Escape from the Child Snatchers

Sufiya Ahmed



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To Rehan and Adam

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Glossary

Angrez – white English person

Bhoot – ghost

Bombay – the city of Mumbai; the British name

Bidi – cigarette

Bidi-wala – cigarette seller

Dupatta – long scarf

Limbu-paani – lemonade

Matka – water claypot

Memsaheb – Madam

Palang – bed

Raj – British government that rules India

Saheb – Master/employer/rich man



Chapter 1

Rats. I hate rats.

I lie perfectly still, curled up in a ball, listening for the pitter patter as they run from one corner to the next, nibbling at anything in their path. Silence. Perhaps they know that the humans will wake up soon and they've scurried off.

Feeling lucky not to be sharing my morning space with the neighbourhood rats for once, I stretch my arms out wide. My right hand hits the patchy wall, and my left hand falls across Usman. I glance down at my four-year-old brother, all wrapped up in a big sheet and cocooned in Ma's arms. Despite the Indian heat, Ma insists that he remain wrapped up so that the rats cannot get to him. I don't know why she bothers because there is always one

that manages to gnaw its way through the sheet to Usman's sweet, chubby flesh. She tries to cover me too, but I end up kicking the sheet off because it makes me sweat.

I can't remember a single night when I haven't been woken by Ma's wooden plank as she bangs it against the floor to frighten the intruders away. Too often, I have felt the sharpness of a rat's tooth on my toes. Even the poison that Ma places in the four corners of the hut fails to stop them. They seem to have learned not to nibble at it over the years. It is very rare that we find a dead rat in the morning. On that special occasion, Ma picks it up by the tail and swings it into the sewage pit that forks its way at the end of our alley. It takes a few hours, but the bloated corpse eventually drifts away with the slush.

I rise to my feet, careful not to disturb Usman or Ma. The sun's first rays hit my face when I emerge out of our home. It is the seventh hut in a row of twenty. Most of our neighbours work for the Angrez saheb from the British Raj at the

grand house by the seafront, just like my ma. He insists that the locals who work for him must speak English. Ma made sure all of us could speak the rulers' language so the big saheb would never complain that Hindi or Marathi were spoken on his premises by the family of one of his servants.

I pick up the empty matka and rope-handled bucket. It is my job to collect water at the communal well. I've been performing this chore for four years now, since I was eight, and I hate it. The matka and bucket are heavy when filled with water, and I sometimes feel as if my arms will rip out of their sockets.

Yawning, I set off. Several women and girls fall into step with me, rubbing sleep from their eyes. The water queue is long, and I shift from one foot to the other, my stomach rumbling with hunger as I wait for my turn.

'Morning, Humza.' The familiar voice belongs to my best friend Ranj, who lives a few huts down with his parents and three sisters.

'Morning,' I reply.

‘I was having the nicest dream when my sister decided to jump on me,’ he grumbles. ‘She’s so lucky she’s fast, or I would have shaken her until her teeth rattled.’

I can’t help grinning at the image of Ranj’s sister jumping on his back. Ranj is always moaning about his sisters, although I know he loves them. They are younger and always going out of their way to annoy him.

‘Same dream?’ I ask.

Ranj nods. ‘The one where I have my own grand house by the Bombay seafront with a big gate and a sign stating, “No Sisters Allowed to Visit until Afternoon”.’

Ranj’s dreams are a reflection of his real-life plans. All he ever does is think about becoming a big saheb himself one day. If being a businessman means earning money, then Ranj is already on his way to becoming one.

‘How many water runs have you done already?’ I ask.

Ranj wakes up way before me so he can collect

water for some of our alley's residents. He saves the money they pay him in a secret box.

'I've done four collections already and this is my final run for home,' he replies, tapping his trouser pocket to feel his coins.

'Hurry up, you two,' a woman behind nudges us.

It's finally our turn at the well. With one swoop, I throw the rope over the wooden bar and lower the bucket down. When it is fully submerged in the water, I heave on the rope with both hands to pull the bucket up. Emptying the contents into my matka, I throw the rope down again and repeat the process. Ranj does the same and when our matkas and buckets are full, we walk back slowly, careful not to spill any of the precious water.

Inside the hut, Usman and Ma are awake. Usman greets me with a lopsided grin as he munches on his breakfast.

'Get clean,' Ma says, her back to me as she empties water from the matka to brew tea.

Our little wash area is next to the kitchen counter. With my teeth and body clean, I take the bowl of tea and single biscuit from her hands. That's when I notice her red-rimmed eyes. Did I sleep through her tears again?

'Ma, have you been crying?' I ask.

'No,' she denies, although she is unable to hide the tremble in her voice. 'What makes you say that?'

'I can tell from your eyes . . . and your voice.'

Ma's face crumbles and fresh tears gather in her eyes. 'It's Dani's birthday today.'

Dani's birthday! How could I have forgotten his birthday?

'He will be seventeen,' she adds, sobbing in between her words. 'All alone . . . away from home . . . and who knows in what state.'

Dani is my brother. He sailed away to England two years ago and never returned.

I push my hand through my hair, spiking up the ends. Ma's sobs increase and I know she is seeing Dani in my face. Everybody says that

I look so much like him that I'm a walking, talking reminder of him. I think they are right because when I peep a look in the hallway mirror at Saheb's house I can see a younger version of Dani staring back at me.

'He did that with his hair too,' she says, wiping her face with the back of her hand.

'Ma . . .' I say helplessly. 'Shall I shave it off? At least you won't be reminded of him every time you see me.'

'Why would I not want to be reminded of him?' Ma demands incredulously.

I give up. There is nothing I can say or do to make Ma feel better about losing her eldest son.



Chapter 2

'Humza!'

I jump at the sound of my name.

Sister Joan's blue eyes pierce me with disapproval. My teacher is not impressed that I've drifted off into my own thoughts in her mathematics class.

'What is more important than sums right now?' Sister Joan demands.

How do I tell her that I'm thinking about my big brother who left on a ship two years ago, promising to return within nine months? My big brother Dani. My hero. The one who I trailed behind ever since I could walk.

I was remembering how we would go down to Bombay beach, build a fort in the sand as high as we could and then step back to watch the tide

wash it away. Then, before heading home, Dani would climb a coconut tree on the beach and cut down two coconuts with a knife. He would break the hard shells against the rocks, and we would drink the water and munch on the sweet white flesh.

After Dani left, Ranj and I tried to climb a coconut tree, but we didn't get very far. Our legs were cut and bruised by the harsh bark. Ranj offered to buy us a single coconut to share from a beach seller. We munched away, but I knew it didn't taste the same as when my brother cut one directly from its branch.

How do I tell Sister Joan that I miss my brother? Or even that it makes me feel equally hurt and cross that I can't make my ma stop crying over him?

I share none of this and drop my head to show humility. Sister Joan encourages us to do this a lot. 'I'm sorry,' I mumble.

Sister Joan clucks her tongue and turns back to the board, her chalk making scraping noises

as she draws more numbers. I shoot a glance at Ranj. His expression is one of boredom. We must endure another hour and then we will be free from the St Angela Missionary School.

All fourteen children in this class have one or both parents working for the Angrez saheb. It was his wife, Maureen Memsaheb, who insisted that all children of her household staff attend missionary school to learn to read, write and do maths. She was the one who recruited the nun, Sister Joan, from the St Angela Mission.

When the two-hour morning lesson is finally over, we all push and shove each other in our haste to get out of the dark, dreary room and into the sunshine. The classroom is based in a small shed away from the big house. We are kept out of sight so as not to disturb our mothers from their work dusting and mopping after the saheb's family. I am the only one who is allowed to approach the house so that I can collect Usman from Ma and take him home with me.

‘See you later,’ Ranj shouts, running off.

I walk towards the main residence. Made out of white stone and pillars, it is one of the grandest mansions on the Bandra seafront.

I pass by the maids dressed in white saris and enter the house. No one pays me any attention. I know Ma and Usman will be with Maureen Memsaheb in her quarters. Maureen Memsaheb likes to play with Usman in the mornings while Ma sorts her clothes out for the day’s engagements. Maureen Memsaheb thinks Usman is an adorable boy and lavishes sweets on him. Once or twice, I’ve managed to pop the leftovers in my mouth when no one is looking.

I am just about to knock on the door when Maureen Memsaheb’s voice drifts out.

‘So how old is he then?’

‘Seventeen,’ Ma says.

They are discussing Dani. I know that the conversation will stop if I go in and I want to hear what they have to say about my brother. I stand by the door and listen.

‘It is rather a long time for Dani to be away,’ Maureen Memsaheb says. ‘I remember him. Tall and gangly, even then when he was fifteen.’

‘Memsaheb, may I ask you a question?’ Ma asks in her most obedient voice.

‘You may.’

‘When you travel back to England for your next holiday, could my sons and I come with you?’

‘Whatever for?’

‘So I may search for Dani.’

Maureen Memsaheb laughs. Even to me, standing outside, it sounds forced and fake.

‘My dear Fatima,’ Maureen Memsaheb says in a mocking tone, ‘England is a very big place, and it wouldn’t be safe for a woman to be searching for a man on the streets. You must put the idea out of your mind at once.’

‘But—’

‘No arguments, Fatima.’

‘Yes, Memsaheb . . .’ Ma’s voice trails off. She won’t risk Memsaheb’s displeasure.

Silence follows. I frown, not liking the way Maureen Memsaheb has talked Ma out of searching for her son. She knows Ma can't afford the fare to sail to England. The only way is to travel with the saheb's family in place of other servants who go with them every year.

'Fatima . . .'

Ma doesn't respond.

'Oh, Fatima.' Maureen Memsaheb's voice has a tinge of regret. 'Please don't cry. We don't even know if Dani is alive.'

Ma's sobbing grows louder, and my frown deepens. Honestly, Maureen Memsaheb has no tact.

'You have a middle son who can go and look for Dani,' Maureen Memsaheb says. 'Surely he should stop being so useless and be responsible. We've discussed this before.'

I stagger back from the door in shock, unable to listen to any more. Maureen Memsaheb is talking about *me*. She is saying that I need to be responsible, and that I am useless. Does Ma

think that too? Has she been secretly hoping for me to travel to England to bring Dani back?

I turn round and speed down the stairs and out of the house. The beach lies at the front, and I make my way to the sand. I need to hear the waves to drown out the roaring in my head.

Useless. Useless. Useless. Useless.

Now all I can think about is how Dani stepped up to be responsible two years ago after Pa died. The ships that sail between England and India are always searching for Indian seamen. They call them lascars. They promise a good wage and the opportunity to see the world. Dani had taken the job and told Ma that he would return in nine months with a good wage packet.

We hadn't heard from him since . . .

After about fifteen minutes, I straighten up from my slumped position and head back to the house to collect Usman. My little brother is waiting for me by the front door. Ma is with him, and she frowns at me.

'What took you so long?'

The annoyance is clear in her voice. I shrug in response, avoiding her eyes.

'Take his hand,' she instructs. 'I must get back upstairs to Memsaheb. I will see you both at home.'

I fold Usman's hand into my own as we walk away, just like Dani did with me when I was little, and I make up my mind. I am the responsible one now. I need to become a better son. Just like Dani.