The Boy Who Grew A Tree

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For B and her Babu

And for all the Timis out there.

The days that her grandfather took her to the library were her very favourite.

It was usually on a Sunday, because he played table tennis on Saturdays and she was at school in the week. Sunday was their day.

She'd choose a stack of books and they'd lose themselves in different lands and places. Sometimes they would fly with dragons, on other days they'd be under the sea. Whatever the book though, when she'd finished reading, she always found herself asking him for another story – a story from his head.

Today was no different.

"Tell me Babu," she said, in that direct way she had of speaking and because Babu was her name for him. "Tell me the story about the tree."

She climbed onto his lap and looked at him. Sometimes she could be rather serious.

"The one about the tree and the full moon and the great, big baboon?" her Babu said, his eyes glinting a little.

"No, not that one."

"Ah, the one about the tree and the stone giant and the saxophone?"

“No, no,” she said, pretending to be cross even though she knew his game. He always pretended he didn’t know, although she asked for the same tale every time. “The one about you!”

Babu had told her that this story was about him.

That it was real.

That he was not even kidding.

“The one about the tree and the library and me?” he asked.

“Yes, that one,” she said.

“Well,” her Babu said, drawing her close. “There was a boy...”

Chapter 1

There was a boy called Timi who had always liked growing things.

When he was three years old, he'd buried his wellington boot under three pillows and watered it every day until his mum found it.

It hadn't grown into anything. But that didn't put him off.

When he was a little bit older, he collected seeds from apples and grew them in old yoghurt pots on his windowsill. He took a piece of mint from the school garden and let it sit in a glass of water where it grew white root tendrils that looked like hair. He planted it in a patch of soil at the bottom of his block where it grew strong. It came back every year.

His mum would always know where to find him whenever he disappeared off. He'd be in his bedroom, at his windowsill. 'The little garden,' Mum called it.

The 'little garden' was getting bigger. Timi's class had grown bean plants in school, although not everyone had wanted to take one home. But Timi had found a space for them amongst the apple seedlings.

Mum's tummy looked like an apple these days. It was round and hard and domed but sometimes it would move.

"There's the baby," Mum would say when Timi would spot the little movements in her tummy.

Timi imagined the baby to be like one of his seedlings. Starting so very tiny but over time, a root would push its way out of the seed, a little leaf would uncoil. And then another and another and the stalk would grow strong and green, up and up.

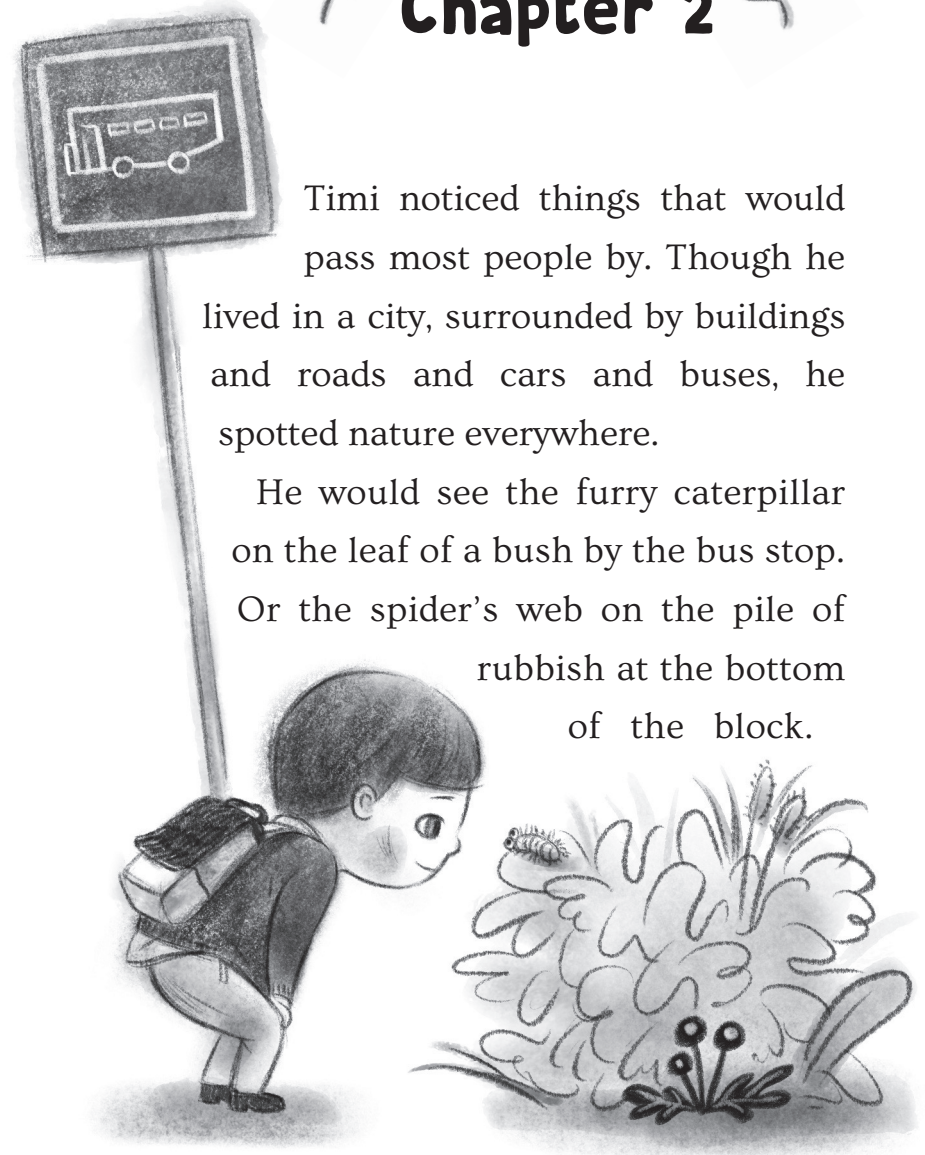
It was almost impossible to believe that the tall bean plant in front of him had started off as just a shiny, speckled seed that he could hold in the palm of his hand.

And it was almost as impossible to believe that there really was a baby in his Mum's tummy.

Chapter 2

Timi noticed things that would pass most people by. Though he lived in a city, surrounded by buildings and roads and cars and buses, he spotted nature everywhere.

He would see the furry caterpillar on the leaf of a bush by the bus stop. Or the spider's web on the pile of rubbish at the bottom of the block.



He knew which rocks in the little patch of grass by the playground would have long pink worms beneath them, and the one which hid the most scuttling woodlice.

But he wasn't, perhaps, very good at noticing people.

He had been digging with a stick in the outside space at the after-school club, quite lost in his thoughts, when he heard a voice.

"What are you doing?"

It took Timi a moment to realise that the voice was speaking to him.

He looked up. A girl and a boy were standing over him. They were both just a little older than him. He didn't recognise them. They must go to a different school, he thought.

"Just looking," he said. He glanced around the small yard they were in. It was his first time at the after-school club and

he didn't know anyone there. He hadn't realised anyone had been watching him.

He hoped they wouldn't ask him anymore but the girl said: "Looking for what?"

Timi glanced down at the dark red beetle pupa that he had just discovered in the ground. He didn't find beetle pupa that often – the time when an insect is changing

and grows a shiny skin before it emerges as a grown-up beetle. Lots of people knew about caterpillars, cocoons and butterflies, but not so much about a beetle pupa. It was precious and he didn't trust the girl and boy not to hurt it.

Timi had seen it time and time again; people hurting small things, even when they didn't mean to. They'd tread on the daisies that were trying to spring up in the grass in the park, they'd brush away a tiny spider that landed on their arm without noticing what it was, they'd step on the snail that was winding its way across the pavement. The list was endless. He carefully put the piece of mud that was hiding the pupa back down on the ground.

"Nothing. Just, you know – buried treasure." It was not really a lie, Timi thought.

“Buried treasure. You’ll be lucky to find anything here,” the boy said, kicking at the ground. Now that Timi was looking at the boy, he saw that the toes of his shoes were peeling away from the soles. He wondered if he’d worn them out by kicking at the ground like he had just done. And when he looked up, he saw the boy had dark, fuzzy hair that stuck out in strands and looked not unlike the shape of the tiny, coiled pupa.

“We haven’t seen you here before,” the girl said. She, Timi noticed, had tiny felt-tip drawings on her hands. It looked like they were pictures of the waves of the sea or maybe it was just a pretty pattern – but it made Timi think of the dapples in a puddle just after you jumped in it.

“Have you been here before?” the girl spoke again, and Timi tried to pull his eyes from the drawings on her hands.

“I’ve just started,” Timi replied.

He didn’t really understand why he’d begun coming to the after school club. His mum had just told him that it was happening. She didn’t seem to hear Timi when he’d asked her why.

Her tummy had got so much bigger in the last few weeks. She could only walk very slowly now, and she was always tired.

“What’s your name?” the boy asked.

“Timi.”

“You can come with us,” the girl said.

“Come where?” Timi asked.

But then one of the adults shouted out to them that someone had come to pick them up. They ran away, before Timi could even find out their names.