



**SWEETS
WITH
SHWETA.**

By Harry Jivenmukta

SHWETA

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OLD MAN

The Old Man

The old man
Shweta and Shubhum's granddad
Had been a head teacher
In a village school
In Uttar Pradesh.
He's wiry and very lively
With inquisitive eyes
And a ready laugh.
Sitting at the entrance
Of their little shop
With hardly anything to sell,
And the telephone business,
He watches the world go by
Amused that people come
And call the USA, UK and
Other far away countries
And always talk about the same
Mundane things that he
Speaks about in the village.
And all the funny accents
And mispronunciations of the West.

The Old Man's Son

The old man's son
Is the real shopkeeper
Although he isn't really
Cut out to keep shop.
Wrong career choice
But despite his shyness
He did his best and risked
Buying twenty packets of crisps
Rather than fifteen
Waiting for the rush for
Crisps that might net him
Enough rupees to buy some
Vegetables for the pot.
The telephone made the money
Because westerners don't know
When to stop talking
Until the bill reaches almost
200 rupees.
A tidy profit and a
Guaranteed vegetable meal
For the evening.

SHWETA

Shweta

Shweta is five
And far too clever for
Her age.
She is alive
And inquisitive
Always asking questions,
Thinking,
And then asking more questions
About the world outside
Their little village
Beyond her reach
Only because they are poor.
She is too clever by half
And can dial numbers
On the telephone, to
Anywhere in the world
Without making mistakes.
Her father gets nervous
Because dialling numbers
Is part of the service.

SHUBHUM

Shubhum

Shubhum is eight
And very upright
Formal and polite.
He isn't as clever
As his sister, but
Has a dignity that
A child shouldn't have.
He's good at learning
But has to work hard at it.
He already has a maturity
That poor children have
To have.
Poor children grow up fast
Especially boys,
Especially older brothers.
He never scolds his sister
But tries to guide her
To stop asking so many questions,
To stop behaving like a princess
Because one day she will
Realise
They are not rich.

TELEPHONE

The Telephone Call

After the telephone call
I pay the shopkeeper
And get my change.
Our ritual begins.
I say to Shweta that
We should really have
A sweet each.
One rupee each.
She politely refuses but her
Eyes betray her.
I have to insist and then
She takes two rupees from
My hand and gives it
To her father.
Then she starts to ponder,
Which jar should she put
Her hand in?
She asks me which sweet
I want
But I tell her to choose
For me.

We sit in the shop and go
Silent as we enjoy the
Sweetness and friendship.
I still have three rupees more.
Shweta refuses again
Although she is eager
For another sweet.
Get one more, I say,
And two for your brother.
She dips her small hand
Into the jar and pulls
Out the sweets.
Very deliberately she makes
sure
I see her pocket the two
To give to her brother.
She would never cheat.
Then she stuffs the other in
Her mouth
And we have another small

TEA.

Tea

Can you make tea?
I ask her.
Of course, she exclaims.
One day, I go on,
I'm coming to your house
For a cup of tea.
From that moment on
Every time I go to make
A call
She demands to know
When I am going to
Her house for a cup of tea.
I don't know where you live
I say.
Don't worry, come to the shop
And I'll take you myself.
Granddad loves all this
Chatter
And we even get to talk
About other things
In between Shweta's
Interrogations and
Overflowing curiosity.

BIG DAY

The Big Day

The day finally comes
When I say to Shweta
I'm ready for my cup of tea.
She is delighted
And leads me through a
Warren of narrow village streets
To her home.
She calls her mother
Who seems to be expecting me
Probably because she gets
The same chatter everyday
When Shweta is at home.
Remember, I say, I want
You to make it
Not your mum.
She races off and her
Mother wisely, follows
Just to make sure.
Ten minutes later her mum
Carries in a tray
Followed by Shweta.
Mmm... I exclaim
I've never tasted tea so nice.

SHRINE.

The Shrine

Me and Shweta
Are good chums
And I always remember
To tell her how much
I enjoyed her tea.
She swells with joy
Each time.
Granddad smiles knowingly
And invites me to
Visit their family shrine.
He surprises me by saying
Their devi is Chinnamasta
Just like mine is.
Shweta doesn't know much
About the shrine
And is more interested
In our ritual
And the jars.
Next week, she says,
I am starting school.
Work hard, I tell her.
I can't wait she adds.

SCHOOL.

School

After a few days at school
I ask her
In between sweets
If she knows the alphabet.
In Hindi and Panjabi
She replies.
I am amazed as I always am
By her.
A five year old
And two alphabets!
She recites them both
Although I only know the
Panjabi one.
I think that deserves
Another sweet, I declare.
I think Shweta, her brother
And me
Eat more sweets than
The shop sells to all the
Other villagers put together.
Shweta has made a
Paper flower at school
And gives it to me.

RESPONSIBLE

Responsibility

I don't see much of Shubhum
Because he goes to school
Full time and because
He is eight and has
Responsibilities and chores.
He is always polite
And thanks me for the sweets
That Shweta diligently
Keeps and passes on to him.
He is glad, I think
That an offshoot of my
Friendship with Shweta
Means he gets sweets.
Sometimes he complains
That Shweta eats too many
And asks me to keep
My money.
In truth he wants sweets as much
As Shweta
But politeness and pride lead him
To remonstrate with me.
He is funny
In a responsible sort of way.

LEAVING

Leaving

The day comes for
Me to leave the
Village and head back
To the UK.
Shweta isn't sad but
Switches her questions
To ask about the UK.
I tell her some things
And then a light goes
On in her head.
Can I go to the UK
One day?
Of course, I say generously
But first you have to
Be good at school and
Pass all your exams.
I will, she is jumping up and down.
Will you come for me?
Yes, I say with commitment,
One day I will.