she stood up and said: "You are a bad person. You made me wear these itchy clothes!!" She threw the ice cream stick at Kheya and left.

She came back the next afternoon and demanded her share of the ice-cream. Soon, she became a part of the usual routine. Every afternoon, Kheya ate half of the ice-cream and gave the rest to the grumpy woman. While Kheya and the old

man shared their stories of adventures, the woman sat in the background—eating the ice-cream and constantly scolding Kheya for being a bad person.

"What's your friend's name?" The old man asked Kheya one day.

"Paglee," answered the grumpy woman.

"Igloo uncle, can you please tell her that Paglee can't be someone's name? She must try to remember her real name, shouldn't she? What if she gets lost at the train station and we have to go look for her? How will we find her?"

"We will ask people if they'd seen a *paglee* begging at the station. And they'll show us at least a few hundreds of her kind; then we will identify her by her dreadlocks maybe." The old man said.

The woman paid no attention to them. She talked incessantly about meaningless things. Sometimes she talked about the monsters that came and ate her at night when she slept on the bench by the train station. Sometimes she talked about a house that was once full of people. Sometimes she talked about winds that could blow breaths of death and water that could rise above the sky and take away with it a home full of goods.

SEE PAGE 7

