



BREAKING EXCITEMENT

Sona Sharma lives in a large joint family full of happy people who argue sometimes. Relatives come unannounced, the phone rings often and everyone is always welcome whatever the time.





These are Sona's people:

Amma – Sona's mum. She is a music teacher and singer. She's always humming a song or listening to music.



Appa – Sona's dad. He works with computers all day and sometimes at night too.

Minmini – Minmini means "firefly", and she is Sona's baby sister who is almost one.

Thatha – Sona's grandfather. He knows a lot of things. And when he doesn't know about something, he tells a story about something else.

Paatti – Sona's grandmother. She makes the best sweets in the whole world. She always laughs at Thatha's jokes.



The President – Sona's other grandmother. Sona doesn't know her real name. The President used to be the president of some college, so everyone calls her that still. She lives in the only orange house in the entire neighbourhood, called The Orange.

Joy and Renu – Sona's friends from school. They live a street away and go to school with Sona in an auto-rickshaw.

Mullai – Sona's auto-rickshaw driver. She picks up Sona, Joy and Renu in that order, to drop off at school. In the evening, she takes them home – Renu first, Joy next and Sona last. She's never late and recites a lot of Tamil poetry.





Miss Rao – Sona, Joy and Renu’s class teacher. She is kind, funny and strict all at the same time. Sona and her friends hope she’ll be their teacher for ever.

Elephant – Sona’s best friend. He fits perfectly in Sona’s toy bag and her cuddly chair and next to her on her pillow. Sona never goes anywhere without him, except, of course, to school.



That Friday morning, when Sona came down from her room to get breakfast, she couldn’t contain her excitement.

“It’s the last day of school,” she said to Elephant.

“For ever?” asked Elephant.

“Not for ever, silly,” said Sona. “The last day before our mid-term break. Nine whole days.”

“What will we do for nine whole days at home?” asked Elephant.

“Good question, Elephant,” said Sona, and decided to make a list of things she could do during the break.



1. *Go on an adventure.*
2. *Write a book with lots of pictures in it.*

“Will I be in it?” asked Elephant.

“Absolutely,” said Sona. “All my books will have elephants in them.”

3. *Go to a museum.*
4. *Spend time with my friends.*
5. *Play board games.*

Sona put her list aside and ran downstairs when she heard Mullai honk. Soon they were off to school.

“Do you have any big plans for the break, girls?” asked Mullai, as they zoomed along.

“I’m making a list,” said Sona.
“I’m going to read zillions of books,” said Joy.
“I’m going to visit my grandparents,” said Renu.
“Here we are,” said Mullai, pulling up in front of the school. “Enjoy your last day of term.”

The whole school was extra noisy during assembly and still their principal, Mrs Girija Shekar, didn’t tell them off even once.

There were no more lessons to do. On the last day of term, they read stories in the library, had an extra art session and sang funny songs in Music class.

When it was hometime, Renu sang, “Holiday, holiday, time to go away...”

“Holiday, holiday, loads of time to play,” finished Sona.

Miss Rao clapped her hands to get their attention. “I know you’re all excited to get started on your break,” she said. “But I have an important announcement to make.”

“Please don’t give us holiday homework,” said Joy. “I want to read a zillion books.”

“No holiday homework,” said Miss Rao. “It’s a happy announcement.”

“Tell us, Miss,” said Sona.
“I’m getting married,” said Miss Rao. “Next Thursday.”
“Married?” Renu exclaimed.
“That’s only six days away,” said Joy, counting it out on her fingers.

“Can we come to the wedding?” asked Sona.
“Yes, of course,” said Miss Rao. “I’ll be sending invitations to your parents. Keep a lookout for the post.”



That evening, when Sona, Joy and Renu got into the auto-rickshaw, their excitement had shifted from what to do in the break to what dresses they should wear for Miss Rao’s wedding.

“Should we go in matching skirts and blouses?” asked Sona.

“That’s a great idea,” said Joy.





Renu was quiet.

“What’s wrong?” asked Sona.

“I hope we return from our village in time for the wedding.”

“You’ve got to be there,” said Joy. “For Miss Rao’s sake.”

As they turned from the busy road into a quiet street, Mullai asked, “So do you know if Miss Rao is coming back after her wedding?”

“Coming back where?” asked Sona.

“To school,” said Mullai. “What if her husband is from another city? She’ll have to go and live with him.”

Sona looked at Joy and Renu in shock. Could that happen? They had never imagined going to school without Miss Rao as their teacher.

For the rest of the ride home, Sona and her friends held hands.

“I think she’ll be back,” whispered Sona, emphatically.

“I’m not sure,” said Joy. “My cousin got married and she had to move to England to be with her husband.”

“My aunt came from Kerala when she married my uncle,” said Renu. “She only visits her home town once a year.”

Oh no! They couldn’t even ask Miss Rao about it because the next time they would see her would be on her wedding day and that might be too late.





EIGHT FOR A WISH

The next morning when Sona woke up, the first thing she remembered was Miss Rao's wedding. What if Miss Rao never came back to teach their class?

She ran downstairs with Elephant to check the letter box.

“The postman will be here only after eleven a.m.,” said Thatha, who was sitting in the front room with his newspaper and a steel tumbler full of coffee.

“Oh!”

“Anything special you’re expecting?” asked Thatha. “Letter from a pen friend?”

“What’s a pen friend?” asked Sona.

“A friend you talk to only through letters,” said Thatha. “Your appa used to have a few pen friends. He’d wait by the letter box every Saturday hoping for a letter from one of them.”

“My friends live in the neighbourhood,” said Sona, “and they have phones. I can just call them.”

Thatha chuckled as he went back to his newspaper.

Sona ran to find Amma, who was at the dining table, feeding Baby Minmini.



“Can I call Joy and Renu to come over?” she asked.

“Good morning to you too, my lovely,” said Amma. “Sure! After you’ve finished your breakfast.”

“And here is your breakfast,” Paatti said, coming out with a plate full of idlies with sambhar on the side.

“Thank you, Paatti,” said Sona as she sat down next to Amma at the table. She ate without looking up once. She didn’t talk or move her food around or even stop to explain something interesting with her mouth full.



“Finished!” she declared, getting up from the table. “Can I call my friends now? Please.”

Amma smiled and nodded as she played “here comes the food plane” with Minmini.

“Are you OK?” asked Elephant. “You’ve never eaten this fast.”

“I’m not OK,” said Sona to Elephant. “Miss Rao might never come back and I’m in a panic.”

“But you *love* Miss Rao!” said Elephant.

“I know!” said Sona.

But Renu’s phone kept ringing and ringing. Ah! Sona remembered Renu was away for a couple of days. She called Joy.

“I’m coming right away,” said Joy.

Joy arrived singing a song that Sona had never heard before.

*“One for sorrow,
Two for joy,
Three for a girl,
Four for a boy,*

*Five for silver,
Six for gold,
Seven for a secret, never to be told.
Eight for a wish,
Nine for a kiss,
Ten a surprise you should be careful
not to miss.”*

“What’s that song?” asked Sona.

“My cousin in England taught it to me,” said Joy. “If you spot two magpies, they will bring you joy.”

“If I ever see eight magpies together, I’ll wish that Miss Rao will always be our teacher,” said Sona.

“Me too,” said Joy.

“But there are hardly any magpies in India,” said Sona. “Our wish might never come true.”

“My cousin said we could spot ravens instead of magpies.”

Sona brightened up. “Let’s go to the roof terrace,” she said. “Ravens come to our mango tree.”

Sona, Joy and Elephant sat on the bench on the terrace, under the mango tree’s shade, looking



up into the branches. Crows cawed. But no ravens yet.

“Careful not to spot a single raven,” said Joy.
“One is for sorrow!”

They waited and waited. Joy was bored. Sona was bored. Elephant was bored. Thatha came to the roof terrace to check on them.



“Something wrong?” asked Thatha. “Why are you sitting here doing nothing?”

“We’re waiting for ravens,” said Sona.

“But we can’t find any,” said Joy.

“Is it a science project or something?” asked Thatha.

Joy sang the song for Thatha. “We need to spot eight ravens,” she said.

“To make a wish,” said Sona.

“Oh! I see,” he said. “Did you try feeding them?”

Sona jumped up and hugged Thatha. “You’re the cleverest thatha I have.”

“I’m your only thatha,” he replied with a chuckle, as he followed them downstairs.

Sona and Joy brought a cup of steamed rice and scattered it on the terrace floor for the birds. First one crow turned up. But instead of eating, he called his friends. Soon more crows arrived, and some ravens too.





Sona and Joy couldn't contain their excitement. They counted the ravens. One, two, three, four, five, six!

"Six for gold!" shouted Joy.

"I'm already gold," said Sona, "'Sona' means 'gold'. I need eight ravens to make my wish."

Crows came in droves. Squirrels tried to sneak off with the rice. But eight ravens never came together.

"So that didn't work," said Joy.

But Sona wasn't ready to give up. "We need to find more lucky charms," she said.

After Thatha took Joy home, Sona too got busy looking for lucky charms. "Come on, Elephant," she said. "We've work to do."

"Elephants don't do work," Elephant replied. "Especially during the holidays."

"Elephants help their friends, right?" asked Sona.

"Yup! Always."

Sona giggled and hugged Elephant, as she began her quest for lucky charms.





WISH UPON A FEATHER

On Sunday morning, while everyone was busy with Sunday things, Sona was thinking about magical things that might grant her a wish.

“A magic wand,” said Sona, “and a magic lamp.”

“Do you have either of those?” asked Elephant.

“Nope!”

“*Elephants* are lucky for some people.”