
Flyaway Boy
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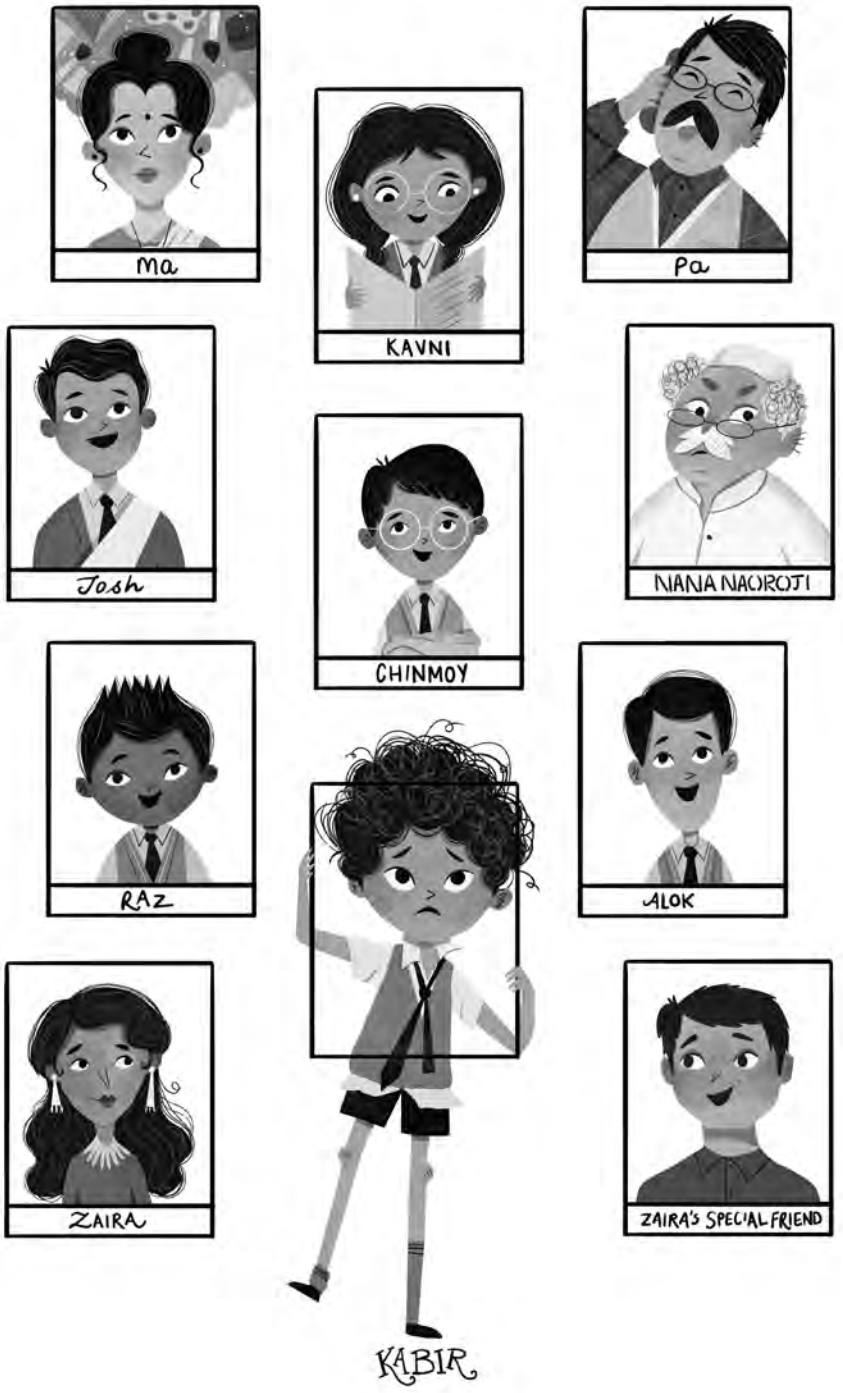
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For Keya
For Tam



A BIT ABOUT THE BOXES

(You can skip over the boxes, if you like. Just hold your breath—and jump! The story starts from the next page. Or maybe from inside a box. Only one way to know . . .)

Everyone lived in boxes.

They just didn't know that.

So the world was made up of billions of boxes, all avoiding each other. For how could a grey box go and stack up near a set of pink boxes? What would the pink boxes think? Would they close into themselves, pile up and form a wall? Or maybe they would open a fold and peep out? If they did open up, who knows what horrifying thing the grey boxes would bring in? No, it was enormously difficult, and quite ill-advised, to get out of these boxes.

What's more, the boxes had labels on them.

Kabir considered Ma's box. It was full of too many things; it was bursting at the seams. It had

recipes and gardening tips and office mails to reply to and motherly things to do. All over the box were labels that said "BUSY" in black marker, and it was sealed all over. Ma was a researcher. The label which couldn't be seen, however, was that of "Artist", which she had been long, long ago. Only, for too many years, it had had other labels stamped over it.

Pa was loud and friendly and funny. And his label said: "Call Mr Anand of 15 C" with his mobile number on it, like the flyers pushed under people's doors. And so people did call him at all hours of the day. "Mr Anand, could you please take a look at the lock on my door, my car's tyre, my sick grandfather, my broken computer . . ."

Kabir's sister Kavni lived in a neat little box which announced, through its flawlessly printed labels, "Top of the Class", "Perfect" and "Hope of the Family". Kavni used to be fun, but now she was in Year 11 and disappeared into her box to study all the time. No-fun no-more!

Kavni's friend Josh had a box that everyone wanted. The labels said "Dude" and "Champ" and "School Head Boy" and a label for parents, to point out to their kids—"Why Can't You Be More Like This?"

A bit about Zaira (who may not come into the

story at all) who lived next door and was working in an environmental architecture office, whose box was labelled "Pretty" so no one else saw beyond that: that she was a tree climber or a guava eater, for example. And about Zaira's special friend who worked in the same office: he was kind and funny but his biggest label which hid everything else was "Not of the Same Caste". Oh, all right, they don't come into the story. Their boxes just happened to.

When you turn the street corner to the white house with the iron gate, you see a faded old box. The retired judge, Nana Naoroji, only he was "Angry" and "Grumpy" and "Conceited" and so was called "Nana Know-It-All". One day, Kabir heard Ma comment to a neighbour about how lonely he looked. And from then on, a "Lonely" label also slapped itself across his box.

And what of Kabir, the boy who saw the boxes? "Such an odd kid," he'd heard a pram-pushing aunty tell another. And of course he got this a lot: "Why can't you . . ." (be like so-and-so/finish your homework/pay attention/fit in). So that was it. His box just wouldn't fit into the slot it was meant to—in the classroom, on the playing field, in his own family sometimes.

IT BEGAN WITH A PIERCING SCREEAAAMMMM

On a dark night, in a sleeping town nestled in a valley in the hills, of single-storeyed houses shuttered against the winter cold, where the nightwatchmen dozed with mufflers wrapped over their ears and newspaper stuffed into their threadbare jumpers, and street dogs huddled in heaps near the dying embers of fires made at make-shift tea stalls, while street lamps made a half-hearted attempt to pierce the thick mist, and mosquitoes decided it was too cold to take the trouble to bite anyone, categorically postponing their dengue-giving plans for the summer vacation, a bus stopped at the town's main bus stop but no one got off . . .

On this night, a soft, stealthy shadow approached Kabir's single-storey house, leaping like a high note over the low hedge and slinking towards the window at the back, which belonged to the room in which

Kabir slept—a small room which doubled up as a storeroom in which Ma's papers and paints and pots were stored.

Just as the shadow uncoiled itself and pounced at the window, which (like other windows we've pointed out in the town) was shuttered, and tore at the wooden shutters with a low, guttural growl . . . Kabir let out an ear-piercing, mist-piercing, sweet-dream-piercing scream.

Don't Make Things Up

The lights in the house flicked on rapidly.

Pa stumbled out of the house in his kurta-pyjama without his glasses on, and without a weapon of any sort or even a torch (therefore, of little help).

Ma ran into the kitchen, grabbed a heavy pan and then rushed towards Kabir's room (probably more helpful).

Kavni stayed in bed, covering her head with her 100 per cent woollen blanket (of the least help of all).

"Who's there?" Pa shouted out at the trees and deserted streets, not seeing much beyond the swirls of mist. He stepped forwards belligerently and tripped over the milk pan left out for the morning milkman, stubbing his toe so badly that he joined in the screaming for a short while.

Other lights in neighbouring houses snapped on.

"Who's there?" shouted a number of voices.

"I don't know," Pa shouted back.

"Was it a burglar, Mr Anand?"

"I don't know."

"Who was screaming?"

"I don't know."

Ma knew, however, because pan in hand, she'd reached Kabir's room and switched on the light to find nothing there.

Kabir pointed to the window. "It attacked me."

"What?"

"A large dark shadow. A dragon-leopard that came in from the hills of the North, Ma. It was at least six feet long and had nails like a sultan's sword."

"Did you see it, Kabir?"

"No, but . . ."

Ma and Pa were both in the room by now.

"Kabir, it's two in the morning. You have woken up the entire neighbourhood. It was just a bad dream. Go back to sleep. There are no leopards or ghosts or dragons or shadows or anything at all. Don't make things up."

"I can't go back to sleep when the shadow's outside."

"Keep the light on. Shadows disappear in the light."

"Can I have a glass of chocolate milk? Chocolate milk melts shadows away."

Pa nodded and went off to make a mug of warm Bournvita while Ma went back to sleep. Kavni switched on her lamp and began to study a chapter she'd studied four times already.

Kabir took out his eighty-page notebook from under his mattress and added "Shadows" to his list:

Don't Make up:

-Imaginary Friends
-My Own Language
- Funny names for people on tv
- Voices of aliens who live on the roof
-Names of illnesses that I have on Monday morning
- History Answers
- Excuses for not eating my dinner
- Stories that aren't true
- Shadows

We're sorry you had to meet Kabir this way. We'd have liked to introduce him properly. In his starched white school uniform, with his hair slicked down (Ma sometimes adding a little spit on the comb to make those stubborn curls behave).

Yes, we had plans to introduce him like most books do. Perhaps on a fried-egg-sunny morning, while boarding the yellow school bus. But then that night scream happened. It wasn't expected. We'd all planned to have a good night's sleep and wake up today to introduce Kabir. But then Kabir always does things that aren't expected.

He should stick to the rules.

His curly hair should stick to his head.

His white socks should stick to his skinny legs.

His "shoulds" should stick to what "shoulds" should do.

Kabir is just so odd. He's not an average boy in Year 6. He's not like the others. He imagines things all the time. Even in class.

Can you imagine that!

THE LINE THAT WOULDN'T STAND IN LINE

"First, draw a straight line," said the maths teacher, who was trying to teach them the basics of geometry. She drew a straight horizontal line on the board.

Everyone smoothed down their papers, and pulled out their rulers, and bent their necks, and stuck out their tongues (well, not everyone, only three did the last thing). They focused, and began to pull their pencils alongside the rulers, drawing slim black lines across their paper.

Kabir did too. Then, when the kids were satisfied with their straight black lines, they stopped and looked up at the teacher.

Kabir's line didn't stop. "Hey," he whispered under his breath, "you're supposed to end there. On the page."

The line didn't have ears so it couldn't listen, and so it didn't know it was supposed to stop. So

it went on, across the graffiti-covered wood of the table, through the darkened mango-shaped patch where someone had spilt ink many months ago, down the leg of the table and straight across the classroom till, to Kabir's astonishment, it climbed out of the window and streaked down the corridor outside, where it met many lines in different colours which were painted along the corridor's walls. But this line zoomed across them all and across the corner, almost knocking down someone. And that someone was Headteacher De.

"Kabir!"

Kabir looked up and saw the maths teacher looking quite annoyed.

"Have you drawn your line?"

"Yes. Oh no." Kabir looked at the blank page in front of him. "It ran away."

"What ran away?"

"My line. You didn't say when to stop. So the line didn't stop."

Chinmoy, who was top of the class, began to laugh loudly. He was a brilliant boy who studied hard, behaved impeccably, played the sitar, and was on the school chess and quiz teams. In fact, he was so very perfect, that (even though he admitted it only to himself) he got a bit bored and found Kabir

a welcome distraction: Kabir was a clown without knowing it, and Chinmoy took every chance to make the rest of the class see that.

And obviously, Chinmoy was also the class leader. So whatever he did, the others followed.

Everyone in class laughed loudly. They slapped their desks, they wiped their eyes. Even Nathu, who had been searching for his rubber under the desk and had missed the joke, laughed, then bent down again to look for the rubber (which he never found in the end—where do escaped rubbers go?).



The teacher's face was straight. Not a ☺ or a ☹.

"Well, stop! Will you please request your line to stop?"

Kabir's line shot back, like a rubber band, and with a clap of thunder that no one else heard, it thwacked the page. And there it sat like every other kid's line. Slim, black and well-behaved.

"Good!" the teacher said. "Now that we have all got it right, let's go on."

"Pssst," whispered Kabir's line. "I had the chance to be so much more. To be a telephone wire on which birds rated the juiciness of worms they'd just caught. A yellow line in the middle of a road going on and on forever. A string keeping a kite from getting lost. Maybe even a horizon. But now, I'm like every other one. A line."