

A FAIR EXCHANGE

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Mani heard Thatha arguing with his friend as he entered the hall.

“All five or nothing!” Thatha was saying, “Take it or leave it.”

“But these are so rare,” his friend protested, “and you are such a fan.”

“My two are as rare as your five,” Thatha was relentless, “fandom is different from collection.”

Mani had become curious by now. He wanted to find out what rare things Thatha and his friend were fighting over. He slowly tiptoed into the room and peered over Thatha’s shoulder.

“Both of you are fighting over old stamps?” he asked unbelievably. “You can get them off the post that comes to the house daily. Better still, you can just walk into the post office and buy them! Stop being silly!”

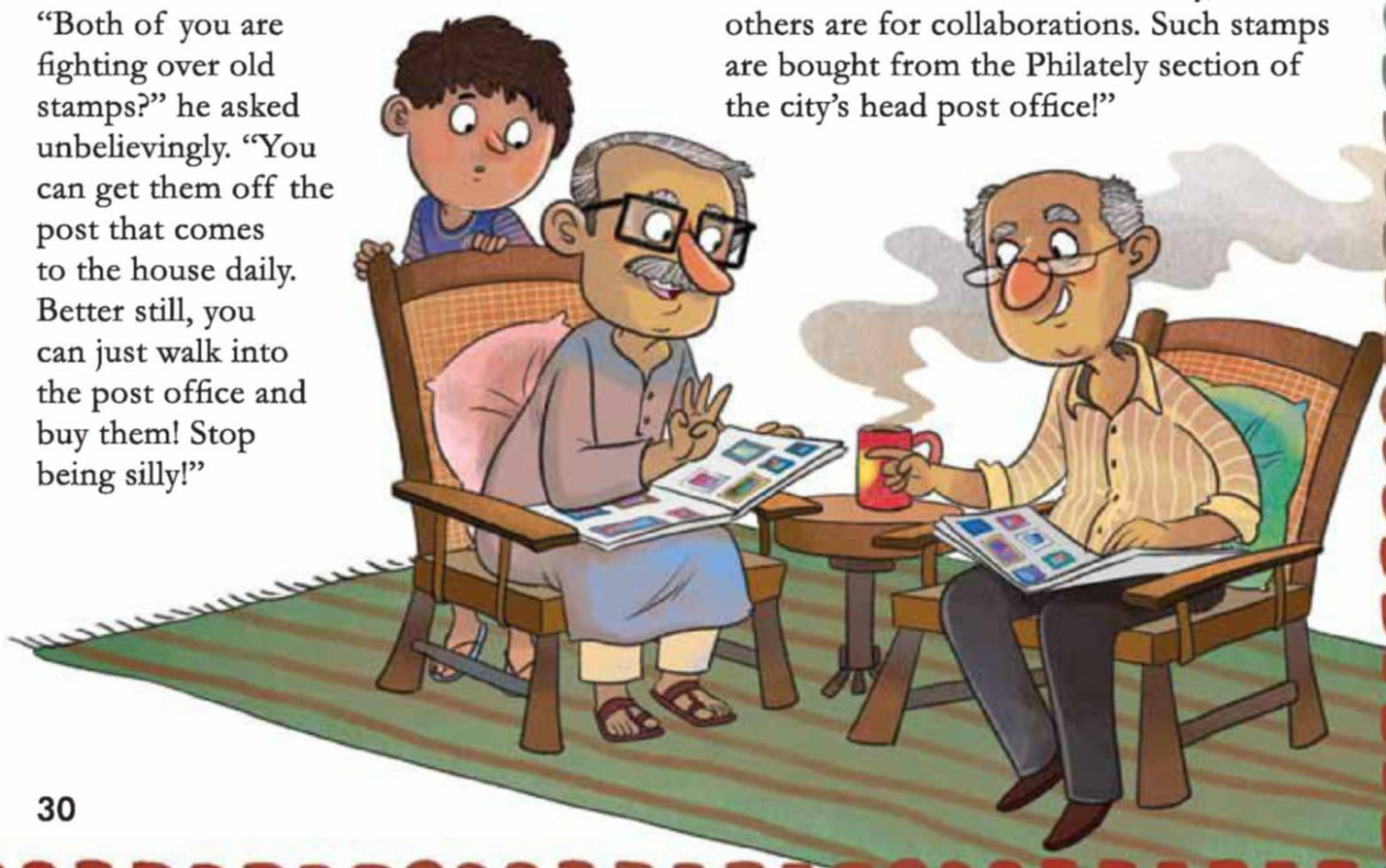
“Watch it, young man.” Thatha chuckled. “You are talking to two seasoned philatelists. We eat and breathe stamps.”

“Philatelists? Who are they?” Mani inquired.

“People who collect stamps are called ‘philatelists’ and the hobby is called ‘philately,’” Thatha’s friend explained.

“Oh. So you tear stamps off each letter that you get? Is that how you collect?” Mani asked, confused.

Thatha laughed, “That is one part, but not all stamps can be found on envelopes. Special stamps are released for occasions like Children’s Day, Independence Day or festivals. Some mark centenary, while others are for collaborations. Such stamps are bought from the Philately section of the city’s head post office!”





the garbage heap and got a good thrashing for it. And this," he continued, "I got it in exchange for three stamps from another collector."

Each stamp had a unique flower, animal, monument, festival, food or person. The collection was engrossing.

Thatha's friend flipped the pages of his book and showed a sheet of stamps to Thatha. "You remember this sheet? We saved our breakfast money for a whole week and bought this!"

There was a chocolate wrapper in the corner of the page and Mani was intrigued. "Is this some kind of a stamp too?"

Thatha's friend laughed and said to Thatha, "Do you remember the time we used to run to meet our colony postman, K K uncle every time he brought the letters to be delivered?"

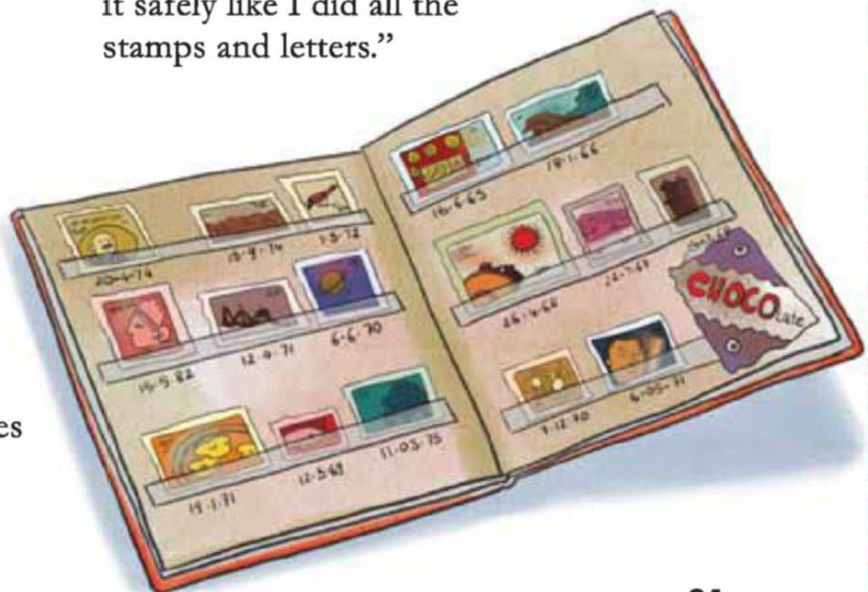
"Yes," Thatha joined, "and we used to quickly check which neighbour got letters with rare stamps on them and who got letters with foreign stamps."

Thatha flipped the pages of his stamp book excitedly, "See, this stamp nearly cost K K uncle his job because we pestered the neighbour to give us the stamp even before they read the letter."

Mani looked eagerly at the stamp Thatha showed. On it was a beautiful orchid flower. "Wow," Mani said, mesmerised.

"And this," Thatha turned two more pages and pointed to a three anna stamp and laughed out loud, "I picked this from

Thatha's friend chuckled "Of course not, my boy. While your grandfather was in London, we used to write to each other regularly. He would collect stamps from the post offices there and carefully paste them in the letters. Once, he wrote a letter saying he was stuck somewhere far from his belongings and couldn't find food anywhere. After searching for a few hours, all he could get was this chocolate. He sent me the wrapper and I kept it safely like I did all the stamps and letters."





"Yes," Thatha looked dreamily at Mani. "Letters are still a great way to communicate. Even now, we

have post offices running on hills and high mountains where mobile signals are unheard of!"

There was a lull in the conversation briefly and then Mani asked Thatha and his friend, "Show me some more rare stamps."

"Okay. First, tell me, what do you like the most, right now?" Thatha quizzed Mani.

"Sherlock Holmes!" Mani replied spontaneously.

Thatha and his friend winked at each other. Thatha's friend slowly opened his palms to reveal five wonderful stamps from the Sherlock Holmes series. Each

stamp represented a critical part of the most famous Sherlock Holmes stories.

"Wow!" Mani was amazed. "Oh, I always wanted to see how the dog looked," he said, holding the stamp closer. "This is beautiful!"

"This is what we were arguing about," Thatha smiled. "I am asking for these five in exchange for my two."

Just then the bell rang and a familiar voice cried out, 'Post...'

Mani rushed out saying, "My turn to look at all the envelopes and begin my philately hobby!"

"Bring your collection to us for exchange once you are ready!" Thatha and his friend called out laughingly, "We always deal fair and straight! Your five for our two!" ●

