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An extract from

Walking the Bear

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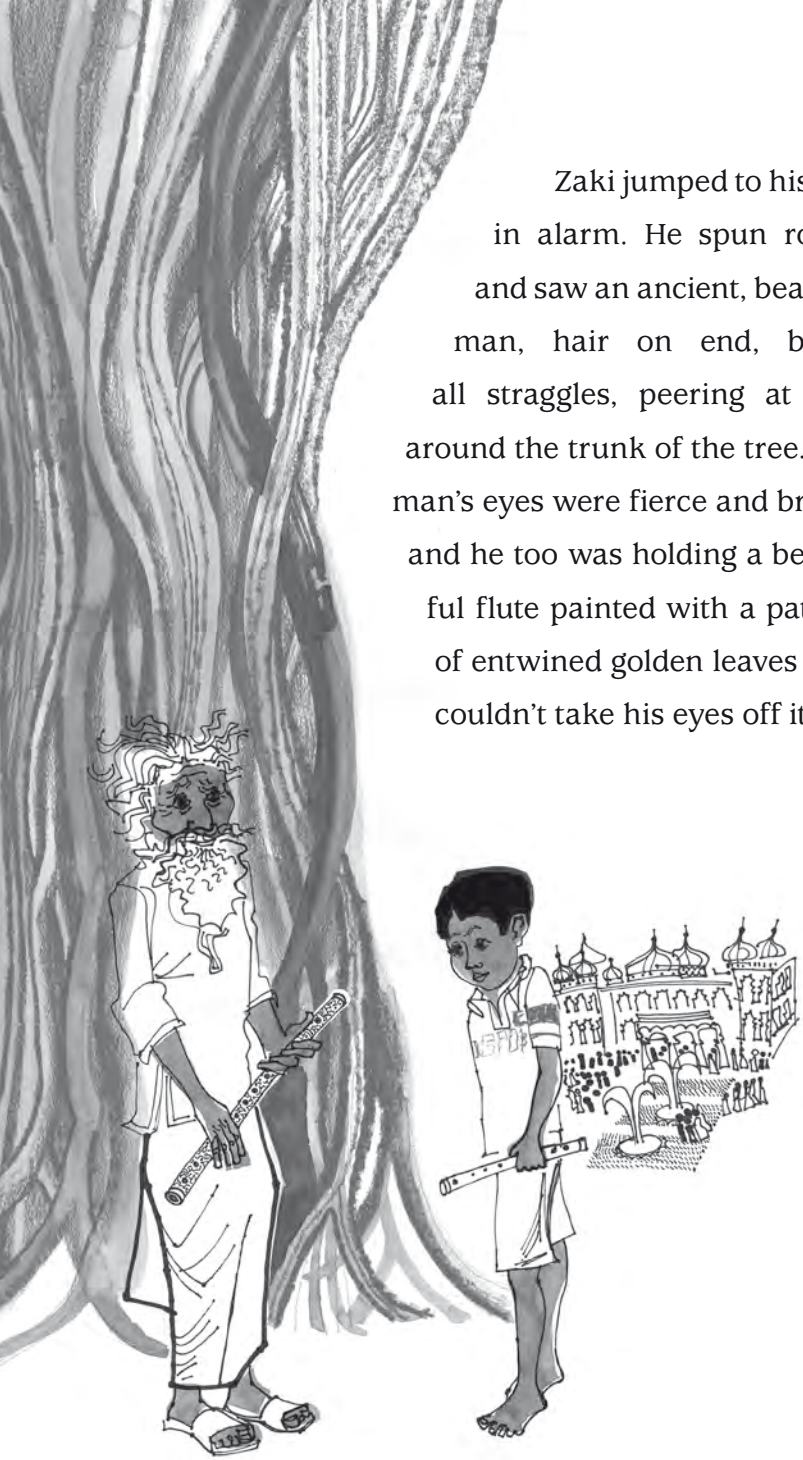
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Zaki jumped to his feet in alarm. He spun round and saw an ancient, bearded man, hair on end, beard all straggles, peering at him around the trunk of the tree. The man's eyes were fierce and bright, and he too was holding a beautiful flute painted with a pattern of entwined golden leaves Zaki couldn't take his eyes off it.

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"Yes. It's a good instrument," the old man said, replying to Zaki's thoughts. "But only a fine player can play a fine instrument. *You* need more practice, boy. A *lot* more. Work on your breathing. And your *soul*. Not enough *soul* getting into your notes yet. You need to learn to make your mind *quieter*."

And with that, the old man stomped away, towards Mr Kahn's splendid house through the dry stubble of last year's crop.

Zaki watched him go, with his mouth open.

"Zaki! *Zaki!*" Naz's voice sounded rough, as if she had been calling for a long time. Zaki could see her walking up the field edge. She must have been sent to find him, which probably meant he was in trouble.

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Chapter Three

The start of the parade had been brought forward by an hour so everyone was in a rush. Tareef threw a bright green shirt at Zaki, together with the collars and leads that the cubs would have to wear in the parade.

"Smarten up, boy!" Tareef growled. "We need to be in position soon."

But Tareef wasn't really cross. Performing always put him in a good mood. Zaki often thought that Bilqis was just his father's excuse for doing what he liked best, which was telling stories and showing off.

As the sun sank behind the trees, all the performers and animals were lined up at the entrance to the garden and the parade began. Two drummers led the way. Behind them walked the elephant, a rather moth-eaten old creature, but still splendid enough in her bejewelled headdress. Her mahout* was a little old and moth-eaten too and struggled

***mahout** a person who cares for a working elephant.

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to button a ragged gold jacket over his round tummy. Then came a troupe of performing monkeys and their handlers – a family very like Zaki's own who he'd seen before at big events like this. He always thought that the monkeys had faces so clever, so cunning that *they* might be the keepers and the humans their slaves. Then came Tareef in a shining white dhoti* and a waistcoat encrusted with sequins. He held himself very tall and straight and his dark hair spread like a cloud above his solemn, noble-looking face. Bilqis walked on her hind legs beside him, her long fur combed to a glossy shine and a necklace of silver bells around her furry throat. One of Tareef's long, elegant hands held Bilqis' rope, pulling it very slightly upwards so she wouldn't drop down and walk on four feet. She huffed grumpily at the cubs if they got too close, so Zaki was careful to keep a few paces behind. He held their leash in one hand and played the mughli* with the other. The cubs were overawed by it all and stuck close to Zaki's legs.

***dhoti** a traditional Indian men's garment, like a sarong.

***mughli** a small flute used with a little handheld drum, the damru, by Kalandar bear keepers to announce their arrival.

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Following the animals came a flock of child acrobats doing cartwheels and behind them more drummers and musicians. The whole of the parade was wrapped in a confusion of loud, happy noise, as it snaked its way between the cheering guests. Zaki looked among the musicians for the old man, but there was no sign of him, or his beautiful flute.

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The sky grew dark and the world became a fairy tale of glowing lanterns and the smiling faces of the party guests. Zaki was happily lost in it all – the confused music, the cheering, the smell of food and woodsmoke. From time to time, he glimpsed Naz, his mother or one or other of his sisters in the crowd, smiling their most charming, businesslike smiles and selling the charms and amulets, sweets and puris*.

The parade reached a ring of flat ground lit with a string of electric lights around it and the show began. The elephant stood, rather unwillingly, on her hind legs and lifted her tubby mahout in her trunk, the monkeys raced and misbehaved to order, making the crowd shriek with laughter and the acrobats leapt and spun as if gravity was just a silly story that someone had made up.

Then it was Tareef's turn. The moment he stepped into the light, the crowd grew quiet. He beat a rhythm on the damru* and Bilqis stepped from one foot to another as she'd been trained to do

***puri** a crispy pancake with a spicy filling.

***damru** a hand-held drum played by twisting the wrist so that the ball inside strikes the drum skin.

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all her life. She was very old now and her stepping was a bit slow and wobbly, but all the same Tareef's black hair and her dark coat made them seem like two different sorts of bear, dancing slowly together. Then Tareef began to tell the story of Bilqis' life as "Queen of the Bears".

"She was the fiercest bear of all time," Tareef told the enraptured audience. "All the animals feared her. The dhole*, the wolf and even the mighty tiger ran from the scourge of her paws."

Of course, it was complete rubbish: Bilqis had been captured as a helpless cub, the same as every other dancing bear. But the audience loved it, especially as Bilqis had been taught to snarl when the rope was pulled in a certain way, and she did this now. Even though she didn't have big canine teeth to show, the crowd jumped. Zaki smiled; he wondered how many of them knew that sloth bears like Bilqis were indeed fierce hunters … of ants, termites and figs!

The snarl was the cue for Zaki and the cubs to

***dhole** an Indian wild hunting dog. These are beautiful and very fierce.

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make a brief appearance, so that Tareef could tell another bit of the story.

"Once a year, Queen Bilqis returns to her forest kingdom to meet Jambavan* the King of the Bears. And these are their cubs, with the blood of royal bears in their veins."

Zaki made a circuit with the cubs, aware that both he and the little bears were supposed to be looking regal. But the cubs were skittish, and Zaki felt thoroughly uncomfortable in the too-tight, shiny shirt. He was glad when they could move out of the light and let his father take centre stage again.

During the finale, Bilqis walked on all four feet so she could carry small children on her back. The first was the birthday boy, Mr Kahn's son, one year old and fat as a grub. He gurgled and grabbed at Bilqis' fur, pulling it hard. She might have snarled but Tareef kept an especially tight hold on her rope at this point: bitten babies were *not* good business. While Kahn Junior and other small children rode

***Jambavan** King of the Bears in Indian myths.

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on Bilqis' back, Tareef told how Bilqis "Queen of the Bears" had been persuaded to leave the forest to bring health and good fortune to human babies. The audience cheered wildly and the show came to an end.

Tareef and Bilqis melted into the dark and Zaki was about to follow them when Naz wiggled her way towards him through the throng.

"That famous old flute player you like, whats-hisname," she said breathlessly, "he's playing up near the house. You should go."

"*Jayarman*?" Zaki exclaimed. "*Raju Jayarman*?"

"Yes, that's the one!" Naz said. "Go on, Zaki! I'll take the cubs." She grabbed the cubs' leashes and pushed him away.

"Thanks, Naz." Zaki smiled. "Don't let go of them, not for a second. They'll just run after me!"

On a little stage not far from the terrace, the performance had already begun. Zaki felt the music slithering through the night air and straight into his heart. He recognized the playing of his idol, Raju

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Jayarman, at once. He had stood in CD shops for hous listening to his music, until the owners threw him out.

The famous flute player sat on a pile of silken cushions, dressed in a long black jacket, his hair combed, his beard trimmed, playing a flute with a pattern of gold leaves!

Zaki gasped; this was the scruffy old man from under the tree! Which meant that Raju Jayarman had given him advice, *in person*! Had told him he was *not bad*!

Zaki worked his way between the people until he was right at the front of the crowd. The old musician was completely lost in his own playing. Zaki too was in a dream, soaking up the wonder of actually seeing his hero play, right there, close enough to *touch*!

The blissful moment didn't last. There was a series of sudden shrieks from the crowd and two furry missiles shot right across the little stage, brushing the famous man with their fur, then

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knocking Zaki flying in their delight at finding him.

Raju Jayarman ignored it all and simply went on playing.

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