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Opening extract from

# Broken Glass

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# Chapter 1

We hadn't always lived on an island. We moved on to our island when I was twelve and my brother Sandeep was nine. Up until then, we would never even have dreamed of living anywhere like that. Why would anyone dream of such a thing if they had a house with its own path and a gate at the end of it? Our house had a path and a gate and two bedrooms and a kitchen, and a room that we could sit in to watch television. We didn't all have to sleep in the same room, and we didn't have to walk all the way down the road to fetch water from a standpipe like some families had to. Some days no water came from the standpipe and then the other families had to struggle all the way over to the well at the bottom of the village.

Before we moved to our island, we went to school every day, Sandeep and I, dressed up smartly in our

bright white shirts and dark grey trousers, with shoes on our feet. Not everyone in our village went to school – not everyone had shoes either – but I was glad that I did because then I could look forward to a good job when I was older. Some of the children who lived nearby had never been to school. They stared at us as if we were creatures from another world when we walked past with our satchels banging up and down on our backs. Some of them made rude comments, but we just ignored them. Most of the time we felt sorry for them, because they were sent by their parents to work in the fields instead of learning how to read and write. We knew they would never have a good job if they couldn't read or write.

Appa worked for the railways back then. Early every morning, before we were awake, our father rode off on his bicycle, straight-backed and proud in his uniform, to his office above the station in the nearby town. He dealt with timetables and ticketing, an important job, Amma said, because if he got the timetables wrong there might be a catastrophic accident. In fact, there were frequent accidents, but none of them was my father's fault.

'It's attention to detail, that's what counts,' he used to say. 'If you take care with the little things, the big things will take care of themselves.'

As soon as he had left the house, Amma cleared up after his breakfast with a great clattering of pans. That was our signal to leap from our beds and run across the yard to the toilet and washbasin, before Paati woke and demanded to be helped there first: that would make us late for school because sometimes she took a very long time. Paati was my father's mother. She shared the bedroom with Sandeep and me, and we'd grown used to the chorus of nocturnal snorts that came from her corner. If we did wake up, we would lie in our bed and mimic the sounds, giggling quietly until Sandeep turned on his side, dug his chin in my shoulder and fell sound asleep again.

We ate our breakfast with Amma if Paati wasn't ready to get up, otherwise we sat on our own and tucked into rice dumplings, moong dal dhosas or, if we were really lucky, homemade jelabis which dripped syrup down our chins and sent us rushing to the kitchen sink to wipe the stickiness from our hands. Amma was a good cook, we thought, even if Paati was always complaining to Appa that everything was too spicy or too dry or too bland or too stodgy. Paati complained to Appa about a lot of other things as well. She regularly accused Amma of being 'insensitive to the needs of a sick old woman'; of failing to provide her

with the comforts she deserved; of ignoring the fact that she was racked with pain from her kidneys, her bunions, her arthritis, her lungs. Amma argued that nothing she did would ever be good enough in her mother-in-law's eyes, and that Paati needed a servant rather than a daughter-in-law.

'I have a husband and children to look after as well as your mother,' she said to my father more than once. 'I cannot always drop everything the minute she demands my attention.'

'She is old,' Appa replied. 'Her mind is strong but her body is letting her down and that makes her frustrated.'

'She could still make an effort to be more agreeable,' Amma said. 'She should try saying please and thank you once in a while.'

'And you should try putting yourself in her shoes,' was Appa's answer before he changed the subject.

Mostly my mother would let Paati's biting comments pass over her head. She had no wish to upset Appa, nor to push him into choosing between the two women in his life. It was hard for her, though, even I could see that, because as soon as I stopped being a sweet little toddler, Paati began to pick on me as well.

Only Sandeep and Appa escaped her lashing tongue. They could do no wrong as far as she was concerned. They were the heroes, Amma and I were the villains.

When Sandeep and I finished breakfast, we set off for school. Amma, though, was left on her own with Paati, and by the time we reappeared in the early afternoon the strain showed in the tightness of her lips and the deep crease between her eyebrows.

Once a month, Amma took us into the town in a taxi. It was a real treat to go into town. Many of the villagers couldn't afford the fare, but they waved goodbye to us and we waved back as though we were film stars. As soon as we arrived, we climbed the stairs to Appa's office to say hello. I liked going there, even though it was noisy and stank of sweat and was so hot you could hardly breathe. Appa had a big desk with a computer and a telephone. On the wall behind him was a huge map showing all the stations in the region. It was always covered with pins, which Appa warned us not to touch because if we did the whole rail network might come to a standstill. We never understood how moving a pin could have such an effect, but we did as we were told because we didn't dare risk making Appa angry.

There were two other desks in the office. One was

occupied by Ramit Tandon, who was sixteen, as skinny as a bean stick, and leapt like a startled rabbit every time my father ordered him to do something. He shrank into his seat the minute we opened the office door, shuffled papers in an attempt to look busy, chewed the inside of his mouth, and refused to make eye contact with us. Amma said that he had been terrified of other children ever since being bullied mercilessly at school because he was cross-eyed. I so badly wanted to see what he looked like with his eyes crossed, but not once did I manage to catch Ramit Tandon off guard.

Behind the other desk sat Naresh Kumar. He had worked for the railways for fifty-two years, and knew everything there was to know about engines and rolling stock. He only had one hand. He had lost the other when he fell from the back of his uncle's motorbike at the age of ten. Sandeep and I were fascinated by the knobbly stub that remained and by the way he used it as a prop. We were fascinated, too, by his black and broken teeth. Appa said they were rotten because of the bowl of sweets he kept on his desk, and which he held out to Sandeep and me whenever we visited. If he wasn't sucking on a sweet, a beedi dangled precariously from his mouth and

bobbed up and down when he spoke. His voice sounded as though he'd swallowed a box of nails, but it was caused, Appa said, by the smoking.

Appa was always on the telephone when we arrived, shouting instructions and waving his arms around. I thought how important he must be to have two people working for him in the office and more people at the end of a telephone waiting for him to tell them what to do. I knew that when I grew up I wanted to be just as important and have people working for me, even if I did think that Appa was the most scary person in the world when he shouted.

While we waited for him to finish talking, we stood at the back of the office and looked through the window down to the station below. We never grew tired of gazing at the crowds who were gathered there in the hope that a train might soon take them to their destinations. It was like watching the whole world crammed into one small space. There were smartly dressed young men and women on their way to work. There were mothers with children and babies. There were older people setting off to visit members of their families. There were porters, taxi drivers, newspaper vendors, and hawkers of everything from silk scarves to bottled water. We could see

them all from our watchtower, but hardly anyone saw our eager faces peering over the bottom of the frame.

The continuous thunder of the stationary engines was bad enough in Appa's office, but the roar from those that were just arriving or departing was brain-numbing even with the window closed. It was never open. You wouldn't have been able to think at all with it open. You wouldn't have been able to breathe at all. We could see the foul fumes from the engines rising, swirling, trying to find a way through the glass. And on the other side of the room the windows also remained firmly shut, to keep out the noise and dirt from the busy street below. Amma worried about my father's health, stuck as he was all day long in this furnace.

'You'll suffocate one day,' she was always saying, 'and nobody will know.'

'Oh, they'll know soon enough, when all the trains come to a halt,' replied my father.

'When I'm grown up, I'm going to have a great big office with windows that open out on to the sea,' I said.

'Well, you'll be the lucky one,' said my father.

'I'm going to work hard,' I said simply.

'And you think I don't,' he grimaced.

Our visits only lasted about ten minutes. There was no real purpose to them except that they allowed Appa to show us off to Naresh and Ramit and, by slipping some rupees into our hands, to show himself off as a loving and kind husband and father. When we left, we skipped alongside our mother and pestered her to be allowed to spend our rupees, which were already burning holes in our neatly pressed pockets. We stared longingly into toy shops and sports shops, and once, between us, we pooled enough money to buy a cricket bat and ball. But the ball was quickly lost and the bat split in two when we used a stone as a replacement. Mostly, all we could afford to buy was a pack of cards or an ice cream, but it was the only money our father ever gave us so, no matter how little, it always seemed like a fortune.

For the rest of our day in town, we followed my mother around as she stocked up on everything from turmeric to cotton thread to notepaper to light bulbs. Some of the things were available in our village shop, but Amma disliked the queues and having to listen to other villagers gossiping.

'They're so busy talking about other people's lives, they forget to look at their own,' she said, 'which is probably just as well because they may not like what they see.'

We loved gazing into shops at all the things we had seen advertised on television but which nobody we knew possessed. My favourites were the stores selling electrical goods like television sets that would take up half a wall in one of our rooms at home, and laptop computers that were so thin I couldn't believe they could fit anything inside them. Sandeep stood with his mouth wide open whenever we saw demonstrations of computer games, and once, when a shopkeeper allowed me to have a go on one where you had to fire at aliens from another planet, I was so excited that I couldn't have hit one even if it had taken up the whole of the screen.

'How anyone can afford such frivolities I shall never know,' my mother said, but I think she enjoyed looking almost as much as we did, especially at the clothes shops with their dazzling collections of silks and saris, and at the jewellers with their gold and diamonds.

By the time Amma had bought everything she needed and we were ready to go back home, we were loaded down with bags which banged irritatingly against our flagging legs as we tried to hire a taxi. We threw ourselves on to the seats when at last one stopped to pick us up. Within seconds Sandeep was asleep, his head bumping up and down on my

shoulder, even though the driver always chattered loudly all the way to our gate.

The joy of our monthly outing was quickly snuffed out. Even as we walked up to our front door, Sandeep and I exchanged grimaces. We went through it to be greeted by Paati's disapproving scowl. Sitting in her chair in the corner of the room, her shoulders hunched and elbows pressed into her sides as though she were freezing cold, she would complain bitterly that we had no feelings if we could leave an old woman on her own for so long without so much as a glass of water. Sandeep would scamper over and lay his head on her lap. I would rush to the kitchen and fetch a drink. Amma would sigh deeply, apologise, but point out that it was necessary sometimes for her to leave the house and that it would be good for Paati to have some fresh air herself once in a while.

'Why don't you go into the village and sit in the shade with your friends?' my mother often asked. 'It will put fresh air into your lungs. You can watch the world go by.'

'Pah!' Paati snarled. 'You think these poor legs of mine can carry me that far when they cannot even take me to the kitchen? Do you think my lungs can cope with fresh air? Do you think I want to sit and listen to tittle-tattle?'

We all knew that Paati was quite capable of getting up and doing things for herself when there was nobody there to be at her beck and call. On Sundays, after we had all been to the temple, Appa would take her for a walk and, though she leaned heavily on a stick as she went down the path, she scarcely used it at all once she was on her way. We loved having the house to ourselves during the hours she was gone. Sandeep and I indulged in noisy play-fights, while Amma threw open the shutters to let in the light and put on her favourite radio programmes. Even when Paati returned, the atmosphere was brighter as long as Appa was around. Paati was a different person when her favourite son was there to indulge her. He remained aloof from us though. I don't think he saw it as his role to spend too much time with us, though Amma said he was deeply proud of our every small achievement at school.