Bamba Beach

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ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID DEAN

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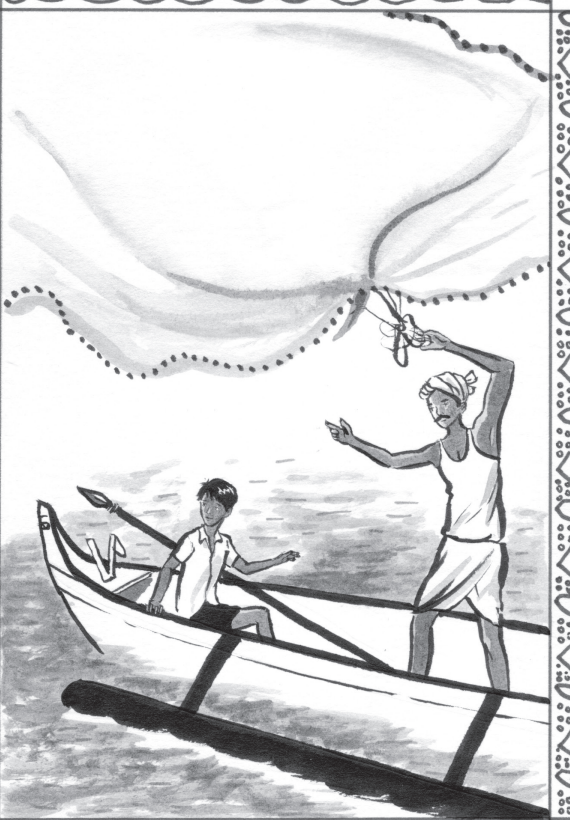
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CHAPTER ONE



Hari lived in a fishing village in Bamba Beach. Bamba is a seaside village in Goa. The nearest town was many miles away, so he was a country boy – tough, wiry and used to a simple life.

Hari wasn't a person to blow his own conch shell, but he knew he was pretty good at a few things. By the age of eleven he could:

1. Swim quite far out to sea (breast stroke and a sort of crawl).

2. Climb a coconut tree (not too often, because the coconuts were reserved for someone else to harvest).

3. Do mental arithmetic (rupees 145,718 plus rupees 308,960 equals rupees 454,678).

4. Go fishing with his father and sort out mackerel from sprat, prawn, pomfret, kingfish, lobster, and so on. Mend nets.

5. Read and write very well in his own language, Konkani. He was top of his class at St Agnes Catholic School for Boys and Girls.

6. Speak English, as in "Good morning, sir/madam", "You want go in fishing boat?", "Goodbye, have-a-nice-day".

One hot November night, Hari woke up with a start and found a full moon staring boldly at his face. He rubbed his eyes. It seemed like the Man in the Moon was grinning down at him. Hari brushed away

a mosquito that was nibbling his ear. The window was wide open. A delicious cool sea breeze drifted in, but so did a lot of other things – moths, flies, bluebottles and of course mosquitoes.

He got up and went to look outside. His gaze travelled from the ink-black shadows of coconut palms in the sandy yard to the line of silvery surf beyond the fence.

In the moonlight he saw the waves curling in and out. He imagined the sea creatures tumbling around in the dark-green waters – squid waving their tentacles, shoals of sprat, tiny crabs plopping and sucking down into the wet sand, plankton thicker than the Milky Way.

A few lights were winking far away on the horizon. They were the lights of fishing boats in the bay beside Bamba Beach.

From the next room, Hari heard the murmur of his parents' voices. They weren't asleep, either. He tried to eavesdrop.

"School fees… doctor's bill… thatch has to be repaired… boat needs new engine… grocer's bill… bills… bills…"

It was a list as long as a piece of rope. Hari was very aware that there was no money to pay for anything. The reason there was no money was because there were very few fish left in Bamba Bay. And the reason for *that* was because the bay had been hit very hard by the tsunami.

Even though the west coast of India had not been physically affected, the ocean currents had dramatically changed. The good fish, which sold quickly in the market, were now swimming much further out,

way beyond the reach of Hari's father's old coconut-wood boat.

Now a steel-hulled boat with an outboard motor would be a different matter. *Then* he would be able to travel further out and lower his nets in the deep. The tourist hotels paid good money to feed the visitors who came to Goa. But no fish equalled no money. The arithmetic was as simple as that.

Hari rubbed his eyes again. Dawn was still a long way off. The coconut palms rustled their underskirts. A very early cock crowed and Hari saw a shadow flitting past in the next-door compound. Was it a stray dog or a ghost? Or was it the granny from next door, whom everyone in the village called the Witch?

Hari yawned an ear-splitting yawn and found his bed again. He and his sister Radha weren't allowed to talk to the Witch, or any of the Next Doors. They, like Hari's family, were fisherfolk, and village gossip whispered that the father was a bit of a bully. There were rumours that he shouted at his family when he got angry. But he was rich enough to own a fishing boat with an outboard motor.

Hari fell asleep and dreamed about the Witch. She flew up to a coconut tree and started to cackle. He woke up to find it was morning and the cock was crowing loudly in their back yard.

"Is it true," Hari asked his father as he ate his breakfast, "that the Witch has cast her spells on all the other fishermen in

Bamba Beach? Everyone is saying that nobody will ever bring in a catch to equal her son's. That no one will ever be as rich as him!"

"Tchh! Complete rubbish!" Hari's father replied. He believed that praying to Lord Krishna had more power than any bad magic. "But even so, I don't want my children mixing with the Next Doors."

"Why not?" asked Hari.

"It's to do with some old family quarrel," his mother explained. "You must respect Papa's wishes."

Hari heard Papa sigh. "It's no good being jealous of Next Door's wealth. What we need is capital."

"But, Papa, how can you get Delhi? It isn't possible," wondered seven-year-old Radha.

Hari laughed. “Stupid! Papa’s not talking about the capital of *India*. Capital means money. You know – rupees, dollars, pounds, roubles!”

Radha was crushed. She was very proud of her GK, or general knowledge. On Wednesday evenings, she watched *Who’ll Become a Millionaire?* on TV, and dreamed of winning the quiz one day. Her lip trembled.

Hari, who was very fond of his sister, immediately felt ashamed. He gave her a friendly push. “Come on. Race you to the creek!”

As they ran, their bare feet smacked the damp sand. At low tide, Bamba Beach was the best running track anywhere. Near the creek, where the small river met the sea, a pack of stray dogs was barking at the

hermit crabs. The crabs ignored the strays and carried on scuttling onto the sand. Then a squabble of gulls appeared, so the dogs had something else to get excited about.

The sky was a perfect bright blue and the sea looked so inviting that Hari quickly stepped out of his shorts and ran into the water in his underpants. He swam strongly to the rocks. Then he turned over on his back, closing his eyes and letting the warm current carry him back to the shore.

Two tourists, a young man and a young woman, approached the creek. They had walked all the way from the neighbouring village. They came up to Hari's father's fishing boat, which lay on the sand. Radha was playing in the shade of the bow with some tiny blue and white shells.

Hari waded out of the water and went up to the tourists. He flashed a smile. "Good morning, sir, madam! Wanna go in gen-u-ine fishing boat? Round the bay trip is only rupees 80!"

Eighty rupees were worth less than one pound for the tourists. The trip took over an hour. Surely they would see what a bargain they were getting!

But the pair shook their heads.

Hari was disappointed. If lots of tourists came up to the creek and wanted fishing trips, then things would be very different. He knew that when demand was greater than supply, prices went up. If he could charge more, then he would start earning good money. Even if it took years, he would collect enough boat fares, get a loan from the bank and *then* they could

buy the kind of boat they needed to catch fish in deep water.

But tourists seldom walked out so far. They preferred to lie on the sand close to their hotels and sunbathe, or splash about in the waves. They were frightened of the stray dogs, of being far from their base, and goodness knows what else.

Hari looked sadly at the pair, who had turned to go back. If only he could think of a way to earn some money! What was the use of coming top of his class if he couldn't help his father and mother?

Maybe he should leave school and sell fruit on the beach. Maybe he should look for work as a tea-shop assistant or washer-up. Maybe he should invent something so brilliant that the President of India would give him a gold medal.

Maybe he should save someone's life and get a reward.

There were so many possibilities. Though, sadly, he realised that none of them were likely to happen to him.