

The Mystery of the Not-Missing Plastic

An AT @ Your Service Case

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Bijal Vachharajani
Illustrated by Jayesh Sivan

ABOUT WWF

WWF India is committed to creating and demonstrating practical solutions that help conserve India's ecosystems and rich biodiversity. Since 1969, WWF India has been working towards finding science-based and sustainable solutions to address challenges at the interface of development and conservation. Today, with over 70 offices across 20 states, WWF India's work spans across thematic areas including the conservation of key wildlife species and their habitats, management of rivers, wetlands and their ecosystems, climate change adaptation, driving sustainable solutions for business and agriculture, empowering local communities as stewards of conservation, combatting illegal wildlife trade and inspiring children and youth to take positive action for the environment through education and awareness programmes.

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The programmes continuously inform and empower the children, youth and citizens of India to act and create impact for a sustainable planet. WWF India's Environment education division has 5 flagship initiatives that reach out to diverse urban and rural audiences and aim to create a generation of critical thinkers, problem solvers and environmentally conscious individuals.

- Ek Prithvi – Build conservation leadership through education
- People for Planet – A platform for youth and citizens to volunteer for nature
- Wild Wisdom Quiz – India's only International wildlife quiz.
- Nature Connect- An experiential learning programme to reconnect with nature
- One Planet Academy – A Digital Resource Centre for environment education.

The Mystery of the Not-Missing Plastic:

An AT @ Your Service Case authored by Bijal Vachharajani

and illustrated by Jayesh Sivan for WWF-India

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Website: tide-turners.org

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• 1 •

A Mysterious Mystery

This is a mystery. In fact, it is a mysterious mystery. Yes, yes, all mysteries are mysterious. But this one's a bit more so.

See, here's the thing. Most mysteries are about one thing — something or someone's missing.

Either it's the thief,

With the crown jewels.

Or the murderer,

With or without the murder weapon.

Or a piece of art. Or...

Money

Documents

Gadgets

Pets

Body parts

Animals from forests.

You get the drift.

But this one mystery was about many things and it had AT @ Your Service club completely stumped. The A of AT @ Your Service stood for Adnan (Class VI-B, Roll No 6, shy and tall, official note-taker) and the T stood for Tanu (also Class VI-B, Roll No 56. Not-shy, not-tall, official researcher) and they were in the service of solving any mystery that came their way. In fact, the AT @ Your Service duo had solved many mysteries before this mysterious mystery.



There was the Case of the Missing Spectacles — yes, they were around Dadi's neck the whole time. Then there was the harrowing Case of the Missing Pajamas, which had led them down many laundry



lines. And the thrilling



Case of the Missing Dog, Cat and Mouse — the dog had followed the cat, who had followed the mouse, who had followed a football. These cases had earned them fame and lots of snacks and desserts from grateful clients at Champion

High School and A and T's apartment complexes.

But now the mysterious mystery was threatening to harm their good name. The case had been brought to their notice by their No. 3 Clients: The Eco Club at school. A case where nothing was missing, instead, the prime subject was everywhere.

- On top of the tree
- At the bottom of the sea
- On the left side of the road
- On the right side of the road
- Inside the cow and the goat by their school
- Outside the cow and the goat by the garbage bin
- In people's hands
- And out of their hand,

That's how bad the problem was — it was out of everyone's hands. Because plastic was in everyone's hands, on everyone's mind, and even in the syllabus! That's how big this mystery was.

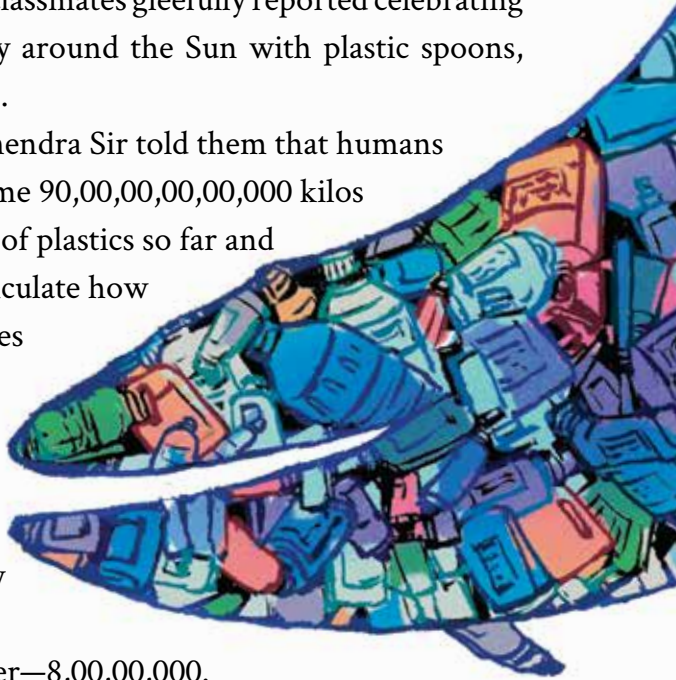
It had first come up in their Geography class, where Miss Murthy had said that the world was now producing 300 million tonnes of plastic every year — half of which was single use!

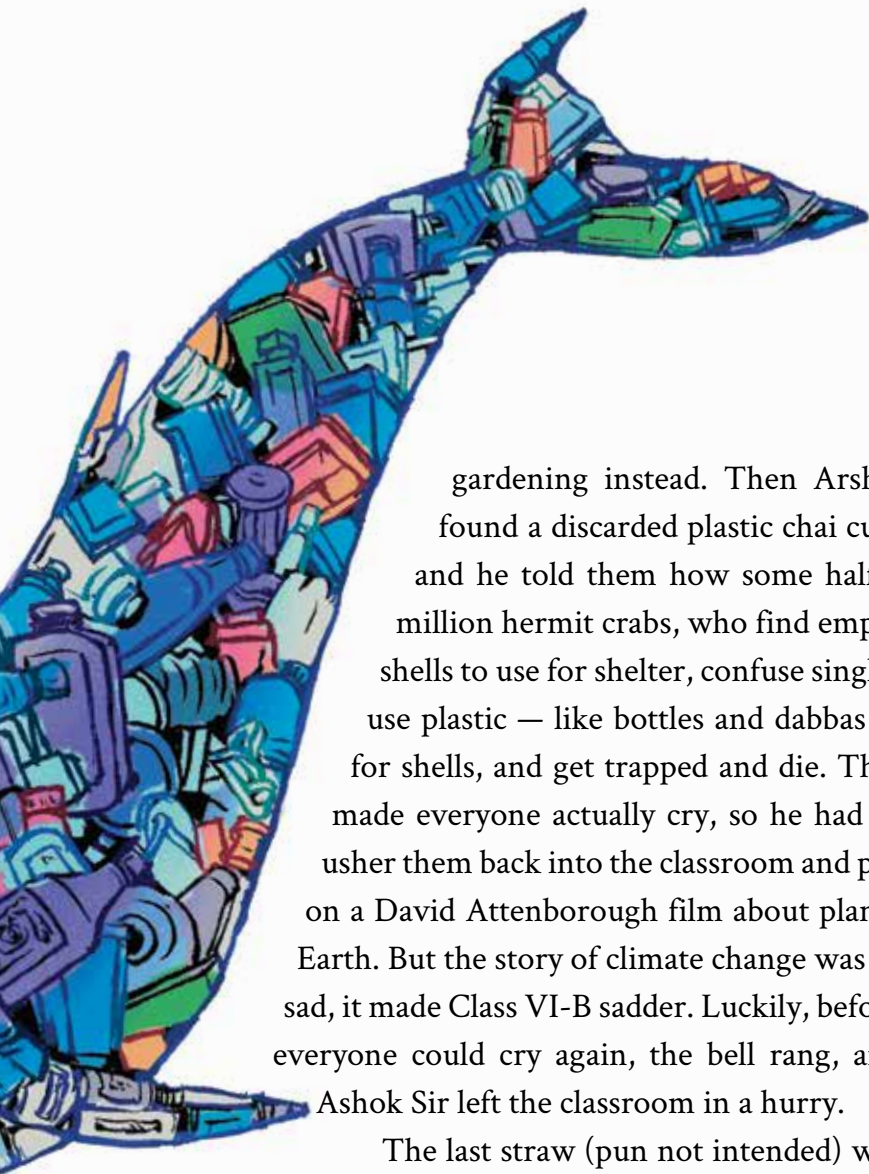
Then in English, Ms Ranjana set an essay on 'My Birthday Party', and the Eco Club had been alarmed that so many of their classmates gleefully reported celebrating their 11th journey around the Sun with plastic spoons, plates and glasses.

In Math, Ganendra Sir told them that humans had produced some 90,00,00,00,00,000 kilos (9 billion tonnes) of plastics so far and asked them to calculate how many Blue Whales would that be in weight?

It was most confounding, and as usual, only Sneha calculated the correct answer—8,00,00,000.

Then in EVS class, Ashok Sir said that 9% of 9 billion tonnes of plastic is recycled and everyone looked like they were going to cry, so Sir ushered them out to do





gardening instead. Then Arshia found a discarded plastic chai cup, and he told them how some half a million hermit crabs, who find empty shells to use for shelter, confuse single-use plastic — like bottles and dabbas — for shells, and get trapped and die. That made everyone actually cry, so he had to usher them back into the classroom and put on a David Attenborough film about planet Earth. But the story of climate change was so sad, it made Class VI-B sadder. Luckily, before everyone could cry again, the bell rang, and Ashok Sir left the classroom in a hurry.

The last straw (pun not intended) was in Art class when Lekha Ma'am made them draw a still life of a plastic toothbrush, plastic bag, plastic bottle, with a plastic straw in it. OK, pun intended.

90,00,00,00,00,000 kilos
(9 billion tonnes) of plastics
=
8,00,00,000 Blue Whales

9% of 9 billion tonnes
of plastic is recycled



There are fragments of plastic
in the atmosphere! Atmospheric microplastics
are increasing at the rate of 4% a year.

Most plastics just hang around like pesky mosquitoes in landfills, for some 450 years



Every day India produces almost 26,000 tonnes of plastic waste. That's 9.4 million tonnes a year. Only 5.6 million tonnes is recycled.

OK OK, that wasn't the last straw.

There was a last, last straw right after that. Right outside their school was a street. Outside the street was a patch of mangroves. Inside the mangroves was a black-necked stork.

Usually these storks were known for their dance. One bird goes up to the other, they flap their wings, bang heads, clatter their bills and recede. Tadaaaa...



But this one, unfortunately, couldn't eat. Not because he was on a diet — only humans do weird things like that — but because a plastic ring had slipped onto his long, heavy beak. And it was an engagement the stork just could not break! The poor stork could not eat, drink or even open his mouth. What a horrid thing to happen!

When a photographer spotted the bird, headlines blared, newscasters yelled, and everyone, including the Eco Club, rushed about like beak-locked storks trying to figure out what to do.

That's when the Eco Club presidents, Hari and Prakruti, told AT @ Your Service that they needed to solve the mystery of why single-use plastic was everywhere! Reward: a bag of Sprinkles and Rainbows Bakery's gooey brownies.



When Sandwiches Fail to Cheer Up

Tanu and Adnan were now sitting at the T of the AT's house and making long lists of clues and evidence. Adnan was the official note-taker of the two, so he was busy writing away, while Tanu was the official researcher, so she was busy Googling away. After hours of discussing, and lots of cucumber-cheese sandwiches, they had a rough list of what kind of plastic was everywhere:

The Plastic Problem

- Cutlery – fork, knife, spoon
- Plates
- Cups
- Bags
- Toothbrushes
- Takeaway boxes
- Food wrapping





- Vegetable and fruit covering and packaging
- Plastic ties to seal bags
- Straws
- Bottles
- Toys
- Microbeads in hand wash and sanitizer
- Packaging material
- Gloves
- Milk packets
- Tissues
- Balloons
- Etc – too many to list now. ~~Hand is getting tired.~~



Side note: Pandemic made things worse—PPE, Shield, Gloves, Masks. Yikes!

By the end of it, even food could not cheer up Tanu or Adnan. They sat grumpily in Tanu's balcony, staring at the Coppersmith Barbet going puk-puk-puk on the fig tree outside her home.

'Isn't it just terrible that something that was meant to save elephants is now killing animals?' asked Tanu.

'Explain?' said Adnan.

Tanu got up and gestured grandly — 'Step back into the late 1800s, elephants are being killed (also coral insects and tortoises) because humans want more and more ivory for combs and piano keys, but mostly for billiard balls. A reward is offered, for inventing a substitute. John Wesley Hyatt, now hailed as a plastic



pioneer, creates the first plastic: cellulose nitrate. Step forward a few years to 1907, Leo Baekeland invents Bakelite, a completely synthetic plastic. And the rest, as they say, is history.’ She did a mock bow and sat down.



‘Wait, you mean plastic was only invented some... ummm,’ Adnan struggled to calculate the figure.

He tried and tried until finally Tanu said, ‘114.’

‘I was just saying na,’ Adnan glared at her. ‘Yes, 114 years ago. That’s just over a century.’

‘Yeah a century’s really easy when Kohli is scoring it,’ Tanu said, swooshing her hand like she was hitting a sixer.

‘No, see, it’s not that long,’ Adnan pointed out. ‘My dadi is 62 years old, and her mother, my par-dadi is 95 years old. So, plastic was invented just a few years before she was born.’

Tanu stared at Adnan, imaginary bat forgotten. He was right. A hundred something years was not a very long time in the history of this ancient planet. Then how had plastic taken over their world so rapidly?

‘We need to talk to some adults,’ she said.

Adnan groaned. He hated talking to people. He preferred his lists and deduction on paper. It wasn’t just that he was shy, it was that he was painfully shy. The moment he had to talk to someone older than him, he turned a shade of beetroot and every answer to the questions from the well-meaning grown-up flew out of his head.

‘I will do most of the talking,’ promised Tanu.

Cheering up, Adnan polished off his sandwich and then looked at the container it had come packed neatly in. ‘Tanu, don’t yell, but here’s another example.’ Tanu made a growling sound that scared the Barbet away. And Adnan.

The next day, Tanu and Adnan landed up at Ashok

Sir's table in the staff room.

‘Sir, we want to meet an environmentalist.’

‘A green person. Not a Martian. Oh wait, a Martian might be fun.’

‘Who can tell us something about oceans and seas?’

‘And what about civics stuff, I mean not “We the people type”. Actually, yes that also, because the Constitution does protect the environment. But we mean city people who take care of drainage and all.’

‘What about some plastic manufacturers. Can we meet them?’

Ashok Sir, who had just settled down with a cup of filter coffee (in steel tumbler, he always refused single-use plastics), looked like he would cry. So many questions from two children. Why didn't they use Google, like everyone else? He beckoned them to sit and took a long sip of his coffee. OK, that was better. ‘One question at a time.’

As AT @ Your Service spilled the details of their mystery, Ashok Sir was filled with a sense of pride. In his sixteen years of work at the school, Sir had taught many, many children. Everyone just wanted pass marks with distinction. And now, here were two students who cared so passionately about the environment. He thought of children and young people across the world — Ridhima Pandey, Greta Thunberg, Aman Sharma, Artemisa Xakriabá, Melati Wijzen — the young activists who were changing the world with their climate campaign.



He realised he had stopped listening and forced his attention back to the two jabbering children. Actually, one. Tanu was talking. Adnan would whisper to her, and she would then recite it out loud.

‘Slow down, slow down,’ he said. ‘OK, an environmentalist you said? Let me see.’ He pulled out his phone and started punching in names.

The First in a Series of Unfortunate Interviews

Adnan and Tanu stared at the beach. Not at the sunset. Or the horizon line. Or the frothing waves. But instead at what the sea had thrown back. Thing is, they could not see the sand. At all.

Because it was groaning under a carpet of soddy, ugly plastic. Most of it had become twisted into a grotesque collage — tarp blue, bone white, sea green, balloon pink — plastic from everything imaginable. In places, they could see a doll's head, a punctured football or a broken rubber chappal.

‘EWWWW,’ said Adnan, involuntarily shuddering.

‘It is ewwww, isn't it?’ A tall lanky woman who was nimbly darting from one patch of sand to another, avoiding the plastic, ‘Hi, I am Sahej Karmakar.’

‘We know!’ said Tanu, beaming. Sahej Karmakar was an environmentalist who was known across the

world for her amazing work.

Introductions done, Sahej Ma'am looked out at the beach and sighed. Little worry lines crisscrossed her face. 'It's heart-breaking, isn't it? We use and throw, use and throw, use and throw. Without thinking. Into the bin. And out into the world, into the sea and landfills. How much will the Earth take? Our soil is choked with plastic, and it's creeping into our food. Also into our water! Possibly by the year 2050, there'll be more plastic in the ocean than fish. It's like the sea has finally said, enough. And spat all our garbage back at us.'

Adnan looked at the plastic below his feet. It did look all spat out. EWWWWW.

'Recently, I went to Hawaii,' Sahej Ma'am was saying.

Adnan could not help but think that this was a really strange thing to share. Good on her, getting to travel. But really, why was she telling them that?

'I went because of the rocks there,' she pushed her sunglasses to the top of her head and looked at the two children. Her eyes were grey, like the sea. 'Some of them are now made of plastic.'

Huh? Adnan and Tanu stared at each other.

'Plastic,' Sahej Ma'am began knitting her fingers together anxiously, 'is fast becoming a geological layer of the Earth. They take so long to break down, that they are becoming fossils, forming their own layers in sedimentary rock. Imagine, crust, mantle, and plastic.' She laughed bitterly.





‘Come,’ she said, marching off towards the sea. Tanu and Adnan struggled to follow, they weren’t as adept as Sahej Ma’am in avoiding the yucky-mucky stuff. She beckoned them to sit on a rock and pointed. ‘Look?’

Tanu and Adnan looked around them — water, sand, plastic, what?

Sahej Ma’am smiled and said, ‘There.’

Tanu didn’t want to show that she couldn’t see what Ma’am was showing, so she nodded. ‘Ahhhh yes, yes, oooh.’

‘I can’t see,’ Adnan said sadly

‘There, that blue bottle!’

There were lots of broken green glass bottles, but they weren’t blue. There was a blue plastic bag-type thingie.

‘Oh come on, look,’ Sahej Ma’am pointed again. ‘Not too close, the tentacles sting.’

That’s when Adnan realised that what they were looking at was not a bag! But a gorgeous translucent creature.

‘That is an Indo-Pacific Man o’ War, *Physalia utriculus*,’ Sahej Ma’am said softly, ‘See that bubble-like part? It’s a gas-filled chamber that lets it float on the surface.’

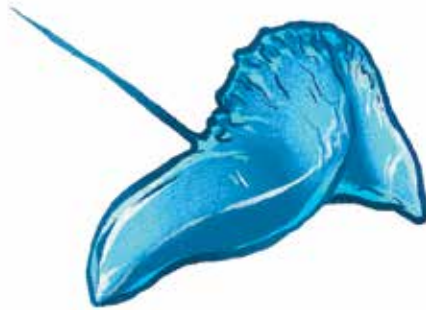
‘It’s so pretty.’ Adnan clutched Tanu’s arm excitedly. ‘But why is it out on the sand?’

‘Oh, they get washed ashore during the monsoon. Then the tide takes them back in. In fact, they’re called

waterproof fish.'

'That is so cool!' Adnan finally said after fifteen minutes of observing the Man O' War.

'It is, and they're here, on our shores,' said Sahej



Ma'am. 'Octopuses, sea fans, corals, crabs, barnacles, snails, sea birds and who all!'

'But but,' a sudden thought gripped Tanu. 'All this plastic...'

'Exactly,' said Sahej Ma'am. 'Marine litter harms over 600 species. It kills, chokes, suffocates.'



Listen, Calm Down

‘Well that was cheerful,’ said Tanu at lunch break, a few days later.

Over the last few days, Tanu and Adnan had trekked across town, meeting activists, reporters, a geologist, people who ran recycling units, and even a plastic manufacturer. What was interesting was that all the interviews had ended in the same way.

REPORTER

It is, it is everywhere!
Why do you think it is
everywhere?
It's because it is
EVERYWHERE.

GEOLOGIST

So rocky, our relationship
with plastic. Does not rock,
having so much plastic
around. After Bronze Age,
Iron Age, welcome to the
PLASTIC AGE!

PLASTIC MANUFACTURER

So much to produce
and sell. So much!
Cheap to make. So cheap!
So much profit.
SO MUCH!

RECYCLERS

So much to sort and recycle.
So much! Yet, only 9% of plastic
can be recycled into something
else. In fact, a lot is not recyclable
at all! And in cases where it can
be recycled, after many cycles,
we're still left with plastic that
has no use and cannot be
recycled further.

**Conclusion:
YES,
PLASTIC WAS
EVERYWHERE!**

ACADEMICIAN

It is what it is, such
is the situation. Our
studies constantly
show that this is one of
the **BIGGEST ISSUES
EVER.**

PEOPLE

Oh, it's so convenient,
who will carry a bag?
So many new shiny products
to buy. So many! YAY!
So easy to use and throw.
Use and throw.
USE AND THROW!



Because AT @ Your Service were anything if not thorough, they had made a map of where plastic was going after it was used and thrown.

Tanu flung her notebook aside, ‘To top it all, that poor stork is still out there, with a ring on his beak!’

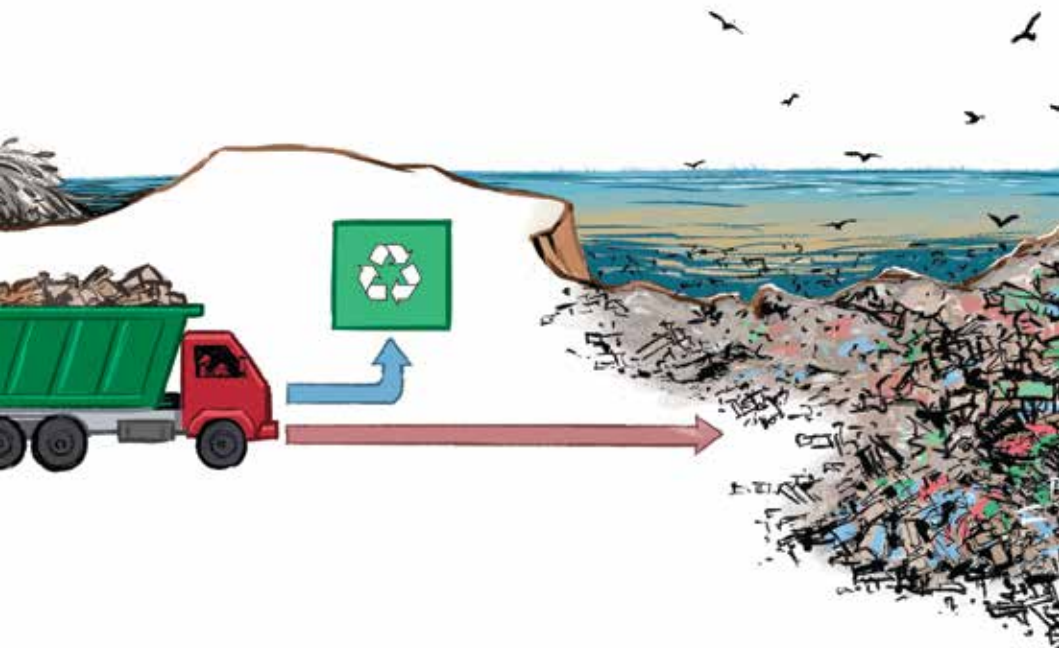
‘Listen, calm down.’

‘I will not!’ said Tanu, her voice steadily rising. ‘No one should. We should all be yelling “SOS SOS”. This plastic is not only harming animals, but also drowning us. Our own creation is doing us in. This is all Thilafushi!’

Adnan gulped. Tanu was finally losing it, and talking gibberish.

‘Tanu, that’s not a word,’ he said, tentatively.

‘It is! It’s all rubbish,’ snapped Tanu.



‘It’s another language then?’ Adnan was now fully puzzled.

‘ARGH! No!’ Tanu glared at her best friend. ‘It’s the name of a human-made island near Malé. People started using it to dump their waste. It’s called Rubbish Island. Things became so bad that the island started growing every single day — one square meter every day. HA! Islands everywhere are being swallowed by climate change, here, this island is expanding with rubbish. Rubbish. Just like what we are living in. Look, look around us.’

Adnan did — classmates were running around the foyer. Outside a basketball match was on in full furore. And most were eating their lunches. ‘What?’ he said

finally. He could not see any rubbish lying around. It was fairly clean actually.

‘Just look at everyone’s dabbas.’

Adnan sighed and looked, feeling bit weird staring at everyone’s lunchboxes as if he was starving. But all thoughts of image swept out of his head as he noticed something: Yash was eating a frankie wrapped in a flimsy sea green plastic bag. Seema was digging into pasta in a plastic box with a plastic fork from a delivery service. Joy had got cold coffee from the canteen in a Styrofoam cup. Even the friends who had got dabbas from home had wrapped them in rainbow-coloured plastic bags. The worst was Shaun, who had a banana packed in shrink-wrapped plastic.

‘Tanu, that banana, I mean, hello, it comes with a peel, why does it need plastic!’ Adnan was speaking very fast. ‘It’s an epidemic. It’s all future rubbish. How is it everywhere? HOW! HOW! And WHY?’

‘And the worst? It’s not us who are bearing the brunt of it,’ she said.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Adnan.

‘I will tell you — meet me today evening.’

Adnan scowled. Tanu was always being mysterious. Hello, they were part of a two-member club. They should be mysterious together.

Tanu and Adnan's Field Visit

That evening, Adnan waited impatiently at the bus stop near his house. Where was Tanu, always late. All right he also had been late, but that meant she was later. And that was totally uncool.

Just then an auto rickshaw pulled up. Tanu beckoned him inside.

‘Chalo, Bhaiya,’ she said, as Adnan tumbled in. The auto sped away, turning left, right, straight, left, right, until Adnan stopped trying to figure where they were going.

Finally, he saw a kettle of kites in the air. Not the paper kinds with their horrid glass manjas that throttled birds and other animals. The avian kind. They were circling the air, crying their eerie wail, over a small group of hills. Adnan was puzzled — he didn’t know their city had hills! How did he not know this?

As they got closer, Adnan realised what he was seeing

was not hills. It was mounds and mounds of garbage, reaching high up into the sky. Involuntarily, he wrinkled his nose. The stench. UGH.

The auto stopped, and Bhaiya said he would wait at the side of the road. Adnan and Tanu hopped out and stood staring at the landfill. It was grey and dismal, the colour of sadness.



‘My grandparents worked here,’ said Tanu, quietly. ‘I thought things had changed. But it’s got worse, hasn’t it?’

She looked at Adnan, who could not tear his eyes away from the landfill. Finally, he said, ‘Can I meet your grandparents?’

Tanu’s eyes shone with tears. ‘They died five years ago. Cancer. All that toxicity. The work.’ Adnan squeezed her arm. He felt his heart would burst.



‘You are right,’ he finally said. ‘We cannot keep calm about this. Animals are dying. People are falling sick. It’s exploitative! The Earth is buried and drowning in plastic. AAAAARGH.’ Adnan was no longer feeling calm.

Tanu fist bumped Adnan. ‘We will get to the bottom of this mysterious mystery,’ she said.

• 6 •

AT @ Your Service Does It Again!

‘The mystery is solved,’ Tanu said to the Eco Club. Hari and Prakruti looked thrilled. They were sitting in the Eco Club meeting room, which doubled up as the Art Room in the day time. They were surrounded by drawings of all sorts, paintbrushes, and that delectable smell of paint and kerosene. And Ashok Sir sipping coffee.

‘But you’re late!’ Ashok Sir pointed out.

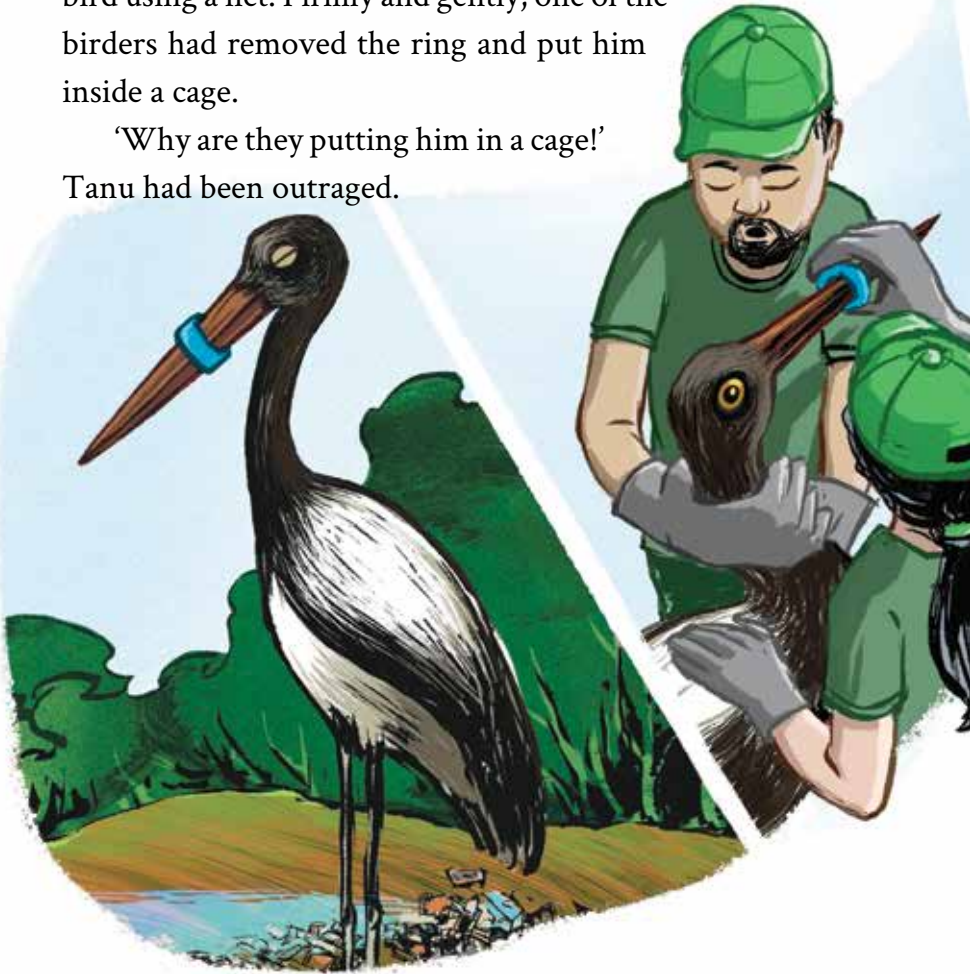
‘We know, we know,’ Tanu said. ‘But we had to do something important first.’

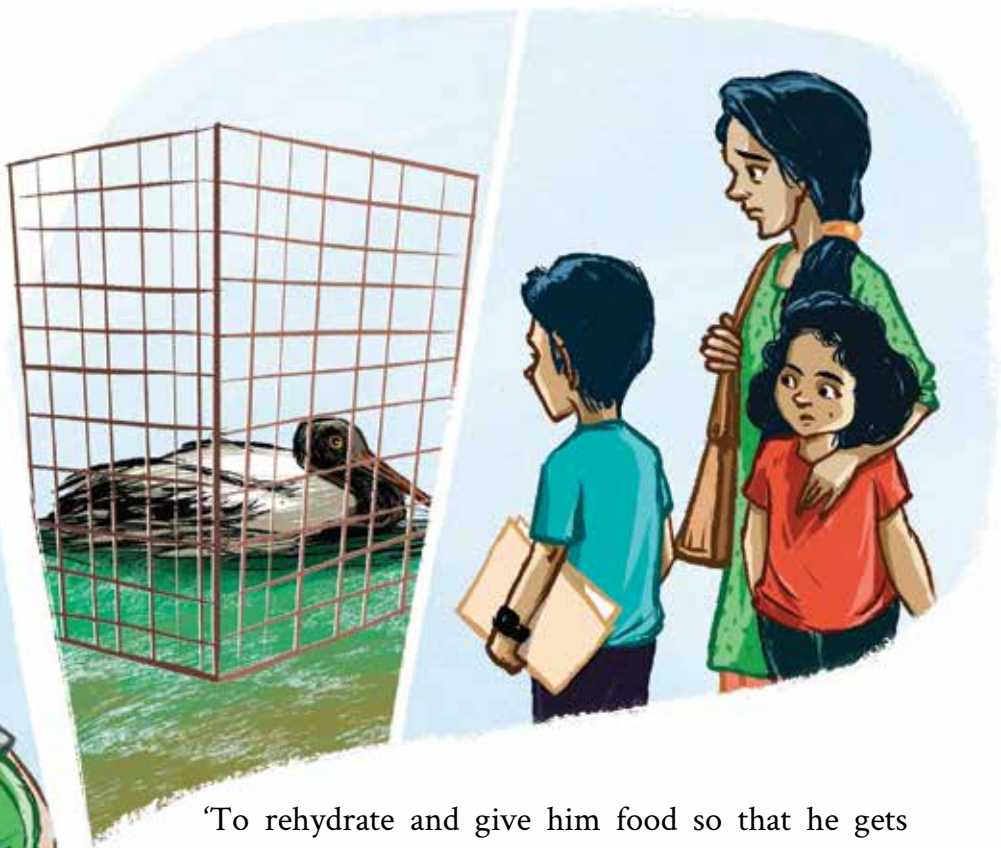
The morning had started with Tanu, Adnan and the Eco Club bunking school (with permission from their parents) and accompanying Sahej Ma’am as a major rescue operation was under way.

‘Think we can call it ORS?’ Adnan had whispered to Tanu.

‘Ummm that’s Oral Rehydration Salts, so no,’ she had whispered, as they had watched a team of birders approach the black stork that still had the plastic ring around his beak. The stork was now so weak from dehydration, hunger and fatigue, that he had made no attempt to fly as they went close to him and captured the bird using a net. Firmly and gently, one of the birders had removed the ring and put him inside a cage.

‘Why are they putting him in a cage!’
Tanu had been outraged.





‘To rehydrate and give him food so that he gets strong enough to fly,’ Sahej Ma’am had said. A cheer had gone up in the crowd when the tired stork drank a thimble of water.

Now, back in the classroom, Tanu prodded Adnan to speak. Ugh, he really hated talking in front of people, even if they were his friends. ‘Well, it is solved but it’s complicated.’


‘Very complicated,’ said Tanu.

‘Very, very complicated,’ Adnan added.

‘We get it,’ said Prakruti impatiently. ‘Now, spill.’

AT @ Your Service presented all their findings using a fancy PowerPoint presentation no less.

Why-o-Why is Plastic everywhere?



IT'S CHEAP

Wonder why it's so cheap?
Yikes, manufacturing it is cheaper
than recycling plastic



IT'S DURABLE

It doesn't last forever, but it works
for every day one-time use.



IT'S LIGHT

Don't need to carry bags, just fill up
as many plastic bags with groceries.



IT MAKES LIFE EASIER

No need to to wash plates, just throw;
don't need to refill pens with ink, just
use and throw and buy new ones,
don't need to take water bottles from
home, just buy plastic water bottles and
throw after they're over.



IT'S CONVENIENT

Home delivery of food so
much easier
(~~yummy food in a jiffy~~).

Adnan clicked a button and the last slide read:

**No wonder
plastic's
everywhere.
DUH!**



‘In conclusion...’ said Tanu.

‘Ahem,’ Adnan cleared his throat. ‘What she means is that we’ve solved the mystery and all the evidence points to one culprit and that is...’ he paused dramatically.

‘Us, us,’ squealed Tanu, as Adnan stared at her balefully. ‘I mean, humans! We are Plastic People living in the Age of Plastic.’

‘It’s actually really simple. Humans invented plastic. Humans used plastic. Humans threw plastic. Humans caused the Age of Plastic,’ Adnan added. ‘Consequence: humans, animals, planet drowning in plastic.’

‘We’re saddened to say that we’ve discovered the motive. Every crime has one, and there’s one here too,’ Tanu sighed. ‘It is...’

‘Laziness,’ Adnan cut in.

Ashok Sir spat out his coffee. Hari, Prakruti and their club mates stirred uncomfortably. All eyes were round, like plastic googly eyes on toys.

‘Do you know the word plastic comes from the Greek word, *plassein* — to mould or to shape,’ said Tanu. ‘We have become plastic people, moulded into complicity and duplicity, taking the easier route, and not the more sustainable one. It’s become so convenient to use plastic. We’d rather take a flimsy plastic bag than carry our own cloth one. Or even happily pay for a bag, thus adding to the piles of cloth bags at home. Cotton requires lots of labour and water to grow!’

Adnan cleared his throat. Tanu was getting off topic.

‘Yes, yes,’ said Tanu. ‘I mean, we are happy with plastic, because, let’s face it, it makes life easy. But now even bananas and oranges and watermelons are packed in plastic! Come on, everyone knows the problems of plastic. But it hasn’t stopped people from using it. As long as we don’t have to deal with the consequences of our laziness, who cares if animals, other people, and the planet suffers? Right, right? This is just Thilafushi. Our behaviour is just Thilafushi.’ Tanu glared at everyone.

‘Do you know what Thilafushi is?’ Hari whispered to Prakruti, who shushed him. She didn’t, but she wasn’t telling him that.

‘I don’t use plastic,’ Ashok Sir mumbled. ‘In fact, the whole club has pledged to live sustainably.’

‘True,’ Tanu nodded. ‘That’s a great start. But we’re a handful of people. More needs to be done. Plastic is ubiquitous. It’s everywhere. In visible and invisible form. We just keep on using it, in all walks of life. Sometimes because we don’t have a choice. But most often, when we do. What is this, if not laziness?’

Hari and Prakruti looked at each other and sighed. They were thrilled to have found the answer to the mystery. But they were not happy with the answer.

‘So what now,’ they asked in unison.

‘First, you pay us,’ grinned Tanu. Adnan opened his bag and removed a steel dabba. ‘You can fill this up with brownies.’

Epilogue

So, What Now?

Well, isn't that on all of us?

AT @ Your Service did their job. Mighty well, one would add. They solved the mystery. They found the culprit and the motive — People and Laziness. Well actually not one person, but 7.8 billion people, barring the few who say no to single-use plastic as much as possible.

Now that you know how gigantic the problem is — 9 billion tonnes in volume — how do we go about doing something?

Did you just say “why do we have to do something?”

Well, because we have to. We cause the problem. We solve it.

Did you just say grown-ups caused the problem?

Sure, but we've all added to it. We can hold people responsible also! We can turn the tide.

Let us begin!



Challenge 1

Become a Plastic Know-It-All

Yes, know-it-alls can be insufferable. But they are called that for a reason. Your first challenge is to learn everything about plastic.

Here is a cheat sheet to help you on your journey.

- What is plastic made of?
- How is plastic made?
- How does single-use plastic impact:
 - › People
 - › Animals (this includes birds, reptiles, mammals, marine species, the works)
 - › Plants and soil
 - › Oceans
 - › Drinking water
- What are some of the wonderful things people are doing to combat this plastic problem? Who are these wonderful people?
- What do the 4 Rs — Reduce, Reuse, Recycle and Refuse even mean? What can you do about the big plastic problem?

Challenge 2

Join AT @ Your Service

Become detectives just like Tanu and Adnan. A good detective must have sharp observation skills.

- **Divide your life into four parts:**

- › Home
- › School
- › Places you visit
- › Your neighbourhood

Using your excellent little grey cells, decipher the clues in each of these spaces and make a list of all the plastic that is being used, thrown, upcycled and recycled. Look into garbage bins, talk to people, observe them. It takes a lot of skill and patience, but hey, you have that, don't you?

Now ~~jump to~~ draw conclusions. What's the point of being a world-class detective if you don't draw conclusions? Start small. First look at your house dustbin. Ask yourself and your family members:

- How much plastic has gone in?
- How much of it could have been stopped at the source?
- How much of it could have been upcycled or reused?
- How much of it was not needed?
- What are available sustainable alternatives?

Then move to other areas, like your school and your building society and so on. Remember, small steps go a long way.

Challenge 3

Become Part of the Action Faction

What is the point of all the data you've collected if you don't do something about it? You've got to find solutions to each problem point!

Here are some ways to get you started.

REDUCE

Now that you know how much single-use plastic is being consumed and discarded, figure out how to reduce the plastic coming into your house.

- Carrying cloth bags to stores
- Returning package material to suppliers
- Going to stores that will fill-up grains and oil in your dabbas
- Carrying your own water bottle
- Switching to more eco-friendly alternatives such as bamboo toothbrushes, handmade soaps, carrying your own cutlery box in your bag when travelling, etc.

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REUSE

Of all the plastic still coming into your house, what can be reused for as long as possible? Get those ideas going. And action them.

Basically, stop sending out rubbish to the soil and sea.

RECYCLE

Recycling starts at home. Think local, affect global!

- Segregate trash at source.
- Find local recycling places who can take dry waste and e-waste. Make a list or a map of recyclers in your area and put it up on your classroom or society's bulletin board or publish it in the school magazine. That way, everyone can know where to recycle plastic.
- Write a letter to your RWA to do the same. Make a presentation to convince them.



- Visit recycling units to see what happens to our trash.

Note: If you're meeting strangers or acquaintances for your campaign, ensure you have an adult you trust with you.



REFUSE

Sometimes the easiest, often the hardest of the 4 Rs. How do you refuse, when everyone is using plastic?

Start small. Say no.

- Saying no is hard. By now, you know that a lot of plastic is unnecessary. A lot of this is about behavioural changes.
- Refuse to buy (well, your parents can refuse) from a grocery store that uses single-use plastic. Tell the store manager why (else, how will they know why you're refusing?).
- Do you really need balloons and disposable cutlery at a birthday party?
- Or do you really need a new plastic toy? Or gift something plastic to someone?

The only one with the answers is you.

Think, investigate. Then think again. And finally, act.

Challenge 5

With Great Power, Comes Great Responsibility

In superhero style, we're adding one more R to the 4 Rs.

The fifth R is **Responsibility**.

That's what it comes down to, doesn't it?

We're responsible for this planet. If you spill something, you are responsible for cleaning it up, and feeling sorry about spoiling that nice carpet, or whatever you spilled that juice on!

In the same way, we've got to take responsibility for our actions — individually and collectively. Become a Tide Turner. Check out the Tide Turner Plastic Challenge — it's a global youth movement to fight plastic pollution. Visit www.tide-turner.org.

Educate your friends and family. After all, you're already a know-it-all. Throw a slumber party and watch a film on plastic. Here are two to get you started — Clean Seas' *Plastic Pollution: How Humans are Turning the World into Plastic* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=RS7IzU2VJIQ) and Greenpeace's *Is this the ocean of the future?* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjU5ig8nx74>). Discuss them.

Read this book. Lend it. Gift it. Borrow it.

Get out there and make a noise. Use WhatsApp to talk about the problem, instead of those annoying 'Good Morning' messages and jokes. Plan social media campaigns

(but ensure cyber safety). Get friends and family on board for a 'We Refuse Plastic' celebration.

Take action: Clean up your neighbourhood, your beach.

Declare your home, school and society a plastic-free zone (fine offenders).

- Vote smart when you grow up. Vote for governments that care about the environment. Who will write greener, cleaner policies.
- Support companies that are green.
- Take responsibility when you throw something out, when you use stuff, when you buy stuff.
- Responsibility starts with each one of us. And then travels on.
- Of course, don't forget to have fun while doing all this.

It's a pity we've got to save the human race on planet Earth.

But we all got to do what we got to do. Else it will all be Thilafushi.

When **BIJAL VACHHARAJANI** is not reading a children's book, she is writing or editing one. Her books include *PS What's up with the Climate?* and *A Cloud Called Bhura*, which won the Author Children's Book Award. She also co-authored *The Great Indian Nature Trail with Uncle Bikky* with Rohan Chakravarty. A certified climate worrier, her purse always has two cotton bags — one for herself, and the other for people who forget to carry shopping bags.

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