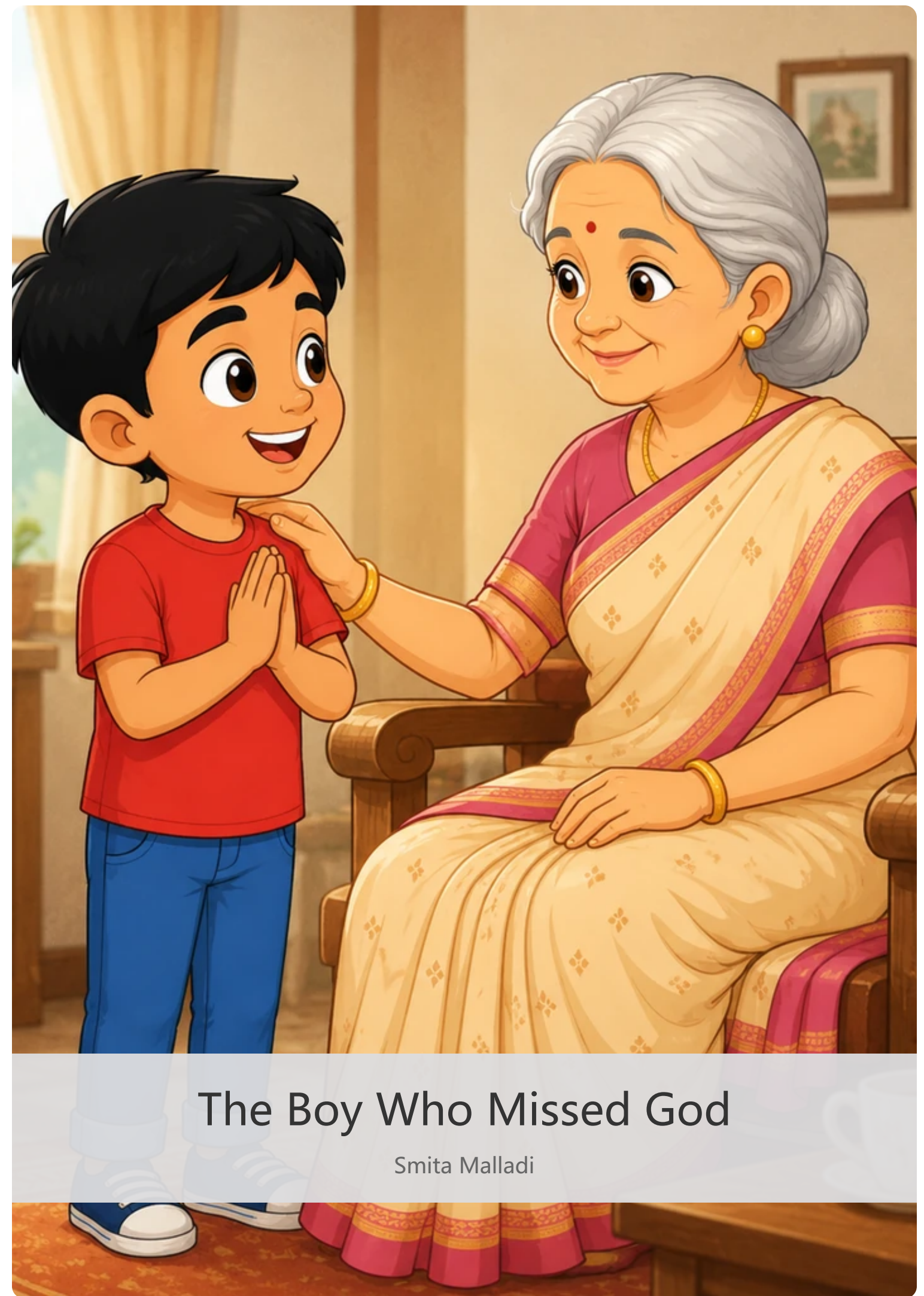




The Boy Who Missed God

Smita Malladi



Under the warm morning sun, eight-year-old Aarav stands before his small, beautiful prayer altar with folded hands and a hopeful heart. His grandmother watches from the doorway with a gentle, knowing smile as the boy eagerly prepares to wait by the front gate for a very special visitor. Holding his wooden stool, Aarav sits beneath the leafy archway of his garden, his eyes wide with anticipation.



A playful, fluffy brown puppy trots down the dusty path, wagging its tail and looking up at Aarav with big, hungry eyes. Aarav, focused entirely on watching the road for his grand guest, gently waves the little dog away, telling it he doesn't have time to play today. The puppy slowly walks off with its head lowered, leaving Aarav alone again at the gate.



The kind old neighborhood gardener plods by, wiping sweat from his brow as he struggles to carry a heavy, overflowing watering can. He stops to ask Aarav for a little help, but the boy politely declines, fearing he might miss his divine visitor if he steps away for even a moment. With a patient smile, the old man slowly continues down the lane, his shoulders slumped from the weight.



A cheerful little girl skips past the gate, holding a bright box of colorful crayons that suddenly slips from her hands and scatters all over the road. She looks up tearfully, asking for help, but Aarav hesitates and shakes his head, explaining that he is waiting for someone incredibly important. The girl quietly bends down to gather her scattered crayons all by herself under the afternoon sun.



As the golden sunset paints the sky in shades of orange and purple, a sad Aarav sits indoors, hugging his grandmother as she gently explains the day's events. With a tender embrace, she helps him realize that the hungry puppy, the tired gardener, and the little girl were all opportunities to share love and connect with the divine. Aarav smiles through his tears, finally understanding that helping others is the truest way to find what he was looking for.