C G Salamander's
YAMiNi
and the 7.00 P.M. GHOSTS

illustrated by Sahitya Rani
Yamini couldn't wait to see her friends again. She cycled towards the park, wondering what news they would have to give her. She had been away at a school camp for a week and had just gotten home.

Yamini and her friends had known each other all their lives, they were neighbours and they took the same auto to school. Yamini was a year older than the others, and had begun calling the shots the moment she turned twelve. She had always decided when to play, where they were going to meet, and when they would go back home.

When Yamini reached the park, Suresh, Shreya and Priya were huddled together with their bicycles near the gate.

“Why did you ask us to meet you here, Yamini?” Suresh whispered.

“Shh… not so loud, they might hear us,” Priya said softly.

“Who might hear us?” Yamini scratched her head.

“The ghosts, Yamini!” Shreya’s voice was shrill and high-pitched.

“Everybody says there are ghosts lurking around this park!” Suresh said, beginning to sweat. “I don’t think we should wait around here for long.” He sounded panicked.

“ Didn’t you hear? Things start disappearing the moment they show up! Bicycles, motors, and maybe even children!”
“Of course I’ve heard about them!” Yamini chuckled, straightening her crooked spectacles “But there’s no such thing as ghosts, right guys?”

Her friends remained silent.

“Don’t tell me you are really scared of ghosts?” Yamini said loudly, astonished, “I was only away from here for a week, you’ve become scaredy cats in that time?

“Shh…” Priya hissed, squeezing Yamini’s hand so hard that it hurt.

“Ouch!” Yamini squealed, surprised by the way her friends were acting. She could understand Suresh being afraid of ghosts, that boy was afraid of his own shadow. But she couldn’t believe Priya and Shreya were equally afraid.

“It was so creepy, wasn’t it?” Suresh said, turning to the other two, “The way all the lights went off at the same time?”

“That was probably just a power cut,” Yamini scoffed.

“It has happened four days in a row, Yamini, and it always happens right after sunset! At exactly the same time!” Shreya joined in.
"I don't want to be here when it gets dark," Priya said, kicking her stand and throwing her right leg over her bicycle. "And you shouldn't stick around either," she added, before pedalling away.

Suresh and Shreya didn't waste any more time. They hopped onto their bicycles, and put their feet on the pedals.

Yamin stood in front of Shreya's cycle. "Come on, let's just play hopscotch like we planned," she said determinedly, but neither Suresh nor Shreya seemed convinced. They began to peddle away from her.

"Don't go, guys! We just got here! We haven't even begun playing yet!" Yamin cried. "We can play seven stones like you wanted, Suresh!" Yamin said, grabbing Suresh's bicycle carrier.

"Let go, Yamin!" Suresh yelled. He pedalled harder.

"Fine, leave!" Yamin cried, scooping up a handful of sand to throw at Suresh and Shreya's backs.

"Fraidy cats! Scaredy cats!" Yamin huffed. "Stupid friends..." she groaned, kicking a tiny pebble as far as she could.

Yamin was too angry to ride her bicycle, so she pushed it all the way home. When she arrived, she was made even angrier by the sight of the front gate shut and locked.

"Appa!" Yamin yelled. "Why is the gate locked?" she shouted, giving the gate a nice big kick.

"Asho! Stop that!" Yamin's mother cried from inside the house.

Yamin did not listen. She rammed the bicycle into the rickety old gate so hard that the lock flew open along with the gate.

"They're all a bunch of fraidy cats Ma!" Yamin yelled. "Remind me to never be friends with fraidy cats again, okay!" She slammed her bicycle to the ground.
“Ummm... okay...” Yamini’s mother said, coming to the window, “Don’t forget to close the gate and lock your bicycle.”

Yamini paid no attention to her mother’s instructions. She took a step forward towards the front door and stopped.

“Can you believe my friends are afraid of ghosts?”

Yamini’s mother shrugged and moved away from the window.

“They really think there are ghosts, Ma!” Yamini continued loudly, with a laugh, as she entered the house.

Yamini’s father, who had been reading the evening newspaper, set it down on the table abruptly, and rushed to her side.

“Not so loud, Yamini,” her father whispered.

“Why not?” asked Yamini, “You’re not afraid of ghosts are you?”

“Of course not!” her father snapped.

“Then you won’t mind if I invite them in?”

Yamini’s father began to look a bit anxious. “I… I… don’t care...” He said unconvincingly. “You can do whatever you want.”

Yamini opened her mouth wide and shouted, “GHOSTS! PLEASE COME INTO OUR HOUSE! GHOSTS COME AND GET US! GH—”

Yamini’s father lunged at his daughter and covered her mouth with his hand. “MMM MMMM MMM!” Yamini struggled to speak.

“Sshhhhhhh! They might hear you!” whispered her father, looking frantically from side to side.

Yamini rolled her eyes as she shook herself free of her father. “You’re all a bunch of fraidy cats!”
When Y amini had washed up, she emerged from her bedroom to see her father staring at the clock nervously. It was exactly 6.58 P.M. Her mother had already begun lighting candles in preparation for the power cut. Her father, on the other hand, went and locked himself in his office, surrounding himself with black-and-white pictures of famous scientists. “Science will keep the ghosts away! Science will keep the ghosts away!” he muttered, rocking himself back and forth.

Y amini sat behind a lit candle on the dining table, and joined her mother in challenging the clock to a staring contest.

TICK TICK TOCK

TICK TICK TOCK

Y amini yawned as she watched the seconds go by.

TICK TICK TOCK

TICK TICK TOCK

The clock was ten seconds from striking 7.00.

TICK TICK TOCK

TICK TICK TOCK

One moment Y amini was looking at the clock, and the next she was staring at the flickering light of the candles. All the lights had gone out.

“Ashoo, it’s happening again!” Y amini’s father mumbled from inside the office. “Please forgive my daughter! She didn’t mean it...”

“Appa! Don’t be such a chicken,” Y amini began, but before she could finish, she heard something.

CREAK...

Suddenly, Y amini realized something.

“I forgot to close the gate!”
She ran towards the door and opened it. “Is anyone there?”

Yamini heard the sound of shuffling feet, then she heard the eerie tune of an almost inaudible hum.

“Who’s there?” Yamini’s voice sounded feeble and afraid.

The twelve-year-old dug into her pocket and fished out her key-chain. She had forgotten to lock her bicycle, but that wasn’t why she fished out her keys.

Yamini felt the grooves and edges of her keys, and after a couple of seconds, she was able to feel her way to the tiny button on the torchlight attached to her keyring. Yamini’s hands were sweaty, she wiped them on her t-shirt and pushed the button. She pointed the small torchlight at the gate.

“Go back inside...” The voice had come out of nowhere and it sounded husky and nasally.

Yamini didn’t listen. “Who’s there?” she cried.

“Go back inside...” the voice sounded scarier the second time around.

Yamini began to tremble. She pointed the torchlight at the floor, but just before she could get a glance at the owner of the voice, the light flew right out of her hand and levitated in front of her.
“Who... who are you?” Yamini stammered, her eyes fixed on the floating key-chain. A mean, ghostly laugh was heard in the darkness.

“What do you want?” she stammered, her eyes following her floating key light.

The mean laugh was heard again.

In the dim light of the floating torch, Yamini saw her bicycle stand up on its own, and then she saw it float in thin air.

“Don’t take my cycle!” Yamini cried. She jumped and waved her arms, trying desperately to pluck the torch out of the darkness.

The light floated in front of her face. It was as though the ghost was taunting her.

Woosh! It sailed past her eyes, and fell onto the main road.

Yamini ran out through the open gate and picked up the torch. She shone it in front of her, and watched the reflectors on her bicycle spin. Yamini’s bicycle rolled away from her.

“Who are you?” Yamini demanded. “Bring back my bicycle!” she said, sounding more angry than scared. Yamini ran a short way behind her cycle. She adjusted her light upwards. Then she tripped and fell over backwards.

Four faces stared back at her, each more grotesque than the other. Skin like melted candles, eyes like squished grapes, hair like freshly hatched maggots. “Baaaaaa!” They roared at her, snatching the flashlight from her hand and throwing it to the curb.

Yamini didn’t need an answer anymore.

“You’re... you’re...” Yamini stammered.

She could not bring herself to say the word ghosts.
Yamini didn't go to school the next day.

She told her parents she wasn't feeling well, and seeing how she no longer had a bicycle, her parents let her stay at home. But the real reason Yamini didn't go to school wasn't because she was not feeling well. It was because she was scared, and needed time to figure out what had really happened.

Yamini was almost certain that she'd seen a ghost. No. She was almost certain she'd seen four of them! But a very tiny part of her refused to believe she'd actually seen ghosts.

She spent her entire day playing games on her computer and watching TV with her mother. And before she knew it, her day at home had come to an end.

DING-DONG!

“What are you doing here?”

Yamini had answered the door to find Suresh, Shreya and Priya standing there.

“We were cycling back from school and we thought we’d bring you your homework.” Suresh said with a smile. He held something out to her.

“Why did you bring me homework?” Yamini was furious. “You’re not even in my class!” she huffed.

“We just needed an excuse to come visit you,” said Shreya, softly. “Our parents didn’t want us to come and meet you, you know.” Priya said abruptly. “They think you’re cursed because of what happened to you yesterday.” Priya rolled back her eyes and made a scary face.

“What are you talking about?” Yamini was still annoyed.

“About what happened yesterday, Yamini?” Shreya said timidly.

Yamini looked puzzled.

“The ghosts!” Suresh exclaimed. “The whole neighbourhood is talking about it!” he continued. “About how the ghosts almost got you. Is it true that you ran away crying?”

“Crying?” Yamini huffed. “Who told you that?” Images of her father talking on the cordless phone that morning flashed in her mind.

“We’re just glad you’re okay, Yamini,” Suresh said. “And there’s no shame in being afraid. We’re all scared of ghosts, even our parents are scared of them. It’s okay to be afraid.”
“I don’t believe in ghosts!” Yamini snapped.

“But...but...you saw them yesterday!” Suresh argued. The boy removed his spectacles and wiped them on his shirt. Suresh was short and stout, and his mushroom style haircut somehow made him look stouter than he already was. “Yamini, they attacked you! You disrespected them by not believing and they attacked you!” Suresh cried.

“Please Yamini, don’t be so stubborn,” Shreya pleaded. “You’re my best friend and I don’t want the ghosts to get you.”

Yamini grunted.

“We’re going to have to leave now, but we’re here for you,” Priya said, shoving the others out with her.

“Thanks, guys,” Yamini smiled. “But I’ve got this. And I’m still upset you brought me my homework!”
CHAPTER 5

If there was one thing Yaminí hated more than anything in the world, it was doing her homework. She carried the homework her friends had brought for her into her room and placed it on her desk. Yaminí sighed. She sat in front of her study table and fished her geography textbook out of her bag. But just as she was about to start, her pencil tip broke.

“Arrgh! I hate doing homework!” Yaminí groaned before storming out of her room.

“I’m going out to play!” she said slamming the door behind her. And when Yaminí realized that her bicycle was no longer there, she grew angrier.

Yaminí crossed the road and walked to the community park. She glanced at the neem trees towering over her, she listened to the birds chirp, and she saw a group of elderly joggers run tired circles around the park. Yaminí walked to the playground in the middle, and finally sat down on the green and red swing right at the center of the playground. She closed her eyes and thought about how things were much better before the ghosts showed up to her neighbourhood.

“Hello there!”

Yaminí jumped out of the swing and leaped into the air.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.” The voice was soft and considerate, it sounded genuinely sorry about startling Yaminí.

“You didn’t scare me,” Yaminí lied. She dusted her pants and then eyed the girl suspiciously. The girl wore a lime green shirt and she held a bundle of flyers in her hand.

“My mother says I’m not supposed to talk to strangers,” Yaminí said abruptly.

The girl smiled back at Yaminí, “That’s very smart of her,” she said. “I just wanted to ask you if you could take this to your parents,” the girl began, handing Yaminí a flyer.
“Active Citizenship,” Yamini read slowly. “How you and your 
neighbours can engage with your local government and become active 
citizens.”

Yamini stared at the flyer. “What does this mean?” she asked the girl.

The girl sat down on the other swing next to Yamini. “What this means 
is that if you have a problem you want taken care of, you can get your 
community to work together or engage with your local government 
and get them to help you out.”

“What sort of problem?” Yamini asked. “And don’t I need to be a 
grown-up?”

The girl in the lime-green shirt scratched her chin. “Say the road 
outside your house is uneven, or there’s no footpath to walk on, or say 
the garbage from your street isn’t removed regularly. Then you can go 
to the municipal ward office yourself and ask them to fix the problem. 
And no, you don’t have to be a grown-up to be an active citizen.”

Yamini gave this some thought. “So if my neighbourhood has power 
cuts at 7.00 P.M. every day, could I do something to...”

“Of course you can,” the girl in the green t-shirt said, interrupting her. 
“If you’re interested, why don’t you take a look at the steps the flyer tells 
you about and—”

Yamini didn’t wait to for the girl to finish. “Okay, thanks, bye!” she said, 
jumping off the swing. She began walking fast. When she got to her 
house, she stopped.

Yamini looked at the flyer in her hand, and then up and down the street 
at her neighbourhood. She finally felt like she could do something.
Sitting on her bed, Y amini tried to remember everything she could about the ghosts. She remembered their grotesque melted faces, their empty vacant eyes, and the burnt hair on their heads.

“They couldn't have been ghosts!” Y amini said to herself. “I know I saw them, but they couldn't have been ghosts! There's no such thing as ghosts!”

She got up and went to her desk. She held the flyer firmly in her hand and placed it beside her social science textbook.

Y amini sighed. Her meddlesome friends had brought back a mountain of homework for her to do, and it was about time she got to it.

Y amini fished out her history textbook from her bag and placed it on the table. It was a square shaped book, with a triangular partition in the middle. The first part of the textbook was for history, and the second half of the book for civics.

Y amini flipped through the pages of her book, turned to the chapter on governments. Y amini skimmed the pages quickly, learning all sorts of things about governments, voting, municipal bodies, and how she could engage with the local government.

“What is it that people are afraid of more than ghosts?” Y amini asked herself. “Darkness, of course!”
Yamini gave this some more thought, she closed her eyes and tried to think back to when the ghosts snatched her light and took her bicycle away.

“Why did the ghosts react so violently to the light?” Yamini muttered under her breath. “Maybe it’s because they’re afraid of the light!” Yamini looked down at her social science textbook once more. She turned to the page on municipalities. She read what was on the page, then re-read the flyer on active citizenship.

Then she laughed. Yamini had come up with a plan.

Just then, she heard whispers outside her room.

“I’m telling you, I just peeked into Yamini’s room and I am sure she is possessed by a ghost!” it was her father. “She’s doing her homework on a Friday evening without anybody telling her to!” His voice sounded urgent and serious. “I’m telling you, Yamini’s possessed by a ghost who likes social science.”

“Don’t be silly,” said her mother, although she sounded unsure, “Maybe she’s just finally growing up and taking responsibility.”

Yamini smiled to herself. She was certainly taking responsibility!

After dinner, when Yamini switched off the light and got into bed, she was excited. She had a long day ahead of her, and she knew exactly what she had to do to get to the bottom of the mystery of the 7.00 P.M. ghosts.

The next day was Saturday, so there was no school. Yamini begged her mother to take her to the local municipality ward office.

Yamini’s mother didn’t think visiting the municipality ward office was a fun way to spend her Saturday, but Yamini was relentless, and she got her way.

An hour after breakfast, Yamini and her mother found themselves in the waiting room, waiting for their meeting with the councillor of her area.

“Next!” the councillor’s peon cried, and he pointed at Yamini and her mother. The two of them entered the councillor’s office.

“What’s the problem, madam?” the councillor asked, scratching his long scraggly beard. He was a thin man with a long, lustrous beard. He sat behind a grand wooden desk that was stacked with files that towered all the way to ceiling.

“Hello…err, my daughter Yamini is the one who wanted to meet with you,” Yamini’s mother replied, nudging her daughter.

“Hi Mr…err, Councillor,” Yamini began. It was her first time talking to a government official, and Yamini, unusually for her, felt a little shy.

“Hello, young lady. What can I do for you today?” the councillor asked, smiling encouragingly at her.

Yamini thought about the ghosts, and the power cuts and how angry it all made her. She felt a little less shy.

She looked at the councillor seriously and began, “Well, we’ve had a lot of problems with the power supply to our neighbourhood for about a week. And everyone thinks that our neighbourhood is haunted now, thanks to that,” Yamini explained.

“Ghosts? There’s no such thing as ghosts. But tell me more about these problems you’re having with the power supply,” said the councillor briskly.
Yamini smiled. “That’s what I said!” she exclaimed, happily. “But ghosts or not, we have a power outage every day at exactly 7.00 P.M. And a lot of things have gone missing on our streets.”

“Hmm…” the councillor stroked his beard once more. “Ordinarily, you need to visit the electricity board for any power-related complaints…” he began, and Yamini’s face sank. However, he continued, “…but this sounds like a very particular problem, so I will have someone from the electricity board come here right away.”

The councillor picked up his phone, and asked for his secretary. “Sheela, can you get someone from the electricity board in here right away?”

Moments passed. The councillor went back to his papers while they waited. Yamini twiddled her thumbs and tapped her feet idly on the floor.

About twenty minutes later, a tall lanky woman with frizzy hair marched into the room. “Sir, you wanted to see me?”

“What, madam, it seems there is a power outage in Venkatala Village, Yelahanka everyday at 7.00 P.M.” said the councillor, “And it has been going on for a week!”
The woman shot Yamini a curious glance, but turned to the councillor and said, “Right sir, we get a dozen complaints a day, and we make it a point to fix the issues that are reported to us. But then the same thing happens all over again the very next day.” The woman looked both flustered and frustrated.

The councillor raised his eyebrows. “What happens all over again?” he asked.

The woman raised her hands, “It’s the transformer, it gets overloaded and explodes everyday at exactly 7.00 P.M.!” she said, looking annoyed. “It’s almost as though something is doing it on purpose—”

The councillor looked at Yamini and said, “Not something. Someone—”

The woman looked from the councillor to Yamini and back at the councillor. “What do you mean someone? Do you know if someone is tampering with the transformers?”

“I think that is what is going on in this young lady’s neighbourhood. And it’s against the law to tamper with government property.”

Yamini had been following this conversation with great interest.

“Sir, Madam...” she began. “I think I know how to get to the bottom of this, and catch the culprits responsible! But I’ll need your help.”

The councillor looked pleased. “Anything to catch those responsible! What do you need us to do?”

Yamini leaned forward eagerly. “You have to make sure that the power doesn’t go out tonight! Just for tonight!”

The councillor turned to the woman from the electricity board. “What do you say, madam, do you think that’s possible?”

She nodded. “Yes sir, we’ll just have to backup the entire neighbourhood using a different transformer. It should take us about a couple of minutes to do it,” she replied. “We can arrange it all by the evening.”

“There you go, Yamini,” the councillor said, satisfied. “Is there something else I can help you with?”

“That’s all, Councillor,” Yamini smiled. The councillor held out his hand to her to shake. She shook it, and then dragged her astonished mother out of the room even before she had a chance to say goodbye.

“Thanks a lot sir, madam,” Yamini’s mother yelled to them.

“Such an involved child,” the councillor said to his colleague from the electricity board, “We need more children like her getting involved in governance.” He disappeared behind his mountain of files.

Yamini and her mother walked out of the building. Yamini could barely contain her eagerness. “I know exactly how I’m going to trap those ghosts,” she mumbled under her breath.

“Did you say something, Yamini?” her mother asked.

“Nothing, Ma,” Yamini replied, smiling.
Yamini and her mother took a share auto back home. The auto stopped at the end of the main road, and the two began walking towards their house at a leisurely pace.

When they unlocked the front door using Yamini’s mother’s keys and entered, they both stopped short at the sight that met their eyes.

“Ma…what’s happening here?” Yamini said.

“I have no idea,” her mother replied, equally unsure.

The living room had been turned upside down. All the pictures that hung on the walls had been replaced with pictures of famous scientists. The dining table had a beaker and a Bunsen burner on it, all of the boxes of snacks and bottles of pickle had been replaced with measuring tapes and foot rulers. The TV blared a documentary at full volume, the radio played physics lectures, and seated in the center of the room was Yamini’s father -- his eyes closed, his lips muttering math formulae with his fists clenched.

“Appa! What are you doing?” Yamini asked.

Yamini’s father was so startled that he jumped two feet into the air. And considering he still had his legs crossed when he jumped, he looked a bit like a floating saint.

DAMAAAALLL!

Yamini’s father came crashing back to the floor.

“Yamini! Dear!” He looked at his wife and daughter. “The scientists have answered my prayers! You’re back safe and sound!” he said, sighing in relief.

“What are you talking about?” Yamini’s mother asked, twisting her head around in confusion.

“The ghosts! They took you away from me! And I brought you back!” her husband replied proudly. “All because of my belief in science!”

“Pa, we told you we were going out before we left!” Yamini said, exasperatedly. “And I don’t think that’s how science works,” she added before disappearing into her room.

Yamini’s father scratched his head and turned to his wife. “Yes, you did tell me, didn’t you?” he mumbled. “I’ll just put things back how they were then...” he said sheepishly, before getting up and getting to work.
It took Yamini and her mother the entire day to help her father put things back where they belonged. They hung up pictures and paintings, carried the dinner set back to the dining room, and returned the beakers, burners, and telescopes back to the school that Yamini's father claimed to have borrowed them from.

When Yamini was finally done helping her parents, it was almost sunset.

“Oh no! I’ve still got to prepare!” she cried, running to her bedroom.

“I’m going to be late,” she said to herself, gathering torches, a rope, and a plastic cricket bat. Yamini was now convinced that there were no such things as ghosts, and she knew she had to catch the pretenders in the act to prove it to everyone in her neighbourhood. Yamini trusted the municipality and the electricity board, she knew they would make sure there was light. She would soon have her one shot at catching the so-called ghosts.

A few minutes later, Yamini ran outside the house and searched for two strong trees on either side of the road. She looked at the rope in her hand. She smiled.

Yamini looked at her watch and waited for it to strike 7.00 P.M. She then stood right at the middle of the road.

Soon enough, a haunting “OOOOO000O!” was heard.

“Just two more minutes, stay calm for just two more minutes,” Yamini said to herself, clenching her fists.

“HAHAHAHA” the ghostly laugh she had heard the other day echoed around her.

“The power will be back in a minute, just as they promised,” she said softly, reassuring herself.
STAY AWAY!” the ghostly voice cackled. “STAY AWAY IF YOU WANT TO LIVE!” it added.

Yamini, however, wasn’t afraid. “Give me back my cycle, you scoundrels!” she demanded, turning on her torch.
The ghosts hissed the moment they saw the light. They were so afraid of the light that they charged forward to take the torch away from Yamini.

CRAAAASH!

THUD!

DAMAL!

“I've got them! I've got them!” Yamini shouted, running towards the sound of the crash. The trap she had set for the ghosts had worked. Yamini flashed her light at the rope she'd tied between the two trees and she smiled.

“Ashoo! My hip!” shouted one of the ghosts.

“Aiyooo my leg,” wailed another.

“I didn't know ghosts had body pain!” Yamini exclaimed. She flashed her lights at the ghosts, and within a few seconds, the power came back on. The woman from the electricity board had kept her promise.

The little girl stood over the ghosts. She pulled out the plastic cricket bat she had stuffed into her bag, and used it to hit one of the ghosts repeatedly on the head.

“Let's get out of here! Quick!” one of the ghosts cried. “Yes! Before someone shows up!” a second ghost agreed.

Yamini held on tightly to one of the ghosts.

RRRRIP!

Yamini heard the sound of rubber tearing. The ghosts crawled away from Yamini and ran away as fast as they could. In a moment, the ghosts were gone, but when she looked down at her hand, she saw that she was holding a grotesque piece of skin.
Yamini’s parents came running out and found her standing outside their house, right in the middle of the road.

“Yamini! What are you doing standing outside?” her father cried out, panicked. “It’s dangerous outside!”

“I’ve solved the mystery of the ghosts, Pa!” Yamini said proudly.

“Get in here this second!” her father cried, sounding angry. This was strange because Yamini had thought her father didn’t know how to get angry.

“They’re not ghosts, Pa! They’re...”

“Come in here this second, Yamini,” said her father.

“But they’re getting away, Pa, we can still chase and catch them!”

In silence, Yamini’s father grabbed her by the wrist and dragged her into their house.
Yamini was furious. But not as furious as her parents were with her.

She waited patiently for her parents to leave the living room after scolding her. Once she was sure they had left, she snuck across the hall, and picked up the cordless phone up stealthily.

TRING TRING TRING TRING

“Hello, aunty. Can I speak to Priya?” Yamini whispered.

“Priya! Phone for you!”

Yamini heard a pair of feet run down a flight of stairs, and soon she heard Priya panting on the phone.

“Yamini! What happened to you? We’re all so worried!” Priya huffed. “We heard you were almost attacked by ghosts again!”

“Priya, I can’t talk for long. My parents aren’t letting me leave the house, and I need your help! The others too!”

“Slow down, Yamini!” Priya interrupted.

“It’s the ghosts, Priya! They’re not ghosts at all! They’re thieves!”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I caught them this evening! But my father got involved and they got away.”

“How are you sure they’re thieves? And what if they’re thieving ghosts?”

“I have proof, I have something of theirs.”

“What is it?”

“I’ll tell you later, there’s no time now!” Yamini sounded desperate. “Just make sure you get the others, and you all bring your bicycles, a strong flashlight and a couple of pans or steel plates.”

“Why should we even help you Yamini?” Priya’s words stung Yamini. “You’re always so bossy and mean to us.” Priya continued.

Yamini was taken aback. Her throat felt like it was burning, and her chest felt heavy. “I… I…” Words struggled to leave her mouth. “But I need your help!” Yamini finally managed to say. “Suresh and Shreya as well!” she added. “You’re my best friends…”

Priya sighed. “I’ll get Suresh and Shreya to come to my house tomorrow. But I can’t make any promises” Priya replied.

“But we’re going to hunt for ghosts!” Yamini replied excitedly.

Beep…beep…beep

Priya had hung up.
Yamini woke up late the next day. She shuffled out of her bed and wandered groggily into the kitchen.

“What’s for breakfast, Ma?” she asked, pulling a stainless steel plate from a basket by the kitchen sink.

“Yamini, it’s time for lunch!”

“Oh no! I have to go meet Priya and the others!” Yamini gasped, “They’re going to be waiting for me!” She set her plate back into the basket by the sink.

“Ahem...” Yamini’s mother coughed. “Are you forgetting that you can’t leave the house?”

“But Ma, please Ma, please!” Yamini begged.

“Fine you can go, but you’ll have to be back before it gets dark,” her mother replied. “And one more thing...” she added, holding the plate in front of Yamini’s face.

“Fine, I’ll eat lunch before I go.”

Never in his life had Yamini’s father seen his daughter eat so much food so quickly.

“My poor daughter,” Yamini heard her father mumble. “She’s been possessed by a social science-loving ghost who eats too fast.”

If it were any other day, Yamini would have snapped at her father. But today she had other things to do, and so she kept her head down, and left the dining table as soon as the last morsel of food was off her plate.

“I’m going to play with Priya and the others,” Yamini said closing the door behind her.

Yamini spun her key around, but the moment she stepped out of her house and onto the front yard, she felt sad. “That’s right, they took my bicycle,” Yamini mumbled sadly. “I don’t suppose my brother would mind if I borrowed his.”

Without another thought, Yamini hopped onto her brother’s bicycle. It felt weird. The handlebar was too sensitive, it was a bit too tall for her, the crossbar running across the length of the cycle was really uncomfortable, and the brakes weren’t as strong as they were meant to be.
Yamini sighed, and checked her watch. It was exactly 2.30 P.M. She pedalled out of her house. A few seconds later, her father came running out of the house, yelling to her not to leave. “Yamini, you’re being punished! You can’t leave the house!” he cried, waving his arms in the air frantically.

Yamini was too far to hear him by this point and, as for seeing him... there was one good thing about her brother’s cycle: it didn’t have any mirrors.

She went straight to Priya’s house and found Shreya, Suresh, and Priya playing hopscotch outside the big red gate that led to Priya’s house.

“Yamini, what are you doing here?” Suresh seemed surprised to see her.

Yamini looked at Priya, who shrugged. “I didn’t know how to convince them, so I just told them to come here.”

“Convince us about what?” Shreya asked, suspiciously.

Priya took a deep breath. “Guys, Yamini says she’s got ghosts to hunt, and she needs our help.”

Everyone fell silent.

“Gh...ghosts!” Suresh coughed. “Are you out of your mind, Yamini?” Suresh looked upset and terrified. “And why should we help you after you were so mean to us?”

Yamini hung her head. “I know you’re mad at me, and I know I haven’t been a good friend. But I need my friends more than ever now.”

Suresh turned his face away from Yamini. “You called us fraidy cats, and you yelled at us for coming to meet you and bringing you your homework.”

“I know I was mean and nasty, and I’m sorry,” Yamini pleaded, going over to him and touching his shoulder. “And I’m glad you brought me my homework,” she continued. “It really helped me get to the bottom of the fake ghosts!”

The three others were silent.

“I know you don’t want to talk to me, but just hear me out.” Yamini said, passionately, “They’re not really ghosts, just a few silly thieves!”

Shreya raised her eyebrows. “How can we trust you?” she asked.
Yamini reached into her bicycle basket and pulled out a scab-like piece of rubber. She flung it in front of Shreya and Suresh. “This is part of the mask that one of the thieves was wearing. I snagged it yesterday after I almost caught them.”

Priya picked up the piece of rubber and examined it.

Suresh looked at her, and said, slowly, “I don’t know, Yamini...”

“I know they’re not really ghosts! And I know you have no reason to trust me! But...” Yamini’s voice became softer.

“Fine, I’ll come too,” he said resignedly. “But something tells me I’m not going to enjoy this.”

Yamini fought to keep the tears in her eyes from rolling down her cheeks. She badly wanted to hug her friends, but she knew they had very little time left in which to prepare. She didn’t waste a minute. She gathered her friends together in a huddle and ran through the plan with them.

Some moments later, the four of them knew what they needed to do. They scavenged for torchlights, pans, and Priya even “borrowed” her older sister’s cellphone.

They met again in front of Priya’s gate.

“Do we have everything, guys?” Yamini asked one last time.

The girls nodded their heads.

“I was even able to find my old whistle,” Suresh added proudly.

“I trust you,” Priya said, stepping forward. She still held the piece of rubber in her hand.

“I do too. You’ll always be my friend, Yamini,” said Shreya, “And I’m sick of going back home early,” she added defiantly.

The three of them looked at Suresh.
The children hid themselves behind a broken wall at the corner of their street. The empty plot where they stood was covered with shrubs, thorny bushes, and a tiny hill that looked suspiciously like a snake hole. In front of the wall were broken bricks and small dunes of sand.

“I don’t like standing here like this,” Suresh complained in a whisper.

“It’ll only be for a couple of minutes,” Yamini replied. “It’s almost 7.00 P.M.”

“Are you sure they’re going to come back?” Shreya asked all of a sudden. “What if you scared them off yesterday?”

“They saw the way my father dragged me in. They saw how afraid he was. They’ll be back for sure,” Yamini replied, confidently.

DAMAAL! DUMEEL!

Just as Yamini was finishing her sentence, the children heard a tiny explosion at a distance. The houses on the street and the street-lights all went dark.

“They’ve cut the power to our houses,” Yamini replied. “Get ready everyone, I hear them coming.”

“HAHAHAHAHA!”

The children heard the familiar ghostly laughter echoing down the street. Suresh was momentarily terrified, and so were the others. But they calmed down the moment they saw Yamini hop onto her bicycle.
“The plan... guys!” Priya reminded them in a fierce whisper, getting onto a bicycle that was clearly too big for her.

Shreya and Suresh both hopped onto their bicycles too—a pink cycle with a basket in front, and a yellow and black cycle with an elongated banana-shaped seat.

“OOOOOO! HAHAHAHAHA! OOOOO!”

They heard the ghosts cackle again.

Yamini shined her torch in the direction of the sound. The outline of a dark shape appeared.

“SSSssss!” the ghost hissed, shielding its eyes from the light.

“It’s you again, you bratty little girl!” cried the leader of the ghosts, fuming under his mask. “We’re going to teach you a lesson once and for all!” he added, charging at Yamini.

But she was too fast for him.

Yamini pedalled like her life depended on it, and the ghost continued to pursue her. He followed her so closely that he almost got close enough to grab her by the collar.

Yamini turned off her torch. She slipped off into the darkness of the night.

“SHOW YOURSELF, GIRL!” the ghost demanded.

“What are you doing? Help me catch that girl you lazy fools!” the ghost snarled at his companions.

Yamini flashed her light at random. Four ghosts wearing rubber masks ran towards her menacingly.
“Now!” Yamini shouted. And, almost instantly, her friends zoomed around the ghosts, accosting them from all sides and shining their lights at them.

“You meddlesome little brats!” the leader of the ghosts snarled. “Go get them!” he thundered, nudging his fellow ghosts to run faster.

Suresh, Shreya, and Priya pedalled faster than they ever had before. Faster than the time they were late for school. Faster than the time they raced the kids from across the street. Faster than the time they heard Suresh’s mother had made them all caramel custard.

“We’re here you dumb gh...ghosts,” Suresh stammered. “Try and catch us!” he cried, his entire body drenched in sweat and fear.

The children rode their bikes up and down, they swerved, they zigged, they zagged, and when there was nowhere else to go, they came to a halt.

Yamini shone her torchlight once more, this time shining it on her face. In her other hand, she held a big black saucepan.

The ghosts charged at the children like wild animals.

The children froze.
“GOT YOU AT LAST, YOU SILLY CHILDREN!” the leader of the ghosts snarled. “IT’S A DEAD END! THERE’S NOWHERE TO RUN NOW!” he laughed.

“You’re right,” Yaminì replied, but somehow she didn’t sound scared or nervous.

The ghosts moved closer to the children.

“What? Are you planning to hit us with this?” The leader of the ghosts scoffed, grabbed the pan out of Yaminì’s hand and flung it to the ground.

“Not hit you with, it…” Yaminì smiled. "Guys, now!” she shouted.

Suresh, Priya, and Shreya all reached into their baskets and pulled out their pans in unison. The children started beating their pots and their pans together, and they beat them so loudly that it scared the ghosts for one brief second.

“STOP THAT! STOP THEM!” the leader of the ghosts spat at his companions.

The ghosts snatched the pots and the pans from the children, and they even found a cellphone in Priya’s basket.

“DUMB LITTLE CHILDREN, YOU SHOULD HAVE CALLED THE POLICE WHEN YOU HAD THE CHANCE!” the ghosts began to laugh.

“But we did call the police,” said Yaminì calmly.
“THUU, YOU’RE BLUFFING! I DON’T SEE ANY CALLS MADE!”
The ghost scrolled through the phone. “JUST A WHOLE LOT OF CALLS FROM SOME BOY NAMED PRAKASH.”

Yamini chuckled. “That’s the problem with the dark,” she replied calmly. “You don’t realize where you are, especially when you’re not from around here, more so when you can’t see what’s around you.”

“What are you talking about?”

The leader of the ghosts was clearly losing patience.

Yamini ignored the ghost. “Suresh, it’s your turn,” she said. “Please, do the honours.”

Suresh took a deep breath and blew into his whistle.

“Help! Police! Help!” the children began to shout.

The ghosts took a step closer to the children.

There was a moment of silence, followed by the sound of a dozen boots stomping the ground. The children heard a door force itself open, then they heard a car door open. And after a few seconds, they watched blue and red lights come to life and flash in quick succession.

“What’s happening?” cried the leader of the ghosts. He sounded as though he was losing his voice. “Who—what?” It no longer sounded hoarse and scary. It just sounded confused.

“I don’t understand,” one of the ghosts began to panic.

“How are we—”

Bright torches were pointed at the little crowd of children and ghosts now.

“We had you follow us to the police station,” Yamini grinned. “We really didn’t think you’d be silly enough to fall for it,” she chuckled. “But we were wrong.”
CHAPTER 11

In a small community like Venkatala village, news travels fast. By the time Yamini and her friends had explained the situation to the police constables, a large crowd had gathered around the station. The ghosts, safely handcuffed, stood to one side. People in the crowd exchanged the news they had heard.

“Did you hear? Someone caught the ghosts?”

“I heard it was a bunch of kids!”

“Someone just told me that they weren’t ghosts at all. They were just thieves pretending to be ghosts.”

“They’re going to be locked up for a long time!”

Pretty soon, the whole community assembled outside the police station.

“How did you know they were thieves and not real ghosts?” a curious police constable with a big bushy moustache asked Yamini.

Yamini took a deep breath. “It was just a hunch, really.”

She began her story. “I’ve never really believed in ghosts, so when I heard that four mysterious ghosts had appeared just as things around the community were going missing, I knew it had to be related.”

“Things went missing?” asked someone from the crowd of bystanders.

“That’s right aunty. Motor pumps, light bulbs, cycles, and even a TVS 50 went missing from my street alone,” Yamini said. “These ghosts even stole my cycle!”
Yamini walked towards the four ghosts who were safely handcuffed. “The first time I saw them, I was convinced they were ghosts. But then I realized something strange: they were afraid of the light.” Yamini paused. “At first I didn’t think much of this, but then I remembered how they grabbed the torch from my hand when I tried to flash it at them.”

“I realized that they weren’t afraid of the light. They were afraid of being seen.”

Yamini walked up to the leader of the ghosts. “So, with a little help from the municipal ward office and the electricity board, I set a trap for them the next day. I even managed to catch them, before they escaped. But not before I managed to tear a piece off one of their masks.”

She held this up for the crowd to see. An ooh went around the group.

“That’s when I knew for sure that they weren’t ghosts. It was all very simple after that. All I had to do was get a little help from my friends and come up with a plan to lure them into the police station. Needless to say they followed us without any suspicions.”

“So clever!” an aunty from the crowd whispered. “Almost as clever as my son Bunty,” another aunty added, stroking her son’s head.

“What’s all this commotion about?” It was the inspector of the police station, who had finally arrived. He had the biggest moustache of all the policemen.

“Aiyya, these children have caught some thieves,” said the head constable excitedly. “And they did it all on their own!”

The inspector stepped closer to Yamini and her friends. “Is that so,” he said, twirling his moustache. “And how did you manage that?” he asked.

The constable narrated the entire story to the inspector.

“How did you know you could contact your municipal ward office to help you?” It was the only question the inspector seemed to have.

Yamini pulled a folded flyer from her pocket and gave it to the inspector. “I saw it on this flyer about active citizenship,” Yamini replied shyly.

“So you actually got the government to help you—and you did it all by yourself?” he asked.
“Yes sir, anyone can get involved and ask for the government’s help,” she answered.

The police inspector clapped his hands. “Our neighbourhood and our city needs more active citizens like the four of you,” he said clapping his hands faster.

All the bystanders followed the inspector’s lead and joined their hands together to applaud the four children.

“We know these four!” the head constable laughed. “They’ve been causing a nuisance and committing petty crimes in and around this community for at least a year now.” The constable grabbed the leader of the gang. “And thanks to you they’re going to jail for a long time!” he added.

“Sure, sir,” Yamini replied demurely, and in one swift move, she yanked the mask off the head of the ghosts. Shreya, Suresh, and Priya followed Yamini’s lead and unmasked the other ghosts.
She hopped onto her brother’s bicycle and signalled to her friends that it was time to leave.

“Where are we going, Yaminis?” Shreya asked.

“You know where we’re going,” Yaminis replied with a smile.

“To the park?” Priya asked, knowing full well that she was right.

“Last one to the park is a stinky face!” Yaminis cried, shifting the gear on her brother’s bicycle. “I’m really starting to like this bicycle,” she thought to herself.

Shreya and Priya got off their seats and pedalled standing up.

“Wait up, guys!” Suresh gasped. “Guys, please wait up!” he whined.

Yaminis and the others stayed out well after sunset, and they played till they were tired and couldn’t play anymore. They did this the next day. And the next. And the one after that. They were happy to cycle through a well-lit neighbourhood, to a place where the power didn’t get cut at 7.00 P.M.
Yamini’s father was greeted with cheers and applause when he walked out of his house groggily to collect the morning newspaper.

“Congratulations on raising such a fine daughter!” someone yelled.

“You’re the best father in all of Venkatala,” cried another neighbour.

“Yamini must get her bravery from you!” The tenants who’d recently moved into the neighbourhood clapped their hands.

Yamini’s father was confused. “Errr… thank you...” he replied, and marched back into the house.

“Yamini,” her father called out to her. “Do you know why the entire neighbourhood is cheering for you?” he asked.

Yamini saw the paper in her father’s hand. “No idea, Pa,” she replied.

“Hmmm… okay whatever it is that you’re doing, keep it up, okay.” He smiled.

“Sure, Pa,” Yamini chuckled, and gave her father a big hug.
Yamini and her friends got involved and helped catch a band of nasty thieves, and it was all because they decided to become active citizens. There are so many things you and your friends can do to change and help your community, and the best way to start your journey as an active citizen is to take the Active Citizenship pledge.

**ABOUT JANAAGRaha**

Janaagraha (www.janaagraha.org) was founded by Swati Ramanathan and Ramesh Ramanathan in December 2001. It is registered under the Indian Trusts Act, 1882. Janaagraha’s mission is to transform quality of life in India’s cities and towns and it defines quality of life as comprising quality of infrastructure and services and quality of citizenship. We work with citizens to catalyze active citizenship in city neighbourhoods and with governments to institute reforms to city governance (what we call “city-systems”). Civic Learning, Civic Participation and Advocacy and Reforms are Janaagraha’s three major strands of work to accomplish its mission.

Quality of Citizenship is an integral component of Quality of Life and therefore, Janaagraha’s Civic Learning Program is aimed at catalyzing Active Citizenship in our cities. We firmly believe that systematic Civic Learning is a prerequisite for large-scale civic participation in our cities, whereby citizens will take ownership of their neighbourhoods and cities and work constructively with each other and their governments to solve civic problems. Good citizenship is about what citizens do, rather than who they are. As citizens, we can make our cities a better place to live in and improve our quality of life. In this process we become responsible, engaged and active citizens.

**I Change My City**

IChangeMyCity is a Janaagraha initiative.

Go ahead and take the Pledge below:

**I take the Active Citizenship Pledge.**

I am a citizen of India. I care about my responsibilities and my rights. I care about my friends, family and my community. I respect the rules of my city and my country.

I pledge to:

- Take care of my school, parks, playgrounds and other public spaces.
- Treat everyone with respect.
- Save water and electricity at home, school and wherever I go.
- Follow road safety and traffic rules.
- Segregate waste and always throw garbage in the dustbin.
- Use public transport.
- Minimize use of plastic materials.
6:59 pm. Venkatala Village, Bangalore. The neighborhood is holding its breath. The ghosts will be here any minute now. No one wants to be outdoors. Everyone is shaking in their shoes. Everyone but Yamini!

Read on to find out about Yamini’s encounter with the ghosts that have everyone afraid.