

## A SINGLE VOICE

Sweekriti Dhungana

*Zzzzzz, zzzzzz.* The alarm starts ringing. Before the sound could even beep for the third time Gabby jumps out of her bed and begins getting ready as the day is Saturday. Now you might wonder, what is with the Saturday? It comes once every week, four times a month and 52 times a year. Oh and yes 53 times if it is a leap year. But what is so special about it other than it being a weekend? For 11 years old Gabby it is the time of the week when she gets to see Shelly the small green sea turtle on the Magnetic Island.

Now the story is how they met? One fine Saturday morning Gabby was lying on the sandy beach next to her mother. While she was try to grab her sun glasses she suddenly felt something strange, something moving. “Mom, look! There is a turtle!” she shouted in delight. “Mom, look, look!” Then she took the turtle, played with it for a while and let it free. Starting from now, every Saturday the turtle returned and formed a bond with Gabby. Exploring the dense forest, swimming alongside Shelly on the crystal clear water soon became highlight of Gabby’s week.

Today as usual she rushes her mother to the Island. All she ever talks about is meeting him. “Mom, I am going ahead. Hurry up! She starts running as soon as she reaches the island.” When she gets there she starts to growl. Shelly is lying motionless on the ground strangled by plastic waste. All teary she holds his lifeless body and shouts his name again and again. Over the following week more of the turtles washed ashore owing to the increasing pollution and neglect.

Gabby struggles to understand the situation and starts questioning everyone to get clarity. All she gets in response is disappointment. No one, including her parents, has an answer to what is killing the turtles. Moreover, they are unconcerned about what is happening. Once a thriving Magnetic island, where the sun kissed the sandy beaches, hoop pines danced gently in the breeze and the pristine water sparkled with sunlight has begun to transform. The fresh air and the serene view which created a sense of tranquillity is now giving way to hazards and has become inhospitable.

Feeling frustrate, desperate and overwhelm with emotions, Gabby decides to take matter into her own hands. She believes that if she does not do anything, then the island she loves will continue to suffer. First, she sneaks into the main switch of the society and turns it off. The

today's people who can't go a moment without their gadgets and constant recharging feels disoriented when their devices are disrupted. She does this again and again. Further, she cuts off the water supply to make a point. For weeks, she continues to make a silent protest. Even in class, she tries to convince her friends. Luckily she succeeds in making a group of six. Together they work towards bringing reform. Slowly, they start to gain attention but instead of support, they are dismissed as mere mischievous kid.

January 24: The final cricket match between India and Australia is shown on a large projector in the society hall. Everyone fully pumped and happy to support their country are hooting in excitement. The captain of Australian team hits a six. Only few runs left to win the match. Thud, thud. Every heart is pounding. Some are crossing fingers while others are chanting prayers. The player hits the ball and begins to sprint. Will he make it? All eyes glued on the screen but suddenly the screen shifts. A video of dying marine creatures of the Magnetic Island is shown along with the before and after footage that presents the contrasts between the beauty that once was and the environment degradation that it experiences at present.

Initially everyone is stunned into silence, then yells in anger and confusion. In the midst of the turmoil, Gabby steps forward in teary eyes. In her cracking voice, choked with emotions she calls out for help. "We are not just harming the island; we are destroying the homes of fish, corals, turtles and all the creatures that lives there. It is not too late. We can still save others, if not Shelly. We can make a difference." As Gabby's words suspended in the mid-air, her parents look at her with new light. They feel that their child has been compelled to mature beyond her age because of their shortcomings. Everyone present there too begins to understand the depth of Gabby's conviction. One man stands up from his chair and shouts, "Gabby I am with you! Let's protect the nature!" His words spark a wave of support, as one by one, others stands up to join him, praising Gabby and her friends going to such lengths to convey such powerful message. "We won the match!" Someone shouts from the back. "Today, the Australian team and its supporters experienced a great win, but Magnetic Island and Gabby achieved an even greater one."

Later that night, Gabby's parents and society members hold a meeting regarding the issue. Mr. Clark, a local environmental scientist from the neighbouring society, is invited to provide guidance. Mr. Clark states, "Gabby is right. We have all been too busy with our lives and have neglected nature to the extent that it is dying. Recently, a boy was admitted to the hospital with a severe allergy after swimming on Magnetic Island. Creatures are dying in greater numbers

than before. But it is not too late to turn things around. We can set up a clean-up efforts, implement strict rules regarding pollution and start raising awareness.”

Everyone nods in agreement. A young man from the local council offers to help coordinate the plan. A few teenage girls and boys stand up to volunteer. Olivia, the society’s influencer creates videos and even invite Gabby to her podcast. The school not only praises Gabby and her friends but also establishes weekly extra-curricular focused on environmental preservation. Slowly, the cleanliness and preservation initiative extends to greater number of people. Some donate supplies for clean-up, while other support financially. Over the next few years, many communities came together to join the cause and social foundation was created.

“Gabriella! Gabriella!” A voice starts shouting. “Hurry up! Are the kids ready? We don’t want to be late to the Shelly Foundation’s 30<sup>th</sup> Annual ceremony.” Crack. A cup drops and breaks from a hand. “Mom, wait is this your story? Is not Gabby short for Gabriella? Mom, tell me more. Does the necklace in the left drawer, engraved ‘Shelly,’ belong to your turtle, Shelly? Are we not allowed to have pets because you are scared that we will be heartbroken like you if anything happens to them? Mom, do you still miss Shelly? If you had not taken a stand, would we not be able to see this beautiful Magnetic Island? Where would we swim? Where would we go on Saturdays if it was not there?

“Baby, one question at a time. No, it is not because I am scared, but I don’t want to confine these beautiful creatures. They need to be in their own home. And baby, I did not do everything alone. I raised my voice and took help. Everyone came together to preserve this beautiful gift from nature, our Magnetic Island. Always remember, we do not own nature by ourselves; we share it with countless flora and fauna, and it is our responsibility to preserve it for everyone. And yes, I do miss Shelly. She was strong, she was resilient, and her company made me love nature more than anything