



# A Mysterious Presence

"Uh-Oh! Here he comes!" Mahesh whispered to Rahul. "Lets get out of here."

Rahul nodded, and the two cycled away together as fast as possible. They ran in to Payal and warned her about Uncle Uh-Oh.

Nobody knew his real name, but that's what the kids called him. A bespectacled, grey haired, clean shaven man, had moved in to the neighbourhood a month ago, but he spoke to no one. Kids, in particular, annoyed him. He shooed them away if they happened to be anywhere in his vicinity.

The kids were sad when uncle Mathur, who always had a smile for them and often slipped them toffees, moved to America, to spend more time with his grandchildren, who were growing up there. Then they saw Uncle Uh-Oh move in. When they saw him tending to the garden, left behind by uncle Mathur with such a loving expression on his face, they were sure he would be just as nice as uncle Mathur.

But as they hovered near the fence, hoping to be offered the last batch of good guavas, the tree would bear that year, they were shocked to hear him growl. "What are you all doing here? Go away to your homes. Don't you dare touch my garden. Shoo! Scram."

He sounded so stern and nasty, that the kids never approached the garden again. But, he even yelled at the poor kids cycling on the streets. Once, while he was on his way to the market, Nidhi went to fetch a soccer ball, that had fallen right in front of him. The children were surprised to see him bend to pick up the ball. But, when he handed it to Nidhi, she looked frightened, and he walked away in a huff.

"What happened Nidhi?" Rahul was concerned.

"I don't know. He had such a strange look on his face. First I thought he was glaring at me, but his eye's were fixed on the ball. Then he looked at me so angrily, as he gave me the ball. The man is crazy!"

After that incident, the kids were even more scared of him. When one of them spotted him, they would exclaim *Uh-Oh*, and rush off to warn the others to stay clear. Since no one knew his name, he became uncle Uh-Oh.



Suddenly Suresh, a tall plump boy, joined Mahesh, Rahul and Payal. He was flushed and panting hard. His curly hair was sweaty. Evidently he had cycled very fast and was bursting with news. "Some one from far away just drove in." He blurted out gasping for air.

"How do you know the person is from far away?" Mahesh challenged him. Mahesh was lean and a head shorter than Suresh, so he had to look up to him.

"Because I know that no one near by drives a red Mustang. Trust me. I'd know." Suresh said smugly.

"A red Mustang? Really?" Rahul's eyes, were wide as saucers, and looked wider still because of the spectacles he wore. "Wow. I have never seen a real one. Only in pictures and on TV."

Just then the Mustang stopped right in front of them. Even Payal, who cared little about cars, could not help but feel impressed.

## A Visit From Santa

A jolly faced man popped his head out of the window of the Mustang and called out to the kids. "Hey little ones. Can one of you help me? I am looking for a particular house."

Suresh being the oldest stepped forward. "Which house?"

"Plot number B-33" The man said checking a sheet of paper.

The kids gasped. "You don't want to go there." Nidhi said shaking her head, as her two little bushy ponytails bobbed along. She had just joined the group on her cycle a moment ago.

"Why not?" The jolly man was intrigued.

"Uncle Uh-Oh lives there." Mahesh whispered.

"Uncle Uh-Oh?" The man laughed a booming hearty laugh. "Is that what you kids call good old Professor Narayan?"

"Professor Narayan?" Rahul raised his thick eyebrows. "Is that his name?"

"You don't even know his name, and he has been living here for a month! How strange! Just point me there please."

Just as Suresh finished giving the directions, he noticed the little boy in the car. "You are not taking that boy with you, are you?"

"Of course I am. He is my son. His name is Akshay."

"Even if you must go, leave him here. Uncle Uh-Oh hates children." Payal urged him.

"Hates children! What utter nonsense. I must go and see him. Thanks for your help."

Akshay looked terrified, after what the kids said, but his father patted him reassuringly.

The kids followed the Mustang round the conner and then a couple of blocks down the road on their cycles. The jolly man parked his Mustang and he and Akshay walked to Uh-Oh's door and rang the bell. The kids parked their bikes under the leafy mango tree across the road and climbed it, so they could see what was happening, without Uh-Oh spotting them.



What would Uh-Oh do to the poor boy? The kids wondered. Would he start shouting? Would he actually pick him up and throw him out? Well at least the boy had a big burly father to protect him.

As the door opened, the kids watched intently. Uh-Oh came out. As soon as he spotted the kid, he started shouting. But then the big man said something, and Uh-Oh invited them in. The kids stared with their eyes popping out. No one had managed to gain entry in to that house.

Mrs. Pinto had baked the most heavenly smelling chocolate cake, with the creamiest icing ever, and taken it over to welcome Uh-Oh to the neighbourhood, and even she wasn't asked to come in. True he hadn't yelled at her, like he did at everyone else, but what magic did this jolly, burly man know that he was admitted in along with a child?

"How did he manage that?" Mahesh asked astonished.

"He must be Santa Claus!" Nidhi concluded.

"Don't be silly. Santa only leaves the North Pole on Christmas eve." Payal retorted.

"But doesn't he look like Santa?" Nidhi persisted. "Plus he has an unusual accent."

"Okay fine Nidhi, we'll call him Santa. You are such a baby" Suresh rolled his eyes.

"I may be the youngest and the shortest, but I am not a baby." Nidhi glared at Suresh.

"Stop fighting you two. Lets focus on what is going on there." Rahul pointed towards Uh-Oh's house.

But nothing interesting was visible from the mango tree since Santa and his son went inside. So the kids got bored and started munching on some crisp green kairis. Then suddenly Nidhi noticed the most astonishing thing. *Uh-Oh hugged Santa and his son as they exited his house.* The sight surprised her so much, she almost fell off the tree. She screamed for help, as she precariously held on to one of the lower branches.

While her friends tried to help, Santa walked up to the tree and easily caught the little girl and gently put her down. "Thank you Santa." Nidhi hugged her saviour in relief.

"Santa!" The jolly man exclaimed. "Are you hallucinating?"

Nidhi blushed. "But you look like Santa, and you did not tell us your name, did you?" One by one the other kids jumped out of the tree.

"No. I am sorry. I am Santa Singh, so you really weren't far off." The burly man chortled.

Payal giggled and turned to Akshay. "Did he treat you well? We were so afraid he would fling you out of the house."

"Oh! He is nice. He is sad, but nice." Akshay said looking at his shoes.

The children looked at him in disbelief. Then Rahul asked, "Santa uncle, how do you know Uncle Uh-Oh?"

"He was a professor of Mathematics at IIT Madras. He would come with his wife and kids to visit his parents during the summer vacation. His parents lived in the neighbourhood where I grew up, in a small town. He used to conduct a maths camp for all the neighbourhood kids who were interested. It was because of him I fell in love with Mathematics and he even wrote me a letter of recommendation for Stanford where I studied maths." Santa had a glazed look in his eye as he reminisced the past.

Then suddenly recalling his audience, he looked at the kids and continued. "Over the years I kept in touch with him. I visit him every time I come to India. But I haven't come since Akshay was a toddler. He did not even recognise Akshay." He looked sad. "I should visit more often." He said mostly to himself.

"Uh-Oh teach children! Impossible! He hates children." Payal declared.

"But he really is a nice old man." The kids were surprised to hear Akshay say.

"He spoke to you?" Suresh was astounded. "I mean he talked to you nicely, not just growled or shouted?"

"Yes. He asked me about my hobbies and friends. He even gave me some cookies." Akshay added.

"Santa uncle if Uh-Oh really was so nice, then why is he so grouchy and mean now?" Nidhi asked curious to get to the bottom of this mystery.

"Like Akshay told you, he is sad." Santa said.

"But why?" Nidhi persisted. "What could change him from a kind and helpful man, to a frightening grouch?"

"It is not my place to tell you. Sometimes, people are in so much pain, that they cant spare the energy or the mental capacity to to be nice. They are drowning and need help. If you kids help him, perhaps he will find a way out of his misery. Why don't you give it a try?"

"Grown ups need help?" Nidhi asked wide eyed.

"Of course they do. Only they are bad at asking for it." Santa patted her head.

"So what can we do?" Payal wanted to know. It upset her to know that the old man was suffering.

"You are smart kids. You'll figure it out. I'll give you a few hints though. He loves strawberries, math and Lego."

"Did you say Lego?" Rahul asked surprised. "I love Lego."

"Oh! He has an amazing Lego collection. If you made friends with him, I am sure he would share it with you. One more thing. Balls make him very sad. Don't let him see a ball. It will make him very unhappy."

Mahesh furrowed his brow. "Balls make him sad! That makes no sense!"

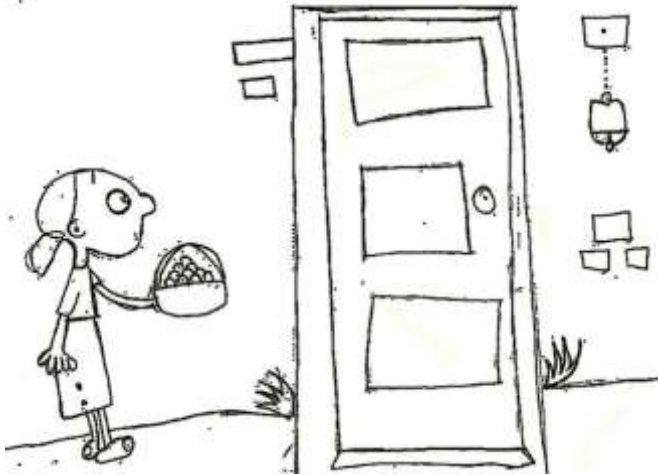
"But wait!" Nidhi interjected. "Remember the time he picked up my ball?"

Rahul recalled the incident and nodded.

"So what next?" Payal asked tying up her long ponytail in to a bun.



## A Challenge For The Kids



Suresh took charge. "Looks like, we have a mystery and a task! We need to cheer up Uh-Oh and figure out why he is so sad. Santa won't tell us because he can't betray Uh-Oh, by telling us what Uh-Oh has told him in confidence. So we need to figure it out ourselves."

"Excellent! I am staying at the Maurya hotel down the street for 3 weeks. Let me know if there is any way I can help." Then Santa left with Akshay.

The kids thought for a few moments about how they would approach the problem. "He is usually less mean to girls than to boys." Payal pointed out.

"I know, I have an idea." Nidhi bounced up and down in delight. "Santa said he loves strawberries. My mom is planning to distribute the first batch of strawberries from our garden tomorrow. I can take him a few, and a runner too for his garden. What do you think?"

"Brilliant Nidhi!" Rahul patted her on the back and Nidhi glowed. She loved appreciation from the older kids.

The next day Nidhi packed a small wicker basket full of fresh strawberries.

She was really nervous but Suresh reassured her. "We will all be just outside Uh-Oh's garden. If you need any help say the word jam really loudly and we'll all storm in to help you."

"Okay." Nidhi braced herself and rang Uh-Oh's door bell. There were butterflies fluttering in her tummy.

Uh-Oh opened the door. "What do you want little girl?" he growled .

Nidhi was terrified. She wanted to run away, but she tried to be brave. Wordlessly, she held out the basket of strawberries.

"What's this supposed to be? Is this a prank?" He looked at the basket suspiciously.

"The-the-they are st-st-strawbe-berries." Nidhi stuttered.

Uh-Oh did not understand a word she said, so he grabbed the basket from her to take a look. "Oh these are strawberries." He said, confused. His tone softened. "Are these for me?" He asked.

Nidhi had to fight back her tears. "Yes they are are for you. My mother grows strawberries in her garden and gives some to the neighbours every year."

"Oh! Thank you very much little girl." Uh-oh seemed to be at a loss for words and blinked.

Encouraged by Uh-Oh's change in attitude, Nidhi plodded on. "I also got you this." She said holding up the strawberry runner.

"A strawberry runner!" Uh-Oh was surprised.

"I saw you gardening some time ago, and thought you may like to grow some."

Uh-Oh blushed. "I do love strawberries. Thank you very much little lady. I was hoping to plant strawberries this year." Then he added tentatively, "There are no good guavas left any more, but I could offer you a cookie ... that is if your mother won't mind."

Nidhi smiled thinking how little Uncle Mathur cared about how her mother felt about the toffees he often slipped her. She nodded and Uh-Oh brought out the cookie jar. Nidhi chose a jam centred cookie. "Thank you uncle." She said and turned to leave, when Uh-Oh called out. "What's your name little lady?" He asked.

"Nidhi. I am Nidhi." She turned around and said, and then she pranced away elated with the success of her mission.

"Great job Nidhi!" Suresh patted her head, when she returned.

The other kids congratulated her too. "But now what do we do next?" Payal asked. "We need to do something else, right? Or this will be a dead end."

"You are quite right Payal." Mahesh agreed. "I was wondering the same thing."

"Well you know, Lego was on the list of things he likes, so I had an idea." Rahul ventured.

"Go on Rahul." Mahesh encouraged him.

"How about, we organise a neighbourhood Lego exhibition? It will be fun for us and Uh-Oh may come and look around and we can get him talking. What do you think?" Rahul looked hopefully at the others.

"Oh yes. Lets do that." Suresh clapped Rahul on the back. "Awesome idea!"

The Lego exhibition was announced and advertised with fliers on trees and lamp posts. It was scheduled for the next Sunday. The idea caught on and some grown ups decided to put up food stalls. The kids spent most of the week fervently working on their Lego projects.

The exhibition was set up at the neighbourhood park. Soon after 9:00 a.m., people started filling in to the park. Some had brought their Lego projects along. Others were setting up food stalls. Still others were looking at the projects.

Suresh had made a red Lego Mustang. Nidhi had made a Lego vegetable and fruit garden. Mahesh had made an aeroplane. Rahul had made a Lego

mountain with a water fall. It was an elaborate natural landscape. Payal had made Lego jewellery. There was also a Lego swimming pool, train, farm, park and shop that various people had brought to the exhibition.

Nidhi's mother had set up a stall for home made strawberry ice cream that was really popular. There were also stalls for pani puri, samosas, jalebis and cupcakes.

The residents of the neighbourhood were having a relaxed and enjoyable Sunday morning looking at interesting Lego creations and eating good food, when Uh-Oh showed up with a large contraption covered in cloth. Everyone looked terrified. "Is that a bomb?" Suresh's mother asked Rahul's father.

But Nidhi ran up to him. "Is that your Lego exhibit?" She asked him cheerfully.

"Yes. Um. Yes it is." He turned pink and shuffled his feet, since everyone had stopped what they were doing to stare at him.

Nidhi pretended not to notice any of the awkwardness. She guided him to a table. "You can put your exhibit down here. I want to see what it is."

Uh-Oh fumbled with the cloth, but finally unveiled his Lego masterpiece. It was a whole Lego town, complete with buildings, roads, cars, traffic lights, bridges, shops, parks, policemen, schools, hospitals and so much more, all planned and executed to perfection.

The children were in awe. So were many grown ups. They came and admired the project and congratulated Uh-Oh. He beamed and smiled.

Nidhi introduced him to all her friends. She showed him their Lego projects. He appreciated their work and gave them terrific ideas on how to grow their projects.

His face was so animated as he talked about Lego, he looked ten years younger. The kids couldn't believe he was the same grumpy old man they were terrified of, just a few days ago. He invited them to tea the next day, so they could see some of his other Lego projects.

Somewhere Nidhi thought she caught a glimpse of Santa in the crowd, giving her a thumbs up but before she could respond he had vanished. Just like the real Santa, she thought and smiled.

## Uncle Uh-Oh's Big Secret

The next day the kids gathered at Uh-Oh's house. He showed them his many wonderful Lego creations. He had a very cute Lego pizza and a gorgeous Lego London bridge. He also had Lego submarines, choppers, planes and trains.

But his most elaborate projects were about clean energy sources and water harvesting. He had a Lego hydroelectric power plant, where he had a water fall, similar to the one Rahul had made for the exhibition. Rahul was impressed with his turbines. Uh-Oh also had a wind energy plant, with about a dozen windmills arranged in a grid. One project was about water harvesting and irrigation of farms through canals and sprinklers.

Uh-Oh explained each project so enthusiastically, that the kids forgot they were with a grown up. The kids spent over an hour examining his various projects. Uh-Oh even explained how actual hydroelectric power plants work.

Then suddenly Uh-Oh remembered that he had prepared refreshments for the kids. He took out a tray full of assorted cookies, and another full of fresh cut fruit. He also brought out some dry fruits and a cup of milk for each kid.

As the kids munched on the delicious snacks, Suresh asked. "Uncle, have you always been interested in Lego?"

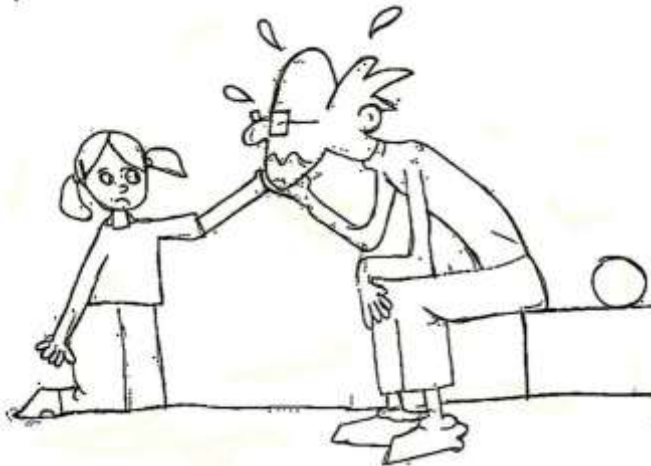
"No, not always. Actually I have been making Lego models only for the last 6 years."

"Oh, only 6 years! What got you interested in Lego?"

"My grandson. He started playing with Lego at the age of two. I would play with him. He was unusually good at it. So I encouraged him and we did a lot of projects together."

"Wow he must be a whiz at Lego. Where is he?" Rahul asked sipping his cup of milk.

Suddenly, Uh-Oh looked more like his grumpy old self. All the animation and joy left him. He became very quiet.



The kids looked scared. Had Rahul said something bad? What happened? Was Uh-Oh going to start shouting again. But a moment later Uh-Oh spoke. And he did not seem mad. But he sounded so sad.

"My grandson is no where."

"What do you mean no where?" Mahesh blurted out and then wondered if he had gone too far.

"I mean he is dead, and it is my fault." Uh-Oh said, as a tear trickled down his cheek.

"Your fault! What do you mean? It can't be. I wont believe it." Nidhi was horrified.

"But it is. He was visiting me for the holidays as usual. We did so many Lego projects together. The last one was that hydroelectric power project. But I was concerned, he wasn't getting enough fresh air or exercise. So I took him to the sports shop. He was reluctant, but he picked out a soccer ball. We were playing soccer in my back yard. He kicked the ball so hard, it went over the fence, on to the road." Then Uh-Oh started sobbing uncontrollably.

Payal went and put her arm around him. She felt so sad. How could she have ever been scared of this man she wondered. "You don't have to go on. It's okay." She said patting him gently. "Would you like some more tea?" She got him some tea from the same flask he had poured himself a cup earlier.

"Thank you." He said looking up at Payal and drank a few sips of tea. The warm liquid seemed to steady him.

"You see he went chasing after the ball."

"Really uncle. You don't have to go on if it makes you so sad." Mahesh said uncomfortable with the situation.

"Please let me. I need to know what you think of me when you have heard the full story. It was my fault. I should never have forced him to play. He suddenly ran out of the back yard trying to get to the ball which was on the yard across the road. He did not even see the car that ran him over. He was dead in an instant. It was so quick, I couldn't even hold his hand, while it happened. He was only 8 years old. Such a lovable little boy. If only I never made him play soccer. If only..." Uh-Oh was crying now but no one stopped him.

Nidhi and Suresh squeezed his hands, but no one spoke. They waited for him to cry it out.

Finally Nidhi declared "I have heard the full story now, and I don't think it was your fault."

The other kids nodded in agreement.

Uh-Oh looked up at them hopefully. "You really think so? You think my grand son would have said the same?"

"I do." Suresh said. "All our parents badger us to play outside and what's more, we love it. Your grandson seemed to have been thrilled to be playing outside. Was it an unusual experience for him?"

"He was shy and rarely played with other kids. He was too involved in Lego and a few other indoor games, and had little time for outdoor



activities."

"So it seems like he was having a great time. He was happy playing Lego with you and he was thrilled you introduced him to football. The rest was just bad luck. You can't blame yourself for that. He wouldn't like to find out that he was the reason you were so sad and grumpy all the time. He would want you to be happy." Payal really knew how to comfort people.

Uh-Oh smiled through his tears. "Thank you for listening. I am sorry I was so rude to you all. But seeing kids always reminded me of my grandson and made me terribly upset. I thought if you hated me, you would stay away and I would not be reminded of my grandson so much. I moved out of my old house, because the memories were driving me crazy. I thought moving away would help, but I just carried the memories in my head and every little trigger made me sad again. Nidhi, my dear, I owe you a special apology. When I saw that soccer ball, the worst memories came back to me. I am sorry. I did not mean to frighten you."

Nidhi smiled. "Don't worry uncle Uh-Oh. Now that I understand, I forgive you. I promise all is forgotten."

"Uh-Oh, what's that?" Uh-Oh looked puzzled.

Nidhi gasped and clapped her open mouth. The kids went on to explain how they came to call him Uh-Oh. They looked worried as they explained, but they needn't have. Uh-Oh burst out laughing and insisted they continue to call him that and refused to tell them his real name.

As he was laughing, the door bell rang. Suresh opened the door and there was Santa and Akshay. Santa winked at the kids and they smiled back. Then Santa and Akshay had some tea and snacks with them and Santa convinced Uh-Oh to start a Lego club for the kids and teach them the many tricks he had figured out. The kids were thrilled and shouted hurray in unison.

A few words from the illustrator, Mishti Shah:

I am 8 years old. I love drawing and painting the most. I also enjoy swimming a lot. This is the first time I drew illustrations for a book. I thank all who made this possible.

