

'An intoxicating
portrait of modern
India . . . Terrific'
Daily Mail



'Epic in scope and yet
composed of intimate
moments . . . One of the
best debuts this year'
Guardian

One Small Voice

Santanu
Bhattacharya

One Small Voice

‘A beautiful coming-of-age novel’ *Observer*, Meet the 10
Best Debut Novelists for 2023

‘An intoxicating portrait of modern India, riven with internal political and cultural tensions, caught precariously between its colonial past and its ruthlessly modernizing future . . . Terrific’

Daily Mail

‘Epic . . . Guided by an intimate trajectory . . . Bhattacharya is a vivid and humane storyteller with a talent for encapsulating the social in the personal’ *Sydney Morning Herald*

‘Devastating and intimate, and political and radical all at the same time. Bhattacharya’s storytelling talents are limitless’

Nikesh Shukla

‘Exceptional . . . Bhattacharya gives us India in all its messy glory . . . Heartbreaking and yet so full of hope’

Melody Razak, author of *Moth*

‘Bhattacharya has the enviable ability of creating a cast of characters that feel as real as any person I’ve met. His effortless writing sings on the page’ Kasim Ali, author of *Good Intentions*

‘Whilst the plot turns on our capacity for cruelty, Bhattacharya’s book brims with compassion. A novel about the complexities of adulthood, and the shame we all carry, that is both fearless and kind’ Clare Pollard, author of *Delphi*

‘Thrilling . . . Bhattacharya writes beautifully about friendship, family and the devastating consequences of secrecy and shame in a narrative that powerfully evokes the complexities of coming of age in modern India’ Ben Fergusson, author

of *Tales from the Fatherland*

‘Emotional and bold . . . A rare voice that rewards us with hope and recognition’ Tice Cin, author of *Keeping the House*

Copyrighted Material

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Santanu Bhattacharya grew up in India and studied at the University of Oxford and the National University of Singapore. He is the winner of the 2021 Mo Siewcharran Prize. He now lives in London. *One Small Voice* is his first novel.

One Small Voice

SANTANU BHATTACHARYA



PENGUIN BOOKS
Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published by Fig Tree 2023
Published in Penguin Books 2024

001

Copyright © Santanu Bhattacharya, 2023

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Lines on p. vii from *Suspected Poems* by Gulzar, translated by Pavan K. Varma.
Copyright © 2017 by Gulzar. Reproduced with permission of Penguin Random House India.
Lyrics on p. 332, from 'Dreams on Fire', written by BlaaZe, Wendy Paar, music by A R Rahman.
Lyrics on p. 381, from 'Naam Gum Jayega', written by Gulzar. Translation author's own.

Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-99639-3

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material

For my grandmothers, Tara and Arati

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Lakeerein haath mein thee toh muqaddar thee
Inhein hum band rakhte the
Zameenon par bichheen toh phir samandar, mulak,
Ghar, aangan sabhi ko kaat-tee guzreen!

– *Gulzar*

*When lines were only etched on the palm
They told our destiny
We kept them closed in a fist;
When they are drawn on the ground
They cut across oceans, countries,
homes and hearths.*

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Contents

| | |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| PART ZERO: Agni / <i>Fire</i> | I |
| PART ONE: Prithvi / <i>Earth</i> | 5 |
| PART TWO: Ankur / <i>Sapling</i> | 67 |
| PART THREE: Vaayu / <i>Wind</i> | 125 |
| PART FOUR: Jal / <i>Water</i> | 211 |
| PART FIVE: Dhaatu / <i>Metal</i> | 283 |
| PART SIX: Aakaash / <i>Space</i> | 335 |
| PART ZERO: Agni / <i>Fire</i> | 377 |

Copyrighted Material

PART ZERO

Agni / Fire

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

The colours of fire are rather cheerful. I look down to see them all over me. Red on my feet. Yellow on my fingers. Orange on my shirt like meteoric streaks. The shades meld into narangi, dhusar, silait, gerua. Bronze, rust, tangerine, honey, carrot.

Agni, fire. Once used to consecrate beginnings, honour endings.

Agni, now used to immolate innocents.

Agni, so holy, so horrific.

The flames blur my vision. I step back and see what I've done. I look down at my hands, feet. I wipe the sweat off my face. It leaves a gash on my forehead.

The phone buzzes. *Ma calling* . . . But I cannot answer. The colours are dripping from my body. Tip-tip-tip.

I close my eyes and gulp a blob of dried spit. I open them and the sunlight sings through. I squint. That was night, this is day. That was the start of our story, this is the end. Twenty-five years between them.

Come, my friend, stand next to me. Give me permission to tell this story – yours, mine, ours. The story of a billion ordinary people. A billion exceptional stories.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

PART ONE
Prithvi / *Earth*

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

2012

Plop

The body drops with a plop.

The people on the platform waiting for the Mumbai local train were like vultures. They let the first wave of passengers off the train, then rushed in like a deluge, a mass of heads and limbs and bellies, icky, sticky, yucky. He'd got stuck in their midst. The train started to move. Panic gripped him. The next station would be even more crowded. He pleaded to be let out. The sea parted. Someone gave him a light push. Someone held out a hand. Someone pulled him out. On the platform, a spasm went up his body. His injured leg gave way. Plop.

A crowd now gathers around him, leads him to a bench. He raises his hand to thank them.

When the next train arrives, another human scuffle ensues. This time, a little girl is ejected. She falls and bruises her knee. Her mother brings her to the bench. The girl sits, looks at him. Something passes between their eyes.

'What's your name?' she asks, her eyes still teary from the fall. In her curiosity, she's forgotten about her leg hurting.

He shakes his head.

The girl sticks her tongue out, like a friend has been naughty in class. She whispers, 'You don't know your name?'

Copyrighted Material

He shakes his head again. Once upon a time, he had many names, many homes, many friends. Now he has none. Suddenly he wants to tell all this to the little girl.

The girl's mother walks up to them. She was busy picking up the vegetables strewn across the platform when her daughter fell. 'Chalo, let's go home fast-fast. Everyone will be waiting for me to make dinner.' She dusts her daughter down and takes her away. The girl looks back at him and winks before disappearing from sight.

He remains sitting.

It is November already. The ancient Mayan calendar predicted that the world will end on 22nd December 2012. Everyone seems excited, movies have been made, restaurants are offering end-of-the-world discounts, shopping malls have set up themed play areas.

His world has already ended, or at least the world he knew, the one he'd built. He is thirty years old, and doesn't even know what name to call himself by.

1980s

Jejus

‘What is your name?’ Papa asked in English, the foreign words sounding funny in his mouth.

It was the same ritual every evening. Papa would come back from the office and change into his kurta-pyjama. Ma would bring out steaming-hot chai and Marie biscuits. Then they’d sit him down on a stool, his legs swinging as he faced the three-seater sofa on which Ma and Papa sat at opposite ends, and the interrogation would begin.

‘Shoob-uncle Dee-ve-di.’

Ma closed her eyes and shook her head. ‘He’s three and he can’t even say his name!’ She wiped beads of sweat off her forehead with the pallu of her saree.

Papa raised his palm, as if to tell Ma he had this under control, then turned back. ‘Let’s try again, beta. What is your name?’ He’d fallen into Hindi but corrected himself to finish in English. His voice was indulgent, encouraging.

‘Shoob-uncle Dee-ve-di.’ He said it slowly this time. Then, before his parents could react, he pointed to the calendar on the wall, unmoving in the thick summer air. ‘One nine eight five,’ he painstakingly read out, to show them he could say the numbers.

A smile escaped Papa’s lips. Papa found everything he did

Copyrighted Material

fascinating, unlike Ma, who never seemed to be impressed enough, always goading him on to do more.

‘Yes, beta, the year is 1985. But first, you have to say your name properly, na? Otherwise how will you get admission into the convent school? It is the best in all of Lucknow.’

Ma reached out and straightened his collar, brushed strands of hair off his forehead, then patted his cheek. ‘What is your name?’ Her English was funnier than Papa’s.

‘Shoob-uncle Dee-ve-di.’

Papa put the teacup down and sighed. ‘Uff, we are Tri-ve-di. Dwivedi is the uncle down the street.’

He couldn’t tell the difference; they sounded the same to his ears. ‘Who is better? Them or us?’

‘Both are high-caste Brahmins. But our ancestors knew three Vedas; theirs knew only two.’

‘What are Vedas?’

‘They are holy books, son. They have everything one needs to know.’

‘Have you read all three, Papa?’

‘Okay, enough now.’ Ma put her teacup down too, struggling a bit because of her big tummy, where the baby was asleep. She slid across to the centre of the sofa, and the tummy seemed to move slightly after her, like a separate object. She looked sideways at Papa as though she’d given him enough time to do this his way, and was now taking control.

‘Don’t you want to be like your Nana-ji? He was an *engineer*,’ she said to her son, mouthing the word carefully, like she was uttering something holy. ‘He used to say – *I have built one of the first bridges of independent India, and I have made sure it is strong enough to keep standing when our dear country turns hundred!*’

He knew this. Ma said it every time they crossed the bridge over the river. **Copyrighted Material**

‘Shoob-uncle Dee-ve-di.’

‘Badmaash!’ Papa looked genuinely angry now, his nostrils flared a little. Papa didn’t like Ma praising her father, the *engineer*, because Papa wasn’t an engineer himself. Just like *he* didn’t like it when Ma praised the Dwivedis’ twin daughters. *So pretty, so well-behaved.* Their names were even more difficult to pronounce than his own.

Papa gave him a tug on his arm. ‘If you don’t say your name properly, you will have it from me. Do you know how many people Papa had to put maska on to get you this interview at the convent school?’

‘And who stood in queues under the scorching sun at all the English-medium schools to get the forms?’ Ma lowered her voice as if speaking to herself. ‘Keep working like a donkey, not a minute to even read the newspaper . . . Wake up before everyone else, cook, pack tiffins, do groceries, bathe and feed the child . . .’ Ma always spoke in half-sentences when she had to say something Papa wouldn’t like hearing.

Ma wagged her finger at him. ‘If you don’t go to a good school, you’ll be stuck in this village. Little people with their little minds and big-big talk.’

Papa turned sharply towards Ma. ‘Lucknow is not a village. It is a city with a thousand years of civilization. It was the capital of the Awadh kingdom. This is where the first rebellion against the British Raj was—’

Ma cut Papa off. ‘Well, now it’s a wasting small-town. It’s no Delhi or Bombay.’

His parents fell silent. The whirring of the ceiling fan took over. All he had wanted was to play with them after a day of picking branches alone on the terrace.

‘Shubhankar Trivedi.’

The words formed in his mouth like a chemical reaction. His parents turned shocked. ‘Say that again, beta!’

‘Shubh-ankar Tri-ve-di.’

Papa clapped so loudly in front of his face it made him blink-blink-blink. ‘Now say your mother’s name – Vasundhara Trivedi.’ He nudged Ma’s arm with his elbow and smiled.

She smiled back shyly. ‘And your father’s name – Ashutosh Trivedi.’

He burst into tears. ‘Why are all our names so long?’

For the interview, Ma chose an off-white shirt and long blue shorts that they’d bought at Janpath Market. Nani was there too, and she wouldn’t stop talking about what engineers wear to the office. ‘Your Nana-ji always wore a white shirt and black trousers. Starched from top to bottom!’ She pointed all ten fingers at herself and motioned from head to toe. ‘I polished his shoes so perfectly that I could see my face in them!’ She looked up fondly at the sky. ‘He’d say – *Subhadra, you keep my head held high.*’ She raised her voice to get Ma’s attention.

But Ma wasn’t listening. She was focused on the clothes and their price tags, going through combinations of shirts, trousers, socks, shoes under the harsh tube-lights in the small dark shop. As he tried them on, Ma and Nani commented on whether the shirt was too loose, the shorts too long, the socks too high.

Ma made her decision. Nani raised her eyebrows and stared at the checked linoleum floor, her look when she disagreed. This led to an argument between mother and daughter, neither willing to give in even though the afternoon heat parched their throats. Nani finally conceded. ‘Who am I to say anything? I’m just a poor old widow.’

‘You’ll see when he wears them.’ Ma had the final word, she always did.

But on the day of the interview, Papa thought the shorts

were too baggy, like a police havaldar's, touching the knees, and the shirt didn't look *rich enough*.

'That is because we aren't rich,' Ma said. 'I wanted to buy good fabric from Siyaram's and get the clothes stitched by Master-ji, but that would have been double the price.' Ma looked like she was going to cry. 'Now they'll reject him for his clothes, na?'

Papa rushed to pacify. He said they could keep the shirt but swap the trousers for the brown ones Panna-chacha had gifted last Diwali.

Ma oiled his hair and bathed him with the Palmolive soap that was otherwise kept only for guests. Papa drew a straight partition with a sharp comb, making sure not a single strand of hair stood out, then sprinkled Pond's talcum powder over his neck and massaged it into his skin.

'I don't like this white-white,' he protested.

'Arre, how will you smell good otherwise? What will the principal-madam say?' Papa teased.

At the school, they waited outside the principal's office. He wandered around the long stone corridors, but Ma ordered him not to stray too far. 'When they call your name, smartly raise your hand.' Her bump was larger now, and she was always short of breath.

When they were finally called in, he saw that the principal's office was crowded. The walls were covered with shields and certificates. There was a large photo of a woman frowning at them. A plaque underneath announced her name – SISTER BENEDICTA. Did no one in Lucknow have a short name?

Next to the photo was the statue of a bearded man on a cross, quite naked, little red streams flowing down parts of his body. He couldn't take his eyes off this person. Ma noticed this and whispered in his ear, 'If the principal asks who that is, remember to say Jesus. It's their god, okay?'

He wanted to ask why the gods at home looked so well-fed and content while this principal's god looked so sad and thin.

Just then, the lady in the photo entered. She was shorter, though the frown was the same. She wore a grey saree tightly draped around her petite frame, pleats pinned in places. His parents half-lifted themselves from their seats. The lady waved, and they let their suspended bodies drop back to the chairs. They held their breaths while she ruffled through some papers. Then she looked up at Papa.

'What is your profession, Mr Trivedi?' The principal's English was different, smooth and rounded. A large cross with the same Jesus hung from her neck. Shubhankar worried that all this dangling would make the god bleed more.

'I am foreman at fertilizer factory,' Papa replied, stuttering mid-sentence. Shubhankar had never heard Papa's voice so soft. Papa's face went red and little streams of sweat flowed down the sides. He added 'dear madam' as an afterthought.

'And what was your father's profession?' The principal seemed very interested in their family.

'He was freedom fighter, dear madam. In fact, he fought with Gandhi-ji in freedom struggle.' Shubhankar knew Gandhi-ji. He'd seen photos of the bald, weak-looking man, a white cloth around his shoulders. Papa shifted in his seat. 'After independence, he was in railways, dear madam.'

Ma leaned forward and cleared her throat. She had sat with her mouth half-open, anticipating a question. But the principal looked surprised, as if she'd only just noticed this woman in the room. 'My father was chief engineer in Public Works Division. He made all roads and bridges in Lucknow.' Ma glanced with pride at Papa, who mouthed something. Ma got the hint and quickly added, 'Dear madam.'

The principal made some notes, then asked them to wait

outside. She said she wanted to talk to the child alone. He held on to Ma's hand, but she disentangled his fingers and perched him up on the chair.

'So, son,' the principal said. 'What is your name?'

Here it was. The ultimate test. He took a deep breath and opened his mouth.

'Shoob-uncle Dee-ve-di.'

His heart sank. He opened his mouth to try again, but the principal was already asking, 'And your parents' names?' His mind went blank. He looked up at Jejus for help. But no, he seemed to have lost all sound in his throat. The principal now picked up a block. 'What colour is this, son?'

This he knew. He felt more confident. 'Red.'

'It's maroon.' The principal sounded disappointed. He felt deflated. Was this woman going to report his failure to Ma and Papa? She played with the tips of her fingers trying to decide what to ask next. Then she pointed to the statue on the wall. 'Do you know who that is?'

'Jejus!'

A smile appeared on the principal's face. She nodded her head several times, then rang the bell for her assistant, who escorted him out into the arms of his parents. 'What did she ask? Did you answer all the questions?' Their voices were high with hysteria.

He felt a hollowness in his stomach as if his body were in free fall and would hit the ground any minute. 'I want to do potty,' he cried.

The assistant laughed at this. His parents squirmed. 'Let's go home first, okay?'

On the rickshaw ride home, when he was feeling better, he asked Papa, 'Did Dada-ji really know Gandhi-ji?'

Ma burst into a laugh. 'He once saw Gandhi-ji at a rally, and told the whole mohalla that Gandhi-ji waved at him.'

Copyrighted Material

People of that generation – everyone thought they were a freedom fighter!’

Papa wasn’t happy. ‘Your Dada-ji *did* fight for independence. Otherwise we’d still be polishing the shoes of the British.’

Ma’s reply came quick. ‘Yes, your Dada-ji drove out the firangs, then brought me into the family to polish everyone’s shoes.’

Shubhankar looked this way and that, as his parents stared out on both sides. Ma’s locks were flying wildly in the hot wind. He wanted to reach out and tuck them behind her ears.

A few days later, a neatly sealed letter arrived in the post – a brown envelope with Papa’s name typed on a white sticker. Ma placed it on top of the fridge, out of Shubhankar’s reach. But she brought it down every few minutes, turning it around, holding it up to the sunlit window, washing and drying her hands before she touched it, careful not to smear turmeric or chilli powder.

Nani came in the afternoon as usual. When Ma told her about the letter, Nani went straight to the puja-room, where her gods were sitting pink and pretty, covered in flowers and ornaments. She lit incense sticks and walked around the house, motioning for the fragrant smoke to reach far and wide. ‘This here is God’s blessing,’ she told Shubhankar. ‘It must touch every corner of the house.’ He followed Nani around, directing the smoke to parts that had gone neglected.

Ma must have called Papa from the neighbour’s new phone, because as soon as he came home, he drew out a long sharp thing from his bag like he was pulling out a sword. A *paper-cutter*. He’d borrowed it from the office stationery. He cut through the top of the envelope, blew for the brown

paper to part, then pulled out a crisp folded sheet. As he read it, Papa's lips turned upward in a full smile. He put his arms around Ma's large frame, barely reaching her shoulders across the bump. Shubhankar had never seen his parents hug before. 'Our son is going to go to an English-medium convent school!' Papa's voice quivered. He paused after each word to let it sink in.

Ma bent to pick Shubhankar up, then realized she wouldn't be able to, her bump coming in the way. Nani popped her knuckles over her ears to ward off the evil eye. She said through tears, 'How much I've heard from everyone all my life for bearing a daughter and no son! Now *you* will make me proud, won't you?'

Shubhankar pointed to Ma's bump. 'But what if she's a girl? Will Ma hear from everyone too?' He was sure there was a sister inside.

Ma scowled. 'Don't mind Nani. She's so old-fashioned! Boy or girl, Papa and I will be very happy either way.' Nani laughed it off, then ran to the puja-room to get a box of sweets. They broke one and stuffed it into Shubhankar's mouth.

That evening, they dressed him up in the interview clothes, saying these were auspicious. They bought sweets for Papa to distribute in the office, and planned the dinner they would host for relatives, acknowledging the role of Panna-chacha's gifted trousers. They went to the Hanuman temple in the mohalla, where Papa shoved a large donation of ten rupees into the box, and Nani shoved another ten rupees into Shubhankar's pocket. They rang the bell furiously, Papa lifting Shubhankar up so he could reach the gong.

As they were leaving, Shubhankar said, 'From now on, we should pray to Jesus.'

Nani jumped. 'Oh, oh, oh, no need to pray to Christian

gods. Remember we have so many of our own. Keeping them happy only is a full-time job.' She looked away and muttered, 'What-what these parents of today will do to teach their children English. What was the point of fighting the British if all we wanted was to be like them?'

Ma placed a conciliatory hand on Nani's back. 'Relax, Amma. At least it's Jejus. Not some Allah-vallah.'

2012

Macro

‘It’s like Mr Dwivedi’s car.’ Ma’s voice is chirpy, even though she’s trying to hush.

Papa’s voice arrives in static waves on the phone.

‘Yes, then I guess it’s not very fancy.’ Ma sounds deflated. ‘What do I know about cars?’

He can hear Ma and Papa through the wall, though he tries not to listen. They’re speaking in whispers about him, like co-investigators discussing a suspect during an interrogation. When he came back that evening and told Ma about the purchase, her eyes lit up, part surprise, part elation. It was her wish of many years, her son driving her around in his own car. From convent education to car ownership, the Indian middle-class dream had finally come full circle.

But Papa is right. The car he has bought is nothing fancy. It is indeed like Mr Dwivedi’s. They’ve seen it parked outside the neighbour’s home in Lucknow for years.

Earlier that day, when he walked into a Suzuki showroom, the Sikh salesman danced around him like a child trying to sell India flags at Mumbai traffic signals, the fluorescent-pink turban glowing under harsh white lights. ‘Sir, this one is perfect to take the entire family out. I personally own this,’ the salesman said, almost leading him by the hand to a big SUV. When he moved away, the salesman pointed to another shiny

sedan. ‘And that one, sir, o-ho-ho-ho, what to say! Perfect to take your girlfriend out on a weekend drive! I personally own that one too!’ The salesman squinted to get a pulse of his customer’s needs.

But the customer walked up to a basic grey hatchback, having made up his mind even before he’d entered the shop. He paid the full amount in cash. It depleted his bank account by more than half. But he doesn’t want debts, payment plans, anything that carries into the future.

‘You will have to sign up for driving lessons, na?’ Ma says now, coming to his room after she’s done talking to Papa.

He nods. ‘Yes, but I just need to get to the office and back.’

‘No! Why just that?’ Ma dismisses him with a flick of her fingers. ‘We’ll go on long drives . . . to Matheran, to Mahabaleshwar.’ He knows Ma has a list of places in mind, ideas for weekend getaways that never happen. Usually Ma drags him to a newly opened mall, springing up like shrubs across the landscape of Mumbai. Sometimes they spot yesteryears’ movie stars and forgotten celebrities, and this leaves Ma very excited for days, something she can tell her friends in the building. He can see that she is trying hard to keep things happy, to keep him energized.

After the fall on the platform that morning, he’d sat on the bench for an hour, waiting for the trembling in his bad leg to stop. Then he’d walked out of the train station and into the showroom. He decided he couldn’t endure public transport any more. There’d been a time, back when he was new to this city, when he walked with a heady airiness, his steps springing with confidence, when the Mumbai local train was an adventure. He would lean out of the doors and let the hot winds caress his face, stretch his hand out. One time, he caught bits of paper flying in the other direction, a clandestine love letter someone was tearing up in another

compartment. He'd tried piecing it together after he'd come home. It was in Marathi, and he didn't fully understand the local language.

But all that was before the . . . the *incident*.

Not any more. Now his body is broken, his mind a mush. He is *in recovery*, as the psychologist termed it. In one of their sessions, the psychologist asked him to beware of *micro-aggressions*.

But nothing here is micro, he wanted to tell her. This whole country, this city, people screaming, horns honking, vendors hawking, passers-by shoving, dogs barking, coconuts breaking on the ground unannounced, every corner and every moment here is *macro*. Being wary of aggressions here means being wary of life itself.

He looks at Ma as she narrows her eyes on her phone screen. She catches him looking and breaks into a smile. 'Let's call Nani and give her the good news. How proud she'll be! First car in the family!'

He can hear Nani's phone ringing, then a loud, 'Hellooooo?'

'Amma!' Ma says indulgently into the phone and winks at him. 'Listen to what mischief your grandson was up to today! Just like when he was in school . . .'

1990s

Namaste

‘Give me a word without vaowls,’ Miss Lucy said, her lips sealed in a smile, hands clasping the chalk at her breasts.

It was one of her googlies. First she’d said every word needed to have at least one vowel, then she’d asked this. Not that the boys cared. They focused on the red lipstick, the tight blouse, the pencil skirt, the way she’d said *vaowls*.

Shubhankar thought about how Chintoo would mimic Miss Lucy when they were at home, the English words sounding delicious. *Dab-lingsss, time for some prow-nouns*. Chintoo jiggled his flat chest.

‘A E I O U . . . what are these?’ Chintoo would ask Ma.

‘Vaa-vels.’

Chintoo would laugh. ‘Chhee! They’re *vaowls*. Like Miss Lucy says!’

This made Papa grin with glee. He was always urging the boys to speak English at home. ‘Ashutosh Trivedi’s sons are going to become CEOs in America!’ The boys weren’t sure what a *sea-ee-ob* meant, but Chintoo thought these were people who lived under the sea because they had lots of money.

The thought now made Shubhankar smile. This caught Miss Lucy’s eye. ‘Shub-ank-ah, anything funny, dear?’

He shook his head, cheeks flushed from the attention.

He'd rather sit in his corner and look out of the window. His eyes fell on the book of hymns. They'd just come back from the chapel, and the little blue book with its crowded words in tiny print was still on the table. A blue cloth bookmark hung like a tail.

'Hymn,' he said without thinking. 'That's a word without vowels.'

Miss Lucy looked disappointed. She liked asking confusing questions and doing grand reveals at the end of the period. 'Well done, Shub-ank-ah!' She managed a pasty smile and threw him an orange lozenge. She had a stash of these locked up inside the desk. She was the only teacher who rewarded correct answers. Unlike Hindi-sir, in whose lessons the only way to know they'd got the right answer was when they weren't being rapped on the knuckles with a wooden ruler.

Shubhankar slipped the lozenge into his bag. He knew he had permission to eat it in class, but he was going to show it off to Chintoo first. Chintoo was always doing big things, like singing onstage during assembly, or making friends with older boys. That baby in Ma's tummy was now five years old. When Ma had gone to the hospital, Shubhankar had been left alone with Nani and Papa. He'd missed Ma, and was scared for her. Nani had said twenty-eight was too old to have a baby. So when Ma came back in one piece, Shubhankar was so happy he didn't care he'd wanted a sister.

It was he who'd named his brother Chintoo, the small, gurgling, burping, farting creature. His parents nodded in approval, but a few days later Papa said, 'Your brother's good name is Chitrakar Trivedi. You can call him Chintoo at home, and at school your names will be matching-matching!' Papa waited for him to show appreciation. He knew of all the effort they'd put into naming the baby. They'd argued,

sourced recommendations, consulted holy men, dipped into the epics.

But he couldn't help saying, 'Yet another long name! And why don't *I* have a nickname?'

'Because, beta, you are the eldest son, and your name should carry the pride of the family!' Papa's forefinger pointed upward, like a sage declaring a cosmic truth.

Miss Lucy was now saying, 'Hymn – this is the *only* word in the English language without vaowls. Isn't that delightful?' She threw Shubhankar another lozenge.

Everyone turned to look. He could see they were impressed. These little successes were accidents. Otherwise, Shubhankar was always middling in class, never scoring high, never showing a flair for any subject, even extra-curriculars. *Average.* Ma and Papa riddled him with questions. *Who came first in class? Did you get selected for the school play? Are you in the parade on sports day?* They fed him carrots and spinach, spooned Horlicks and Chyavanprash into his mouth, tested his mental maths on the fly, made him read the newspaper every day.

Chintoo fought back on his behalf. 'Did you come first in class, Papa? Can I see your report card, Ma?' Shubhankar observed his younger brother in wonder. He was eight, yet it had never occurred to him to talk back to Ma and Papa in this way. Chintoo misplaced books, forgot lunch-boxes, soiled his uniform, then stomped around like he wouldn't do it any differently. Their parents brushed it off with a smile. *The younger one's so naughty, so restless.*

Results days were the worst. Ma's anger was like rotting fruit, the stench growing with every passing minute. 'What are we sacrificing for? We don't even have a TV so that you boys aren't distracted from your studies.' And when they finally got a colour TV, that half the mohalla came to

watch on Sunday mornings, she changed her scolding to, 'What use is this? Let's sell it tomorrow only.'

Nani joined in. 'I grew up in a house with seventeen-seventeen cousins.' She held up her fingers even though she had only ten of them. 'The boys would eat first before we girls could fight over what was left.' Chintoo tried not to giggle. Nani continued uninterrupted, 'You've never known what it means to go hungry, to pack your things during the night and move into relatives' houses the next morning.'

She repeated the story she'd told many times. 'My father had a successful zari business in Moradabad. But during the Partition, his Muslim business partner decided to up and leave for Pakistan.' At this point in her story, her eyes became distant, wistful. 'Nawaz-bhai. I still remember him. He was so well-settled in this country all his life, but suddenly he was so keen to flee to another country he'd never been to, knew nothing about. And so . . . our zari business collapsed, partly because the shop was destroyed in the Partition riots, partly because my father lost his will to rebuild by himself. And we had to move in with relatives, a small house . . . We were seventeen cousins under one roof!'

By now, Chintoo would move on to fidgeting with something, taking advantage of Nani being distracted. This would snap Nani back to the present. 'And look at you two! So well taken care of. And yet, no gratitude!'

The boys thought they'd got really unlucky with grandparents. Everyone else seemed to have loving ones who bought them chocolates and sang them lullabies. They longed for the other three illustrious grandparents who'd died before they were born. Dada-ji had fought on Gandhi-ji's team for something called *independence*, Nana-ji had built bridges that would never fall, and Dadi-ji must've been a great cook because

Papa was always telling Ma how his mother's food had tasted better.

'God should send them back and take Nani in return,' was Chintoo's assessment of the fiasco.

'Miss Lucy wants to see you tomorrow.'

The plan had struck Shubhankar on the way home. The mid-term results were out and his marks were average again. He'd spent all day thinking about how to stop Ma from getting angry, until this brilliant idea came to him on the school bus. He ran to the door before Chintoo, bag swinging violently this way and that.

'What does that woman want to see me for?' Ma's spine stiffened. She didn't like Miss Lucy much. Shubhankar had seen Ma in previous parent-teacher meetings – how she stood in Papa's shadow, opening her mouth but no words coming out, thoughts forming in Hindi but not translating into English. Ma, who never stopped talking at home, was dumb as a puppet in front of this foreign woman, staring at Miss Lucy's pointy red heels, twisting the pallu of her cotton saree around her forefinger.

The plan worked. Ma spent all evening obsessing about this meeting, forgetting to ask about his report card. When Papa came home, she convinced him to take a half day's leave from work and come with her. 'I don't understand half of what that firang says. Why is she still here? Shouldn't she have gone back to England with her grandfather in 1947?'

Papa smiled indulgently. 'You should be grateful. That woman could've lived a life of comfort in her country. Instead she's stewing in this heat, teaching our children English so they can make something of their lives.' Papa never hid his admiration for Miss Lucy. 'Don't you see how integrated she is into our culture? She starts every meeting with a "namaste"!'

But the next morning, Papa got a call from his boss Mr Kaushik, whose word he treated more dearly than god's word. Ever since they'd got a phone line installed, after a wait of five years, the boss would call at any time, and Papa would drop everything and rush to the office.

So Ma went to meet Miss Lucy alone. Even though Shubhankar had made this meeting up, he knew Miss Lucy would find something to say. She loved meeting parents, speaking away in English, never waiting for replies, most parents struggling to keep up.

Miss Lucy joined her palms, her cleavage peeping out of her blouse. Ma averted her gaze. 'Namaste, Mrs Trivedi. So nice to see you.'

'Hello,' Ma replied, weight shifting from one foot to another.

Miss Lucy didn't disappoint. 'Did you know that Shubank-ah is an excellent artist?' She went to the cupboard, her heels tap-tapping, and brought out the sketches he'd made in art class. She placed them one by one on the table – a giraffe, a village market, and one that Miss Lucy said was her favourite – of Jesus. 'Aren't these just lovely? Who'd say he's only eight? Your son is very talented, Mrs Trivedi!'

Ma let her tense body slouch with relief. 'Thank you very much. Yes, very good.' She squeezed his shoulder and gave him a smile.

Shubhankar didn't care for his sketches or what anyone thought of them. He was just glad that the mid-term results had come and gone without event.

2012

Bridge

He sketches, the soft scribbles of the pencil cutting through the heavy December air. Ma is watering the plants on the balcony. They somehow manage to look lush and vibrant in this dreary place. Ever since she moved to Mumbai three years ago to take care of him, she's been setting up the little garden, buying pots, digging up soil to plant seeds and saplings, trying to grow dhaniya, albeit unsuccessfully.

Papa is here too, reading the newspaper and sipping his evening tea. He is here for the Christmas break. The Mayans fucked up. The world did not end. The restaurants have folded up their discounts, the movies have flopped.

Papa is trying to have a conversation, clearing his throat every now and then, looking at mother and son. Papa comes down from Lucknow every few months, Chintoo does too sometimes. They want to make the most of their time in Mumbai, away from work. But mother and son are used to coexisting in silence. They've been in the same flat every evening, every night, for three years. When he is at work, Ma spends her mornings cooking and cleaning and doing grocery runs. In the afternoons, she watches TV, endless cycles of serials in which mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law engage in one-upwomanship. In the evenings, she goes downstairs to chat to the group of ladies from other flats in

the building. At night, sometimes Ma comes to his room, sits next to him, reads a magazine while he stares at his laptop, scrolling up and down Facebook, this thing on which he's just created an account, where people are putting up photos of breakfasts in Bandra, honeymoons in Greece, trips to New York.

'One-hundred-fifty-eight?' Ma once exclaimed as she peeped into his screen. 'See? So many friends you have! Why don't you invite some over? I can cook them a nice meal? And why don't you post something here, like the others?'

He shrugged. He has never posted anything, there is nothing to post, no life updates, no opinions, no airport check-ins.

He now looks at the sketch. They are like child's lines, crooked, shadowy, moody. He has started to sketch again only recently. After the *incident*, it wasn't just his leg; his fingers were no good either. They trembled as he drew, the nerves twinging in his arm. One time, the pencil flew out and hit the wall with such violence that Ma came running, fear in her eyes. She took the sketchbook away, slowly disentangling his fingers. 'Try again later,' she said softly.

'What are you drawing?' Papa now asks.

'Nothing . . . just . . .' he replies, then adds, 'the psychologist has asked me to draw whatever comes to mind.'

Ma grunts as she enters from the balcony, the water-can dripping, leaving spots on the mosaic floor as she walks across the room. She mutters under her breath, 'I don't know what bak-bak he does with this psychologist. And here I am, sitting all day, but he won't say a word to me.' Ma doesn't like the idea of him, *her son*, being in therapy.

Papa turns away. He never asks about the therapy. He avoids asking about things he doesn't understand, lest he not know what to say in response. He finally says, 'Beta, I think it's time to apply for an MBA. You can get in anywhere – Harvard,