

THIS STORY WILL SAVE YOUR LIFE

When Mental was alive, he was a boss-man with eighteen or twenty children working for him, and he almost never raised his hand against any of them. Every week he gave them 5Stars to split between themselves, or packs of Gems, and he made them invisible to the police and the evangelist-types who wanted to salvage them from the streets, and the men who watched them with hungry eyes as the children hurtled down railway tracks, gathering up plastic water bottles before a train could ram into them.

Mental didn't mind if his rag-picker boys gave him five Bisleri bottles instead of fifty, or if he caught them outside the cinema when they should have been working, wearing their best clothes and standing in a queue for a First Day First Show ticket they couldn't even afford. But he turned on them the days they showed up with their noses red, their words mixing together like blood and water, their eyes swollen like full moons from sniffing whitener. Then Mental stubbed out his Gold Flake Kings on their wrists or shoulders, and he called it a waste of a good cigarette.

The pungent fumes of burnt flesh trailed his boys, and washed away the sweet, short thrills of Dendrite or Eraz-ex. He knocked some major sense into their heads, Mental did.

We never met him because he lived in this neighbourhood long before our time. But the people who knew him, like the barber who has been shaving stubbly cheeks for decades, and the madman who smears ash across his chest and calls himself a saint, still talk about him. They say Mental's boys never picked fights about who got to board a running train first, or who could claim a stuffed toy or a bump-and-go racing car wedged into the gap behind a seat-berth. Mental taught his boys to be different. That's why, of all the children who worked at all the railway stations across the country, they lived the longest.

But Mental himself died one day. His boys knew he hadn't planned on it. He was young and healthy and had promised to hire a tempo and drive them to the Taj before the monsoon came to the city. They cried over him for days. Weeds flowered in the bald ground watered by their tears.

Then the boys had to work for men who were nothing like Mental. There were no chocolate bars or movies in their new lives, only hands scorched by railway lines gleaming like gold in the summer sun, the temperature forty-five degrees by eleven in the morning. In winter, it bellyflopped to one or two degrees and sometimes, when the mist was white and grainy like dust, the knife-edge of the icy tracks skinned their blistered fingers.

Every day after scavenging, the boys cleaned their faces with the water dribbling from a leaky pipe at the station and sent a collective prayer up to Mental to rescue them before a train's wheels ground their arms and legs to bone-dust, or a belt whistled through the air to snap their hunched spines into two and they never walked again.

In the months that followed Mental's death, two boys died chasing after trains. Kites circled their splintered corpses and flies kissed their

blue-black lips. The men who employed them thought it a waste of money to have their bodies picked up and cremated. The trains didn't stop and the engines screamed late into the night.

One evening soon after the deaths, three of Mental's boys crossed the road that separated the railway station from the hotchpotch of shops and hotels whose terraces were packed with red-and-white mobile-phone towers and black Sintex tanks. Neon signs flashed **PURE VEG FOODS** and **STATION VIEW** and **INCREDIBLE !NDIA** and **FAMILY COMFORT**. The boys were visiting a place not far from here: a brick wall with iron railings on which Mental had dried his clothes, and below which he had slept at night with everything he owned tied up in a sack that he hugged tight as if it were his wife.

In the yellow-pink light of the letters that formed **HOTEL ROYAL PINK**, they saw the small clay gods that Mental had arranged in a niche in the wall, Lord Ganesh with his trunk curled up in his chest and Lord Hanuman lifting a mountain with one hand and Lord Krishna playing the flute, sun-dried marigolds pressed down with stones at their feet.

The boys knocked their foreheads against the wall and asked Mental why he had to die. One of them whispered Mental's real name into the wind, which was a secret known only to them, and a shadow stirred in the lane. The boys thought it was a cat or a flying fox, though there was a charge in the air, the metallic taste of electricity on their tongues, the flicker of a rainbow-coloured bolt of light, gone so soon they could have only imagined it. They were worn out from hunting bottles and light-headed from hunger. But the next day, rooting through the trash on the floor of a train, each one of the three boys found a fifty-rupee note under different seat-berths.

They knew the money was a gift from Mental's ghost because the air around them rippled with the warm breath he exhaled, smelling of

Gold Flake Kings. He had come to them because they had called him by his real name.

The boys started leaving cigarettes for Mental at his wall, and tinfoil bowls of spiced chickpeas tangy with lime juice and garnished with coriander leaves and slivers of red onions. They cracked rude jokes about the smells and sounds that Mental had produced the afternoon he ate a quarter-kilo of chickpeas in one sitting. His ghost didn't care for their wisecracks and afterwards they found cigarette holes in their shirts.

Mental's boys are scattered across the city now, and we hear some of them are grown up and married with children of their own. But even today, a famished boy who falls asleep with Mental's true name on his cracked lips will wake up to find a white tourist buying him ice cream or a grandmother-type lady pressing a paratha into his hands. It's not much, but Mental wasn't a rich man, so he didn't become a rich ghost.

The funny thing about Mental is that his boys were the ones who gave him that name. When they first met him, they saw he was tough in many ways but his eyes turned soft if they showed him a missing toe or a scar thrashing like a dying fish on the back of their thighs where they had been whipped with red-hot iron chains. They decided that only a man who was *Mental* could be half-good in this crooked world. But first they called him *Brother* and the youngest boys called him *Uncle* and much later they started to say *Mental, look at how many bottles I found today*, and he didn't mind because he knew why they had settled on that name.

Months after he became Mental, on a spring night when he had drained several glasses of bhang, he bought the boys creamy phirni in clay cups and whispered to them the name his parents had given him. He told them he ran away from home when he was seven because his mother cuffed him for ditching school to hang about with the town's

Roadside Romeos, who burst into shrill song each time a girl walked past them.

His first few weeks in the city, Mental lived in the railway station, wolfing down scraps from the half-eaten parcels of food that passengers threw out of train windows, and hiding from the police in the alcoves beneath footbridges. Every thumping step above him felt like a blow to his head. For a while he believed his parents would arrive by train to find him, scold him for frightening them and take him home. At night he slept fitfully, hearing his mother call his name, but it was only the wind, the rattle of a train, or the glassy voice of a woman announcing that the North-East Express from Shillong was delayed by four hours. Mental thought of going back home but he didn't, because he was ashamed of himself, and because the city made men out of boys, and he was fed up of being a child and wanted to be a man.

Now that Mental is a ghost, he wishes he were seven again. We figure that's why he wants to hear his old name. It reminds him of his parents, and the boy he used to be before he hitched a ride on a train.

Mental's real name is a secret. His boys won't tell anyone. We think it must be a name so good, if Mental had gone to Mumbai instead of coming here, a film star would have flicked it from him.

There are many Mentals in this city. We shouldn't be afraid of them. Our gods are too busy to hear our prayers, but ghosts – ghosts have nothing to do but wait and wander, wander and wait, and they are always listening to our words because they are bored and that's one way to pass the time.

Remember, they don't work for free. They help us only if we offer them something in return. For Mental, it's a voice calling his true name, and for others it's a glass of hooch or a string of jasmine or a kebab from Ustad's. It's no different from what gods ask people to do for them,

except most ghosts don't want us to fast or light lamps or write their names over and over again in a notebook.

The hardest part is finding the right ghost. Mental is for boys because he never hired girls, but there are woman ghosts and old woman ghosts and even baby girl ghosts who can guard girls. We need ghosts more than anyone else maybe, because we are railway-station boys without parents and homes. If we are still here, it's only because we know how to summon ghosts at will.

Some people think we believe in the supernatural because we inhale glue and snort heroin and drink desi daru that's strong enough to put a moustache on a baby. But these people, these people with marble floors and electric heaters, they weren't with Mental's boys on the winter night the police chased them out of the railway station.

That night, a bitter-cold wind blew across the city, scoring lines into stone. The boys didn't have twenty rupees between them to rent a quilt for eight hours, and the quilt-wallah swore at them when they asked if he could lend them one on credit. They sat shivering under a dark street lamp with a shattered glass cage, outside a shelter with no more beds free for the night. Spokes of pain turned in their hands and legs. When they couldn't bear it anymore, they called Mental.

We are sorry to disturb you again, they said. But we are afraid we will die.

The broken street lamp crackled and glowed. The boys looked up. Beams of light syrupy and yellow with warmth tumbled down.

'Wait,' Mental's ghost said to them, 'let me see what else I can do.'

I Look at Our House With—

—upside-down eyes and count five holes in our tin roof. There might be more, but I can't see them because the black smog outside has wiped the stars off the sky. I picture a djinn crouching down on the roof, his eye turning like a key in a lock as he watches us through a hole, waiting for Ma and Papa and Runu-Didi to fall asleep so that he can draw out my soul. Djinns aren't real, but if they were, they would only steal children because we have the most delicious souls.

My elbows wobble on the bed, so I lean my legs against the wall. Runu-Didi stops counting the seconds I have been topsy-turvy and says, 'Arrey, Jai, I'm right here and still you're cheating-cheating. You have no shame, kya?' Her voice is high and jumpy because she's too happy that I can't stay upside down for as long as she can.

Didi and I are having a headstand contest but it's not a fair one. The yoga classes at our school are for students in Standard Six and above, and Runu-Didi is in Standard Seven, so she gets to learn from a real teacher. I'm in Standard Four, so I have to rely on Baba Devanand on TV, who says that if we do headstands, children like me will:

- never have to wear glasses our whole lives;
- never have white in our hair or black holes in our teeth;

- never have puddles in our brains or slowness in our arms and legs;
- always be No. 1 in School + College + Office + Home.

I like headstands a lot more than the huff-puff exercises Baba Devanand does with his legs crossed in the lotus position. But right now, if I stay upside down any longer, I'll break my neck, so I flump to the bed that smells of coriander powder and raw onions and Ma and bricks and cement and Papa.

'Baba Jai has been proved to be a conman,' Runu-Didi shouts like the newspeople whose faces redden every night from the angry news they have to read out on TV. 'Will our nation just stand and watch?'

'Uff, Runu, you're giving me a headache with your screaming,' Ma says from the kitchen corner of our house. She's shaping rotis into perfect rounds with the same rolling pin that she uses to whack my backside when I shout bad words while Didi talks to Nana-Nani on Ma's mobile phone.

'I won I won I won,' Didi sings now. She's louder than next-door's TV and next-to-next-door's howling baby and the neighbours who squabble every day about who stole water from whose water barrel.

I stick my fingers in my ears. Runu-Didi's lips move but it's as if she's speaking the bubble language of fish in a glass tank. I can't hear a word of her chik-chik. If I lived in a big house, I would take my shut-ears and run up the stairs two at a time and squash myself inside a cupboard. But we live in a basti, so our house has only one room. Papa likes to say that this room has everything we need for our happiness to grow. He means me and Didi and Ma, and not the TV, which is the best thing we own.

From where I'm lying on the bed, I can see the TV clearly. It looks down on me from a shelf that also holds steel plates and aluminium tins. Round letters on the TV screen say, **Dilli: Police Commissioner's Missing Cat Spotted**. Sometimes the Hindi news is written in letters that look like they are spurting blood, especially when the newspeople ask us tough questions we can't answer, like:

Does a Ghost Live in the Supreme Court?

or

Are Pigeons Terrorists Trained by Pakistan?

or

Is a Bull this Varanasi Sari Shop's Best Customer?

or

Did a Rasgulla Break Up Actress Veena's Marriage?

Ma likes such stories because she and Papa can argue about them for hours.

My favourite shows are ones that Ma says I'm not old enough to watch, like *Police Patrol* and *Live Crime*. Sometimes Ma switches off the TV right in the middle of a murder because she says it's too sick-making. But sometimes she leaves it on because she likes guessing who the evil people are and telling me how the policemen are sons-of-owls for never spotting criminals as fast as she can.

Runu-Didi has stopped talking to stretch her hands behind her back. She thinks she's Usain Bolt, but she's only on the school's relay team. Relay isn't a real sport. That's why Ma and Papa let her take part though some of the chachas and chachis in our basti say running brings dishonour to girls. Didi says basti-people will shut up once her team wins the inter-district tournament and also the state championships.

My fingers are going numb in my ears, so I pull them out and wipe them against my cargo pants that are already splattered with ink and mud and grease. All my clothes are dirty like these pants, my uniform too.

I have been asking Ma to let me wear the new uniform that I got free from school this winter, but Ma keeps it on top of a shelf where I can't reach it. She says only rich people throw clothes away when there's still life left in them. If I show her how my brown trousers end well above my ankles, Ma will say even film stars wear ill-fitting clothes because it's the latest fashion.

She's still making up things to trick me like she did when I was smaller than I'm now. She doesn't know that every morning, Pari and Faiz laugh when they see me and tell me I look like a joss stick but one that smells of fart.

'Ma, listen, my uniform—' I say and I stop because there's a scream from outside so loud I think it will squish the walls of our house. Runu-Didi gasps and Ma's hand brushes against a hot pan by mistake and her face goes all sharp and jagged like bitter-gourd skin.

I think it's Papa trying to scare us. He's always singing old Hindi songs in his hairy voice that rolls down the alleys of our basti like an empty LPG cylinder, waking up stray dogs and babies and making them bawl. But then the scream punches our walls again, and Ma switches off the stove and we run out of the house.

The cold slithers up my bare feet. Shadows and voices judder across the alley. The smog combs my hair with fingers that are smoky but also damp at the same time. People shout, 'What's happening? Has something happened? Who's screaming? Did someone scream?' Goats that their owners have dressed in old sweaters and shirts so they won't catch a chill hide under the charpais on both sides of the alley. The lights in

the hi-fi buildings near our basti blink like fireflies and then disappear. The current's gone off.

I don't know where Ma and Runu-Didi are. Women wearing clinking glass bangles hold up mobile-phone torches and kerosene lanterns but their light is wishy-washy in the smog.

Everyone around me is taller than I am, and their worried hips and elbows knock into my face as they ask each other about the screams. We can tell by now that they are coming from Drunkard Laloo's house.

'Something bad is going on over there,' a chacha who lives in our alley says. 'Laloo's wife was running around the basti, asking if anyone had seen her son. She was even at the rubbish ground, calling his name.'

'That Laloo too, na, all the time beating his wife, beating his children,' a woman says. 'Just you wait and see, one day his wife will also disappear. What will that useless fellow do for money then? From where will he get his hooch, haan?'

I wonder which one of Drunkard Laloo's sons is missing. The eldest, Bahadur, is a stutterer who is in my class.

The earth twitches as a metro train rumbles underground somewhere near us. It will worm out of a tunnel, zoom past half-finished buildings, and climb up a bridge to an above-ground station before returning to the city because this is where the Purple Line ends. The metro station is new, and Papa was one of the people who built its sparkly walls. Now he's making a tower so tall they have to put flashing red lights on top to warn pilots not to fly too low.

The screams have stopped. I'm cold and my teeth are talking among themselves. Then Runu-Didi's hand darts out of the darkness, snatches me, and drags me forward. She runs fast, as if she's competing in a relay race and I'm the baton she's about to pass to a teammate.

'Stop,' I say, hitting the brakes. 'Where are we going?'

‘Didn’t you hear what people were saying about Bahadur?’

‘He’s lost?’

‘You don’t want to find out more?’

Runu-Didi can’t see my face in the smog but I nod. We follow a lantern swinging from someone’s hands, but it’s not bright enough to show us the puddles where washing-up water has collected and we keep stepping into them. The water is icky and I should turn around but I also want to know what happened to Bahadur. Teachers never ask him questions in class because of his stammer. When I was in Standard Two, I tried going ka-ka-ka too, but that only got me a rap on the knuckles with a wooden ruler. Ruler beatings hurt much worse than canings.

I almost trip over Fatima-ben’s buffalo, who’s lying in the middle of the alley, a giant black smudge that I can’t tell apart from the smog. Ma says the buffalo is like a sage who has been meditating for hundreds and hundreds of years in the sun and the rain and the snow. Faiz and I once pretended to be lions and roared at Buffalo-Baba, and we pelted him with pebbles, but he didn’t even roll his big buffalo eyes or shake his backward-curving horns at us.

All the lanterns and phone-torches have stopped outside Bahadur’s house. We can’t see anything because of the crowd. I tell Runu-Didi to wait and jostle past trouser-clad, sari-clad, dhoti-clad legs, and hands that smell of kerosene and sweat and food and metal. Bahadur’s ma is sitting on the doorstep, crying, folded in half like a sheet of paper, with my ma on one side and our neighbour Shanti-Chachi on the other. Drunkard Laloo squats next to them, his head bobbling as his red-rivered eyes squint up at our faces.

I don’t know how Ma got here before me. Shanti-Chachi smooths Bahadur’s ma’s hair, rubs her back, and says things like, ‘He’s only a child, must be somewhere around here. Can’t have gone that far.’

Bahadur's ma doesn't stop sobbing, but the gaps between her sobs grow longer. That's because Shanti-Chachi has magic in her hands. Ma says chachi is the best midwife in the world. If a baby is blue and quiet when it's born, chachi can bring red to its cheeks and screams to its lips just by rubbing its feet.

Ma sees me in the crowd and asks, 'Jai, was Bahadur at school today?'

'No,' I say. Bahadur's ma looks so sad that I wish I could remember when I last saw him. Bahadur doesn't speak much, so no one notices if he's in the classroom or not. Then Pari sticks her head out of the sea of legs and says, 'He hasn't been coming to school. We saw him last Thursday.'

Today is Tuesday, so Bahadur has been gone for five days. Pari and Faiz mutter 'side-side-side' as if they are waiters carrying wire racks of steaming chai glasses, and people make way for them to pass. Then they stand next to me. Both of them are still wearing our school uniform. Ma has told me to change into home clothes as soon as I enter the house so that my uniform won't get even more mucky. She's too strict.

'Where were you?' Pari asks. 'We looked for you everywhere.'

'Here only,' I say.

Pari has pinned back her fringe at such a height that it looks like one-half of a mosque's onion dome. Before I can ask why no one realised Bahadur was missing until today, Pari and Faiz tell me why, because they are my friends and they can see the thoughts in my head.

'His mother, na, for a week or so she wasn't here,' Faiz whispers. 'And his father—'

'—is World-Best Bewda No. 1. If a bandicoot chews off his ears, he won't know because he's fultoo drunk all the time,' Pari says loudly as if she wants Drunkard Laloo to hear her. 'The chachis next door should have noticed that Bahadur is missing, don't you think?'

Pari is always quick to blame others because she thinks she's perfect. 'The chachis have been taking care of Bahadur's brother and sister,' Faiz explains to me. 'They thought Bahadur was staying with a friend.'

I nudge Pari and zoom my eyes towards Omvir, who's hiding behind grown-ups and twisting a ring on his finger that glows white in the dark. He's Bahadur's only friend, though Omvir is in Standard Five and doesn't come to school often because he has to help his papa, a press-wallah who irons the creases out of hi-fi people's clothes.

'Listen, Omvir, you know where Bahadur is?' Pari asks.

Omvir hunches into his maroon sweater, but Bahadur's ma's ears have already picked up the question. 'He doesn't know,' she says. 'He was the first person I asked.'

Pari points her onion-fringe at Drunkard Laloo and says, 'All this must be his fault.'

Every day we see Drunkard Laloo stumbling around the basti, drool dripping from his mouth, doing nothing but eating air. He's a beggy-type fellow who sometimes asks even Pari and me if we have coins to spare so that he can buy a glass of kadak chai. It's Bahadur's ma who makes money by working as a nanny and maid for a family in one of the hi-fi buildings near our basti. Ma and lots of chachis in the basti also work for the hi-fi people who live up there.

I turn to look at the buildings that have fancy names like Palm Springs and Mayfair and Golden Gate and Athena. They are close to our basti but seem far because of the rubbish ground in between, and also a tall brick wall with barbed wire on top that Ma says is not tall enough to keep out the stink from the rubbish mounds. There are many grown-ups behind me but through the spaces between their monkey caps I can see that the hi-fi buildings have light now. It must be because they have diesel generators. Our basti is still dark.

‘Why did I go?’ Bahadur’s ma asks Shanti-Chachi. ‘I should have never left them alone.’

‘The hi-fi family went to Neemrana, and they took Bahadur’s ma with them. To look after their babies,’ Pari tells me.

‘What’s Neemrana?’ I ask.

‘It’s a fort-palace in Rajasthan,’ Pari says. ‘On top of a hill.’

‘Bahadur could be with his nana-nani,’ someone tells Bahadur’s ma. ‘Or one of his chacha-chachis.’

‘I called them,’ Bahadur’s ma says. ‘He isn’t with any of them.’

Drunkard Laloo tries to stand, one hand pressing the ground. Someone helps him up and, swinging from side to side, he hobbles towards us. ‘Where is Bahadur?’ he asks. ‘You play with him, don’t you?’

We step backwards, bumping into people. Omvir and his maroon sweater vanish into the crowd. Drunkard Laloo kneels down in front of us, nearly toppling over, but he manages to level his old-man eyes with my child-eyes. Then he catches me by my shoulders and shakes me back and forth as if I’m a soda bottle and he wants to make me fizz. I try to wriggle out of his grip. Instead of saving me, Pari and Faiz scoot off.

‘You know where my son is, don’t you?’ Drunkard Laloo asks.

I guess I could help him find Bahadur because I know loads about detecting, but his smelly breath is rushing into my face and all I want to do is run away.

‘Leave that boy alone,’ someone shouts.

I don’t think Drunkard Laloo will listen, but he ruffles my hair and mutters, ‘Okay, okay.’ Then he lets go of me.



Papa always leaves for work early, when I'm still sleeping, but the next morning I wake up to the smell of turpentine on his shirt, and his rough hands grazing my cheeks.

'Be careful. You walk with Runu to school and back, you hear me?' he says.

I scrunch up my nose. Papa treats me like a small child though I'm nine years old.

'After class, come straight home,' he says. 'No wandering around Bhoot Bazaar by yourself.' He kisses me on the forehead, and says again, 'You'll be careful?'

I wonder what he imagines has happened to Bahadur. Does he think a djinn snatched him? But Papa doesn't believe in djinns.

I go outside to say okay-tata-bye to him, then I brush my teeth. Men who are Papa's age soap their faces, and cough and spit as if they hope the insides of their throats will jump out of them into the ground. I want to see how far my frothy-white spit can go, so I let my mouth make boom-boom explosions.

'Stop that right now, Jai,' I hear Ma say. She and Runu-Didi are carrying the pots and jerrycans of water they have collected from the one tap in our basti that works, but only between six and eight in the morning and sometimes for an hour in the evening. Didi opens the lids of the two water barrels standing on either side of our door, and Ma empties the pots and jerrycans into them, splashing water all over herself in her hurry.

I finish tooth-brushing. 'Why are you still here?' Ma snaps at me. 'You want to be late for school again?'

It's actually Ma who's late for work, so she runs off while also fixing her hair, which has come loose from the knot at the back of her head. The hi-fi madam whose flat Ma cleans is a mean lady who has already

put two strikes against Ma's name for being late. One night when I was pretending to sleep, Ma told Papa that the madam had threatened to chop her into tiny-tiny pieces and chuck slices of her over the balcony for the kites circling the building to catch.

Runu-Didi and I go to the toilet complex near the rubbish ground, carrying buckets into which we have thrown soaps, towels and mugs. The black smog is still sulking above us. It pricks my eyes and splashes tears onto my cheeks. Didi teases me by saying that I must be missing Bahadur.

'You're crying for your dost?' she asks, and I would tell her to shut up, but there are long queues for the toilets even though it costs two rupees to go, and I have to focus on shifting my weight from one leg to another so that my backside won't burst.

The caretaker, who sits behind a desk at the main entrance of the toilets where it divides into Ladies and Gents, is taking ages to collect the money and let people through. He's supposed to work from five in the morning till eleven in the night, but he locks up the complex whenever he wants and leaves. Then we have to go in the rubbish ground. It's free, but anyone can see our backsides there, our classmates and pigs and dogs and cows as old as Nana-Nani that will eat our clothes off us if they can.

Runu-Didi stands in the ladies' queue, I stand in the gents'. Didi says men keep trying to peep into the Ladies. Probably to see if their toilets and bathrooms are cleaner.

The people in my queue are chatting about Bahadur. 'That boy must be hiding somewhere,' a chacha says, 'waiting for his mother to kick his father out.' Everyone murmurs in agreement. They decide Bahadur will come home once he tires of brawling with stray dogs for an old roti in a pile of rubbish.

The men talk about how loudly Bahadur's ma screamed last night, loud enough to scare the ghosts that live in Bhoot Bazaar, and they joke with each other about how long it will take them to realise that one of their own children is missing. Hours-days-weeks-months?

A chacha says that even if he notices he won't bring it up. 'I have eight children. What difference will one less or one more make?' he says, and everyone laughs. The smog is worrying their eyes too, so they are also crying at the same time.

I get to the front of the queue, pay the caretaker, and do my business quickly. I wonder if Bahadur has run off to some place with nice-clean toilets and bathrooms that smell of jasmine. If I had a bathroom like that, I would have taken bucket-baths every day.



Back at home, Didi gives me chai and rusk for breakfast. The rusk is hard and tastes of nothing, but I obediently chew it up. I won't get any other food till afternoon. Then I change into my uniform and we leave for school.

Though Papa told me not to, I plan to give Runu-Didi the slip as soon as I can. But there's a swarm of people around Buffalo-Baba, some standing on plastic chairs and charpais and craning their necks to get a good look. They are blocking our way. I hear a voice I recognise from last night. 'Find my son, baba, find my son for me. I won't move from here until my Bahadur is found,' Drunkard Laloo cries.

'Accha, now you can't live without your son?' a woman exclaims. 'You didn't think of that when you were hitting him?'

'Only the police can help us,' another woman says. 'Six nights he hasn't been home. That's too long.' I think that's Bahadur's ma talking.

‘We’re going to be so late,’ Runu-Didi says. She holds her school bag in front of her and uses it to slam into people so that they will move, and I do the same. By the time we are out of the crowd, our hair is messy and our uniforms crumple.

Runu-Didi straightens her kameez. Before she can stop me, I jump over a gutter, and sprint past cows and hens and dogs, and goats wearing better sweaters than I am, past a woman sweeping the alley while listening to loud music on her mobile with earphones, and a white-haired grandmother stringing beans. My school bag knocks into an old man sitting on a plastic chair, one of its legs shorter than the others, the difference in height made up with bricks. The chair topples over and the man lands on the ground with his backside in the mud. I rub my left knee, which hurts a bit, then I run off again and the man’s curses chase me all the way to another alley that smells of chole-bhature.

Here Pari and Faiz are waiting for me, outside a store that sells Tau jee and Chulbule and other salty, masala-coated snacks. The bright reds and greens and blues of the namkeen wrappers look dreary in the smog today, and the husband and wife who run the shop are sitting behind the counter with mufflers wrapped over their faces. The smog doesn’t bother me as much, probably because I’m strong.

‘This Faiz, na,’ Pari says as soon as I join them, ‘is an idiot.’ Her minaret fringe looks like it will collapse any second.

‘You’re the idiot,’ Faiz says.

‘You saw?’ I ask. ‘Drunkard Laloo is praying to Buffalo-Baba, like baba is an actual god.’

‘Bahadur’s ma was saying she’ll go to the police,’ Pari says.

‘She’s ekdum-mad,’ Faiz says.

‘The police will kick us out if we complain,’ I say. ‘They’re always threatening to send bulldozers to demolish our basti.’

‘They can’t do anything. We have got ration cards,’ Pari says. ‘Also, we pay them a hafta. If they throw us out, who will they extort money from?’

‘Loads of people,’ I say. ‘India has more people than any other country in the world. Except China.’ There’s rusk stuck between my teeth and I pry it out with my tongue.

‘Faiz thinks Bahadur is dead,’ Pari says.

‘Bahadur is our age. We aren’t old enough to die.’

‘I didn’t say he died,’ Faiz protests, and then he coughs. He hawks up spit and wipes his mouth with his hands.

‘Maybe what’s happened is that Bahadur’s asthma went bad because of the smog, and he fell into a ditch and couldn’t get out,’ Pari says. ‘Remember how he couldn’t breathe this one time we were in Standard Two?’

‘You cried,’ I say.

‘I never cry,’ Pari says. ‘Ma does, but not me.’

‘If Bahadur fell into a ditch, someone would have pulled him out. Look at the number of people here,’ Faiz says.

I eye the people walking past us, to establish if they seem like the helpful-type. But their faces are half-hidden by handkerchiefs to keep the smog from getting inside their ears and noses and mouths. Some of the men and women bark into their mobiles through their make-do masks. There’s a chole-bhature vendor on the roadside, and though his face isn’t covered by a scarf, it’s enveloped in a cloud of smoke rising from a vat of sizzling hot oil in which he’s frying bhaturas. His customers are labourers on their way to factories and construction sites, sweepers and carpenters, mechanics and security guards at malls returning home after a night shift. The men scoop up the chole with steel spoons and munch, their kerchiefs pulled down to their chins. Their eyes are fixed on their

plates of hot food. If a demon were to stomp towards them right now, they wouldn't notice.

'Listen,' I say, 'why don't we look for Bahadur? Either he's lying sick in a hospital—'

'His ma went to all the hospitals near our basti,' Pari says. 'The women at the toilet complex were talking about it.'

'If he was snatched, we can solve a case of kidnapping also,' I say. '*Police Patrol* tells you exactly how to find someone missing. First you—'

'Maybe a djinn took him,' Faiz says, touching the gold-coloured taweez that hangs from a frayed black string tied around his neck. The amulet keeps him safe from the evil eye and bad djinns.

'Even babies know better than to believe in djinns,' Pari says.

Faiz furrows his forehead, and the groove of the white scar that runs across his left temple, just missing his eye, deepens as if something is pulling at his skin from the inside.

'Let's go,' I say. Watching the two of them argue is the most boring thing in the world. 'We'll be late for assembly.'

Faiz fast-walks, even when we get to the lanes of Bhoot Bazaar, which are crammed with too many people and dogs and cycle-rickshaws and autorickshaws and e-rickshaws. To keep pace with him, I can't do the things I usually do at the bazaar, like count the bloodied goat hooves on sale at Afsal-Chacha's shop or cadge a slice of melon off a fruit chaat vendor.

No one will believe me but I'm one hundred per cent pakka that my nose grows longer when I'm in the bazaar because of its smells, of tea and raw meat and buns and kebabs and rotis. My ears get bigger too, because of the sounds, ladles scraping against pans, butchers' knives thwacking against chopping boards, rickshaws and scooters honking, and gunfire and bad words boom-booming out of video-game parlours

hidden behind grimy curtains. But today my nose and ears stay the same size because Bahadur has vanished, my friends are sulking, and the smog is making everything blurry.

In front of us, sparks fall on the ground from a bird's nest of electric wires hanging over the bazaar.

'That's a warning,' Faiz says. 'Allah is telling us to be careful.'

Pari looks at me, her eyebrows climbing up her forehead.

I peer into ditches for the rest of our walk to school, just in case Bahadur has fallen into one of them. All I see are empty wrappers and holey plastic bags and eggshells and dead rats and dead cats and chicken and mutton bones sucked clean by hungry mouths. No sign of djinns, no sign of Bahadur.