

Title: Pencil Heels

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I.

It is a Friday. *Himi* wakes up early in the morning. Although most of her friends have the **habit** of sleeping in on weekends, for *Himi* it is just the **opposite**. Fridays are always special for her as her mother stays at home on that day. On the other days, mother has to **hurry** to reach her office on time.

Himi's mother, *Fatima Begum*, is a woman of 42. She is very hardworking and she is in charge of a **government** office. Everybody at her department respects her for her **honesty** and **sincerity**. Not only at her **job**, but also in the place where they live, *Himi's* mother *Fatima Begum* is well-known for her social work. There is not one relative to whom she has ever said, "No" in their time of need.

Usually, every Friday after her morning **shower**, *Himi* goes outside onto their balcony. There, holding on to the iron **rails**, she tries to see the outside world more clearly. She tries to feel the **cool** morning air, and in a strange way, she tries to **smell** the time as well. This may sound strange, but it is because all Fridays smell the same to her. She **connects** the smell of the day to the sweet and familiar smell of her mother's body as she moves around their house.



Fridays are also different in terms of **breakfast**. Mother makes special *Paratha*, **fried** egg and *Sujir Halwa* for them. Sometimes, it is *Khichuri* with *Gawa Ghee*, while sometimes it is *Hilsha Polao* or *Atab Chaler Jau* with coconut. After having breakfast, mother usually makes some dry snacks, which they have the whole week round. The main meals are always done by *Phulir Ma*, the maid who has been serving them for more than 10 years. After the **sudden** death of *Himi's* father, it has been difficult for *Fatima Begum* to keep *Phulir Ma*, as the cost of living has increased day by day. However, considering that *Phulir Ma* needs the work, and also the needs of *Himi* and her younger brother *Fahim*, she has somehow been able to keep the maid on.

As *Himi* is standing outside, she suddenly notices a white Mercedes car arriving at their house. Is someone visiting them, she wonders? After her father's death, only her **uncles** and **aunties** from her mother's side of the family visit them. Relatives from her father's side hardly ever stop over.

Himi **rushes** to the **kitchen** and tells her mother about their visitor. The next minute, they hear the door-**bell** ring. Before there has been time to make a proper **arrangement** of all the **cushions** on the sofa, *Fahim* has opened the door. To everyone's surprise he shouts, "Ruby *Chachi!*" *Fatima Begum* rushes to the drawing room, **bursting** with joy. "What a pleasant surprise! Ruby, you are here! I cannot believe my eyes. Have you come alone?"

Sitting on the most comfortable chair in the living room, Ruby *Chachi* says, "Yes *Bhabi*, I have come alone. What else could I do? Everyone in my house is **busy** preparing for Daisy's wedding **ceremony**."



Fatima Begum excitedly says, “What good news! Daisy’s wedding! Where will it be, and when? Who’s the **lucky** man?”

Ruby Chachi explains that he is an officer from the Defense Department, and the wedding reception is going to be held next Friday at the *Shenakunja Community* Centre. She hands a beautiful **invitation card** to *Fatima Begum* then immediately asks for her leave. She has to take invitation cards to many places. In the **meantime**, *Himi* has brought breakfast, but *Ruby Chachi* has much to do. She goes as quickly as she came, and has hardly touched her **tea**.



After Ruby *Chachi* leaves, they read **aloud** the invitation card a number of times. *Fatima Begum* says **excitedly**, “The ceremony is going to take place in *Shenakunja*! What a lovely place for parties at night! You are surely going to love it there, my dear children. You have never been to *Shenakunja*! I once **attended** a wedding ceremony for an army officer there with your father.”

“Will there be only a wedding reception? What about the other wedding events?” asks *Himi* **curiously**. *Fatima Begum* becomes silent for a moment and then says, “It is better to be invited to only one event. Do we have enough time to attend everything? I don’t think we do.”

To change the subject, *Fatima Begum* begins to talk about their **clothes** for the party. They decide that they are all right with the party dresses they already have. *Himi* decides to wear the **fashionable** new pencil heels she recently received from the U.S from her *Boro Khala*. She has tried on the heels only for a few minutes, and has kept them **aside** to wear on a special occasion like this.

II.

The next six days pass in the wink of an eye. It is Friday again and *Himi* starts her day with **extra excitement** as she looks **forward** to attending Daisy *Apu*’s wedding reception in the famous *Shenakunja* Community Center. She dreams about the place, **imagining** the beautiful flowers and colourful lights. She is **delighted** as she thinks about the coming ‘get-together’ with all of her **cousins**. She also wonders what her cousins will say when they notice her beautiful pencil heels. She imagines how **proud** she will feel as she explains that they are not **available** in Bangladesh, and how **jealous** of her they will be.

The hours seem to pass so **quickly**. Although they got ready in time, they have to wait for more than half an hour for transport to *Shenakunja*. As the centre is so far from their place, no drivers want to go there. At last, they **manage** to get a CNG, but the price of their **journey** is high.

After reaching *Shenakunja*, *Himi* is suddenly filled with joy and surprise. *Shenakunja* is far more wonderful than her mother had said. The flower arrangement at the entrance is much more beautiful than she had ever imagined. She has never seen such lovely lighting in so many colours. The small lake and well-kept green **grass** in front of the building is mind-blowing. The red, green, blue, white and golden lights arranged around the lake are shining softly on the water. Sharing all this beauty with *Fahim* and her mother has given her a sense of heavenly joy.



They enter the large **hall** hoping to see their cousin Daisy, the bride. They cannot recognize her with her heavy make-up and **jewellery**. She looks like a goddess. So many **photographers** are trying to catch her best look. On a **screen** at the other end of the hall, photos of Daisy's childhood memories can be seen, one after another. All of *Himi*'s cousins are here. They are no less beautiful than the colourful lights around the lake outside. Everyone has a camera on their phones, so they take a **lot** of selfies together. Nobody notices *Himi*'s fashionable pencil heels.

In the meantime, Ruby *Chachi* moves quickly towards *Himi's* mother and says in a voice sweeter than sugar, "*Bhabi*, please take care of the **guests**. After all, you are Daisy's *Boro Chachi*." *Fatima Begum* is a little surprised, but she quickly agrees, and begins looking after the guests. After a while, she is so busy, she asks *Himi* and *Fahim* to eat their **dinner** without her.

In the end, when *Fatima Begum* finally has her dinner, it is almost midnight. All those who have a car have already left. *Choto Fupu*, from whom *Fatima Begum* is supposed to ask for a lift home, is nowhere to be seen. *Himi* and *Fahim* feel sleepy. Nobody at all seems to be concerned about them. Even *Ruby Chachi* shows no interest in where they are or how they will get home. Deciding they need to do something, they start to move.

Without a word, *Himi* and *Fahim* follow their mother. The sweet excitement of the evening has turned into **bitterness**. It is now the middle of night. Outside everything is quiet. Most of the people who live nearby are **asleep**. There is hardly any light except the **pale** light from the **lamp** posts. Cars are passing by at a high speed, making an occasional gust of wind. **Worst** of all, her beautiful pencil heels are, in fact, hurting *Himi*, making her soft **feet ache**. She feels like she is climbing a mountain. Their journey seems never-ending and home appears completely out of reach.

They do not remember how long they walk. Surprisingly, a *Tempu* passes by. *Fatima Begum* stops the *Tempu*. Only three seats are left. They get into it and somehow manage to sit down. The seats are so **narrow** that *Himi's* **knees** touch the knees of the **passenger** sitting opposite her every single time the driver steps on the brake. She feels so **awkward** and fights back her tears. She remembers how her father used to drop her at school every morning in their **comfortable** family car, how they used to offer rides to their neighbours and relatives in need. She can now understand the struggle her mother has to go through every day just to reach her office.



Like all other journeys, it comes to an end. Their *Tempu* stops, at last, not far from their house. But, even now, they still need to walk a little bit further. *Himi* gets off the *Tempu* holding her fashionable pencil heels in her hands. There is no-one left in this dark **lonely** street to notice how beautiful her shoes are. She cannot stop the tears that begin to roll down her cheeks.

Learning Activities

Vocabulary Lists: Learn (or review, if you already know them) the words from the following list...

1. High Frequency Words from the 2nd 1000 General Service Word List

ache	breakfast	curiously	government	jewellery	narrow	shouts	worst
aloud	bursting	cushions	grass	journey	opposite	shower	
arrangement	busy	delighted	guests	kitchen	pale	sincerity	
aside	card	dinner	habit	knees	passenger	smell	
asleep	ceremony	excitedly / excitement	hall	lamp	photographer	stairs	
attend	clothes	extra	honesty	lonely	proud	sudden	
aunt / aunty	comfortable	fashionable	hurry	lot	quickly	sugar	
awkward	connects	feet	imagine	lucky	rails	tea	
bell	cool	forward	invitation / invite	manage	rush	uncle	

bitterness cousin fry / fried jealous meantime screen wakes

2. High Frequency Words from the Academic Word List

available community finally job

3. **Other Words.** These words are not high frequency (or common) words. You will not meet them as often as the words from the two lists above. Check the meaning in the dictionary if you need to, to help you understand the story, but **only learn these words if you already know all the words in the above two lists well.**

balcony	coconut	reception
brake	defense	selfies
bride	gust	snacks
cheeks	pencil heels (very high shoes with thin heels, also called 'stilettos')	wedding
CNG - Compressed Natural Gas	maid	wink

4. Idioms, phrasal verbs and collocations

Do you know the meaning of the expressions below?

To wake up.

To sleep in.

To be in charge of (something/someone/a place/ an organization or task)

To be well-known for (something/doing something).

In terms of.

The cost of living.

Hardly ever.

To be bursting with joy/ to burst with joy.

To prepare for (something).

In the wink of an eye (or, in the blink of an eye).

To look forward to (something)

5. Comprehension Questions

1.Remember: Why are Friday mornings special to *Himi*? (provide several reasons.)

2.Remember: According to the story, what are the main reasons that *Himi*'s mother has kept their family maid?

3.Understand: What does the sentence "*The next six days pass in the wink of an eye*" mean?

4.Understand: Explain the following in your own words. "*She feels so awkward and fights back her tears.*"

(Why did *Himi* feel awkward? What does it mean to "fight back tears"?)

5.Remember: Why did *Himi* and *Fahim* have to eat dinner without their mother?

6.Understand: What does *Himi* mean by her mother's '*struggle*' in the sentence...

"She can now understand the struggle her mother has to go through every day just to reach her office."

6. Critical Thinking Questions

These questions require learners to use Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) (The skills of analysing, applying, evaluating and creating are based on Bloom's Revised Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives. (See <https://tlc.iitm.ac.in/PDF/Blooms%20Tax.pdf>).

These kinds of questions are useful for small group or pair discussions, when you want learners to think more deeply about the ideas in the reading, and go beyond comprehension only. If time is limited, tell your learners to choose one or two of the questions they find most interesting, and discuss only those.

Alternatively, they could be used as ideas for writing. If you use these ideas as a writing task, make sure your learners have the chance to exchange their writing with each other and to talk about the opinions they have expressed. The exchange of ideas will enrich their understanding, expose them to a wider range of ideas, and build their explanation and persuasion skills.

1. **Analyse:** Why do you think *Fatima Begum* changed the subject when *Himi* began to ask questions about the various wedding events?
2. **Analyse:** Why do you think *Ruby Chachi* expected *Himi*'s mother to help entertain the guests at the reception even though she, too, was an invited guest? Why didn't *Ruby Chachi* arrange a ride home for *Himi* and her family? Do you think *Ruby Chachi* was unkind to her relatives on purpose, or was she just thoughtless? Give a reason for your answer?
3. **Apply:** In the reading, when describing *Fatima Begum*, the writer says, "*There is not one relative to whom she has ever said, "No" in their time of need.*" In your view, is there ever an occasion when it is OK to say "No" to someone in your family who asks for your help? Give a reason for your answer.
4. **Evaluate and Apply:** How important is it to you to be fashionable? If you owned something that was very fashionable, but at the same time it was uncomfortable to wear, would you still wear it? Why/Why not?
5. **Evaluate and Create:** Sometimes, weddings cost a lot of money. They also create a lot of work for some family members. In your opinion, is this a problem? How could we celebrate special events, like weddings, in a different way, without causing so much financial stress and hard work for family members?
6. **Evaluate and Apply:** How important do you think it is to help people who are not directly related to us when they experience problems in life? Who would you be willing to help, who would you not be willing to help, and why? In your view, what responsibility does the wider community have for people who experience a sudden change in their life circumstances, as *Himi*'s family did.
7. **Analyse and Evaluate:** Why did *Himi* end up carrying her shoes and not wearing them? Was it just because her feet were hurting, or do you think there was another reason? Explain *why* you think the way you do.
8. **Create and Evaluate:** On a piece of paper, design and draw a pair of shoes that you think *Himi* could have worn to the wedding. They should be both fashionable AND comfortable. When you have finished, share your drawing with others, and explain your design. Say why you think these shoes would have been more suitable for *Himi*.