

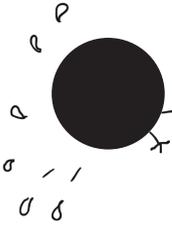
## Chumki's Secret

Chumki felt her cheeks balloon. Her ears became hot and her eyes felt as though they would pop out of their sockets.

Standing at the doorway, Chumki clasped both hands to her mouth, and pressed hard. But, it was too late.

*Ha-ha-haachee!*

The little mud hut in Bagmundi, a small village in Purulia district of West



Bengal, rang with Chumki's sneeze. In the courtyard that encircled the hut, two frightened hens clashed, leaving behind a shower of feathers. Brown, black, white and orange.

Dadi, who'd been waiting at the doorway to see the children off to school, lifted her walking stick and thwacked the ground near Chumki's skinny long legs.

Inside the hut, Aki had just put his school bag on his back. On hearing the whack of Dadi's stick, Aki tossed his bag onto the bed, and his fist pumped the air.

'Yay! No school today!'

Chumki wouldn't have sneezed if she could help it. She knew Dadi said it was unlucky to sneeze when people were about to leave home. She could

hear Dadi mutter and mumble,  
as she retreated back inside  
the hut. It sounded like far-off  
thunder.



'Why don't you sneeze every  
time we have to go to school?' quipped  
Aki, filling his pocket with marbles. Aki  
hated going to school.

'Why don't you sneeze yourself?'  
snapped Chumki and watched her





brother disappear to play with his friends, still wearing his school uniform, pockets jingling. For him, missing school was fun. He would now spend his day playing with his friends.

But for Chumki, missing school meant she'd have to gather firewood, help her mother fetch water from the nearby stream and even take the goats grazing.

*Why does Dadi always blame me for things I haven't even done?* thought Chumki, sadly.

On seeing her aunt, Chumki decided

it was time to

understand why.

'What have I done

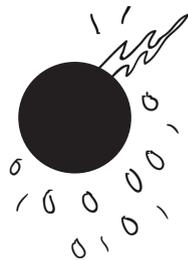
to make Dadi so

angry?' Chumki

jumped at Pallavi



Bua. 'Tell me, how was I responsible for Aki's chicken pox? If anyone should've got the blame, it should've been the chicken!'



Fed up of the little girl's questions, Pallavi Bua made her sit down. She told her the most ridiculous reason Chumki could have ever expected to hear.

'It all began the evening you were born,' Pallavi Bua's eyes widened. Chumki's eyes widened too, as she listened. 'Your father's beloved oxen, Bholu and Bholu, were tied under a jamun tree, when a flash of lightning killed them,' Pallavi Bua said, picking insects out of a heap of rice.

'So?' Chumki wrinkled up her tiny round nose. 'If lightning struck the oxen, was that my fault? I didn't put the oxen under that tree, now did I?' Chumki