

AJAY AND THE MUMBAI SUN

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1

The mid-afternoon train chugged into Mumbai station.

Ajay grinned even though his stomach was rumbling. He picked up the last newspaper and waved it around like a chequered flag, shouting at the top of his voice: ‘Ten rupees. Just ten rupees for the latest news. Read all about it!’

A bald businessman with an egg-shaped head and twirly moustache stopped. ‘How much?’

A customer! Ajay waved the newspaper again. ‘Ten rupees!’

The businessman looked at him with a crafty glint in his eye. ‘How do I know the news is worth reading?’

‘A lot has happened today,’ said Ajay.

‘Such as?’

Ajay thought quickly back to the early morning at the station when he had carefully read the newspaper from cover to cover, careful not to damage its creases or stain the crisp, newly minted pages. ‘An earthquake in Hyderabad.’

The businessman shrugged. ‘That’s all?’

‘Ten rupees!’ said Ajay firmly, holding out his hand.

The businessman pressed his face closer to Ajay’s. ‘Why would I buy a newspaper when you’ve already told me the main news? Let me give you some free advice. Don’t give away anything for free if you want to be successful in this world!’

‘But, sir,’ said Ajay to the man’s back, ‘that’s not the most important news.’

The man stopped and turned. ‘What is?’

‘A new cure for baldness has been found.’

‘Let me see that!’ The businessman grabbed the newspaper out of Ajay’s hand, tearing it as he did so, and rifled through it.

‘Where?’

‘In the advert section.’

‘I’m not paying ten rupees for an advert, you scoundrel!’

At that, Ajay drew up to his full height, which was still not much. At twelve – or thereabouts he still wasn’t as tall as the other children abandoned to the railways. He tried to speak with the dignity with which he had seen the station attendant, Niresh, speak to his employees.

‘I’m not a scoundrel. The newspaper will be ten rupees. Please give it to me at once or I will be forced—’ Ajay breathed here, to give time for his words to sink in like sugar cubes in hot chai, ‘to contact the authorities.’

The businessman looked startled. Then his face began to blow up like the cheeks of a fish.

‘Are you OK?’ Ajay asked, genuinely worried.

The man’s mouth opened and closed, his face turning red.

‘Why you grubby little—’

‘Is there a problem here?’ Niresh came forward from where he had been standing on the platform.

‘This filthy thief—’ the businessman managed.

‘He has taken and read my newspaper, and now will not pay my ten rupees,’ Ajay cut in patiently.

Niresh looked at Ajay, then at the businessman, then at the paper, and then back at the businessman, and spoke gently, 'I am terribly sorry, sahib, but it seems that the boy is right.'

'How dare you?' said the businessman, almost apoplectic with anger.

'You're holding the evidence in your hand,' said Niresh. 'It's the equivalent of a smoking gun. You must pay the boy's ten rupees.'

'I will not pay anything. This is a scam!'

Niresh looked at his watch and said again, with his trademark patience, 'Of course. That is your choice. We can take a statement, but it will take a few hours and I think your train is in . . . three minutes?'

The businessman looked at the train ready to leave the station, its heavy engine chortling and throwing black dust. People were hanging off its sides and windows. Traders were already running towards it with tiffin boxes clanking, boxes of metallic bangles jingling and bottles of cold lemon water fizzing. A bead of sweat ran down the businessman's face.

'Two minutes,' said Ajay helpfully.

‘Why you conniving little railway rat . . .’

‘You might need to run,’ added Niresb with a quick wink at Ajay.

With a noise somewhere between a snarl and a growl, the businessman took out his leather wallet and fished out ten rupees.

‘Thank you,’ said Ajay, beaming.

The businessman looked as if he was fighting the urge to use his briefcase like a golf club.

‘Better go now!’ said Niresb. ‘You don’t want to miss it.’



The businessman started running. He was clearly out of breath.

‘Health section is on page five,’ shouted Ajay, waving.