

SANTONU KUMAR DHAR  
**THE EFFORT**

A Novel



# **THE EFFORT**

**(EXCERPT)**

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## SUMMARY

Take a heart-wrenching journey with young Apu in "The Effort" by Santonu Kumar Dhar as he faces the shadows of grief on his ninth birthday after his mother's death. When Deepak loses his job, Apu's plan to pull his father from the depths of grief takes an unexpected turn. A moving examination of resiliency and the enduring link between a father and son follows.

Apu shows himself to be a remarkable example of perseverance in the face of hardship, despite his diminutive size. Apu faces challenges head-on, motivated by the memory of his late mother, even when the world pushes the boundaries of a child's spirit. The story develops as an engrossing illustration of the unbreakable strength of will, tenacity, and effort.

Apu's quest for achievement turns into a timeless tale of bravery, love, and how hard work can change a person. The tale masterfully illustrates how the expansion of the heart, rather than one's physical size, is the actual measure of growth. Readers are encouraged to support a little hero who overcomes stereotypes and society's expectations by following Apu's adventure.

"The Effort" tells a story that appeal to all age groups. Readers of all ages are invited to follow the incredible journey of a young child who learns that courage, tenacity, and the unwavering spirit of a determined heart pave the way to success in this emotionally packed story. Accompany Apu on a life-changing adventure where the smallest among us can teach the greatest lessons about life, love, and the boundless potential within.

## CHAPTER ONE

The recollection is dark around the edges of my memory, like an old home movie hiccupping on the screen. The noise from the mechanized reel spinning on the projector is sometimes louder than the spoken words of the two-dimensional characters from my past.

Maybe I only see the important parts of the day—portions of the film edited and spliced together to fit the theatre of my thoughts.

The day I'm dreaming about, I'd spent the afternoon playing with friends. My hands were filthy from playing ball in the cricket field on the edge of town. I came back home after sunset and wondered why it was so dark. It wasn't like Mother forgot the front hall light. Maybe the power had gone out, but if the other houses were dark as I passed them on the street, I had not noticed.

“Ac-choo!” The sound came from inside the living room, followed by a giggle.

“Who's there?” I called from the hall, but there was no response. Fear bloomed inside my chest, but my curiosity carried me over the threshold into the living room.

Mama?”

I took another step, and paper crunched under my sneaker. Then my mother's voice whispered, “Oh, Deepak, that's enough. Turn on the lights.”

“Surprise!”

I jumped, startled. The light flicked on, illuminating a group of people under balloons and flowered streamers that hung from the ceiling. Every inch of the room was decorated just for me.

"Oh Mama!" I ran and wrapped my arms around her waist.

I had turned five years old that day, but whatever the birthday, she always made sure I knew how important I was to her.

Mama whispered in my ear as she leaned close to me. "I always want you to know"—she pulled my cheeks into her gentle fingertips—"how grateful I am to remember the day you and I met." She kissed my forehead and took my hand softly into hers, leading me to the table that held a homemade cake. Sugared letters spelled out: Happy Birthday, Apu!

I wondered if everyone liked seeing their name on a cake. I liked that my name was short, and Mama always made sure the piece with my name was cut and put on a plate only for me.

"Hey! I helped too," Papa said. He slapped my back and squeezed my shoulder. "Everyone sing to my son!" Papa clapped his hands to start the song.

Everyone sang the same words, but not at the same time. I sang and laughed, too. Papa lit the candles on the cake, and Mama turned off the lights again. Once the song

reached its crescendo, everyone held their breath so I could make a wish and blow out the candles.

I wish my mother and father were always beside me. The air puffed from my cheeks, and the candles went dark. The smell of sulfur curled up from the burnt wicks and touched my nose.

Silence. The room stayed dark and empty. I was alone. I wanted to take my wish back to clarify it. I didn't just want my parents beside me; I wanted to live with them forever, in that exact moment. I wanted to feel as special as the three of us felt when we were joined together at my birth.

The projector in my mind cast a white light over my thoughts. The film was finished. It wound around the spool, flapping.

In my bed, I bent forward and opened my eyes. Today was my ninth birthday. I knew it was not a special number; I knew it was not a milestone.

Papa had not acknowledged my birthday since Mama had died, close to three years ago. Never again would I have her homemade cake with fruit dipped in chocolate. Never again would I see my name written in colored sugar, marking my slice of cake. There would be no more celebrations with her.

I rolled over and looked at the wall, noticing the absence of flower streamers and balloons. I looked at the chipping paint on the wall and remembered how Mama

used to tell me not to scratch my fingernail along the wall to make the crack bigger. I could hardly hear her voice anymore and pressed my eyes together to recall the whispers from my dream.

I stretched my arms from under the blankets. The chill in the air kissed my skin like my mother's lips. I looked at the little bit of furniture in my room and noticed how bare I had kept it. My bed and the small table I used for homework took up a great deal of space in the small quarters. Papa would not let me have Mama's photo in a frame any longer. He said it only brought sorrow, but I kept the only one I had left of her in a small drawer beneath the table.

It was moments like this, when I felt alone in the empty space of my room, that I wanted to tell Papa that I loved him. That I would hold onto him forever if he promised not to die.

I took a t-shirt from the shelf that hung on the wall. The clock hanging over the doorway read eight o'clock. I frowned. Papa left for work each day before seven. I knew I was alone. The soles of my feet took the chill from the tile floor and made me shiver.

Perhaps Papa took a leave from work and stayed home, I thought to myself with hope,

I ran to his room. "Papa?"

It was important for my father to go to work, but today was my birthday. For weeks, I had lied and told Papa it

wasn't a special day. I told him that I didn't need a cake, a gift, or even acknowledgement that I was growing older.

“Papa?” I called again, but knew there would be no answer. He had gone to work in the factory.

I climbed into my father's bed and smelled the pillow holding his spicy scent. I wondered if my mother's smell remained in the room or if it had all disappeared. A tear fell from the corner of my eye.

I walked to the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash up for the day ahead.

Outside, dogs were barking. It was not unusual, but I hated the noise. They barked at people and other dogs. They barked at the possibility of food. I thought they even barked at the wind when it blew past their ears. I growled and closed my eyes, asking silently for relief from the noise while I continued to brush my teeth. But this young man of nine, looking back at me in the mirror, was old enough and strong enough to quiet the animals. A forceful command from the window should do the trick.

I stretched on my tiptoes and cried out, “Quiet!”

The dogs still barked.

I pulled the chair from my room into the bathroom and balanced it against the wall so I could get a better view of the dogs and they could hear my command clearly.

“I said to be quiet!”



Something caught the corner of my eye. I leaned into the window, but the chair flipped out from under my feet and I found myself splayed on the floor, startled. My ninth birthday was already worse than any I had remembered.

I pushed the chair off my body and stood to assure I wasn't hurt and the chair was not broken. Frustration welled up inside my chest. I pulled the growl from my belly through my throat and stormed through the rooms to yell at the dogs outside. But when I pulled the door open, the dogs seemed to quiet. Frustration fell away from me. There was a bicycle on the other side of the veranda. Whose bike was that? A note on the handlebars? A ribbon on the seat?

I ran to the bike and pulled the note so I could read it silently.

*My Hero, This is my surprise gift for you on your ninth birthday. I hope you like it. - With Love, Your Papa*

Joy filled me. My smile stretched the skin around my mouth, and I had to touch the bicycle over and over to make sure it was real and not another dream. Guilt filled me. I should not have thought my father had forgotten my birthday; he always made sure I was happy, even when he had nothing to give me but his smile. Tears rolled down my cheeks. "Oh, Papa," I said aloud, "you knew I wanted a bicycle for such a long time." He must know that I think it is freedom to ride my own bike.

Back in the house, I put on my shoes and thought, I could not get a better wish. I went back outside and could not stop looking at my bicycle. I tossed the ribbon aside

and sat on the seat. The bike was easy to push to and fro with my toes touching the ground on either side.

Another round of barking pulled my attention to the side, and I decided to lock the door and go for a ride. I pushed the pedals to turn the crank and the wheels, feeling the mechanics of the bicycle under my body and balancing my weight to move around people who walked along the road. The streets were crowded. Zooming in and out of traffic, I wanted to ride everywhere. I rode all the way to my father's workplace. I knew he was busy and could not see me. If I called to him, he wouldn't be able to hear me over the whirring of the machines he had to use. Still, I wanted him to know how much I was enjoying his gift.

I rode back and forth on the street in front of the factory, wondering if he was able to look out from a window during these moments when I was outside, and I smiled, thinking perhaps he would see just how happy I was.

“Whee!” A whistle startled me, and I realized I was riding too slowly among the crowds in Calcutta. People were busy, and they didn't want any interruptions or delays. I was just a young boy playing on his bike in front of them, unwelcome, and no one was shy about telling me so.

I pushed my weight on the pedals again and took off in a flash to ride to the field, where I often played cricket with my friends.

“Whoa! A new bike!” Dipto was almost as excited as I was, tossing the cricket bat from his hand and running over to the edge of the field. “Rohan, look at this,” he squealed.

Other boys protested, “Come on! We’re in the middle of a game.”

Rohan ran from the tin can we always used to mark the base and pulled at the handlebars.

“Papa gave it to me as a birthday gift.” I tried to explain humbly but could not stop smiling. It seemed like everyone playing cricket ran over and was asking me about the bike.

Rohan punched me in the arm. He smiled too when he said, “You didn’t say it was your birthday.”

I just shrugged my shoulders. I wanted to keep the appearance that it was unimportant. I worried if I told my friends about it and then my father did not remember, I would be embarrassed. But now that Papa remembered and gave me this wonderful present, I wanted everyone to celebrate with me. I looked around and knew how many of them did not have their own bicycles and felt self-conscious. I knew my happiness was because of my father’s note, not really from the bike. I couldn’t explain those feelings to my friends.

“Happy Birthday!”

“Thanks Dipto,” I said and slapped his shoulder. Rohan and Dipto were my two very best friends. I couldn’t pick better pals to share my birthday.

Dipto told Rohan, "Bring a birthday cake from the shop for Apu."

Rohan nodded. "Okay. How many people want cake?"

The kids called out words that reminded me of the dogs barking in the morning outside my house. I laughed, knowing it was my birthday that created this joy all around me. Still, I didn't want a big deal in front of everyone. I leaned in to Rohan and said, "Please don't bring a cake."

"Why?" Rohan's smile was almost as big as mine when he looked me in the eye. "It's a special day!"

I pulled my friend aside in the fray while the other boys talked about the cake. I confessed, "I have not celebrated my birthday since my mother's death." I looked at my shoes, like I do whenever I want to run away. I couldn't hold back any tears that stirred when I thought of her. "I was surprised, my father," I started to tell him but could not finish when I felt the words choke in my throat.

Rohan's smile faded. "Oh, sorry," he said, shaking my shoulders to remind me that he was close enough to be around when I needed someone to talk to. He also pulled my gaze to his as Dipto walked to us.

"You okay? You guys are quiet over here." Dipto stretched his arm around his shoulder, and when Rohan explained my sadness, surrounded by joy, he said, "We understand."

I squeaked out the words, "It's been three years."

Rohan frowned and led me away from the cackling boys, who were still talking about how they would celebrate the day. Dipto pulled the bicycle from me and rode slowly next to us as we three went away from the cricket field.

When the sadness passed, I turned to Dipto and laughed. “You have your own bicycle; why did you take mine?”

Dipto stopped and motioned toward the bike. “Mine is not as nice as this!”

Rohan pushed Dipto from the seat. “Let him ride his bike!”

I called out, “Yeah, get yours, and we can take a ride.” I straddled the seat, and Dipto hopped on the handlebars and laughed. “You’re going to bend the frame, and I just got it!”

“You ride my handlebars all the time!”

“That’s because I didn’t have my own.”

Rohan grabbed Dipto’s hand and pulled him to run down the street toward his house so he could get his bike. “I’ll get mine and give you a ride,” he said.

We rode the whole day. It was dusk before we stopped riding. We wound up near the small bridge Papa didn’t like us sitting on. But it was away from the cars, and our bikes would be safe. We leaned up against the side of the bridge while we climbed up and let our legs swing over the edge. Everyone became quiet. Maybe they were feeling the same freedom that I did as they rode their bikes. I closed my eyes

only so that I could open them to make sure it was real and I wasn't waking from another awful dream. The sky was turning red with the sunset, and I wondered if my father was home from work. I wanted to go home to eat my mother's homemade cake. I couldn't stop the extremes of emotions I felt. The day was either elation or depression. A part of me wanted the day to last forever and I hated seeing the sunset wishing it was only the sunrise reminding me of seeing the note in the morning. At the same time, I wanted the sky to turn dark with night so that my birthday would be over and I would stop thinking of my mother's absence.

I climbed off the bridge without saying a word to my friends, and although I could hear them call after me, I did not even turn back to them. I just wanted to be home with my father.

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Hardcover, Paperback and Kindle editions of this novel are now available on **Amazon**.



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