

# AJAY AND THE JAIPUR MOON

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*To Zoë, Gavin, Oscar, Tilly and M.S.L.S*

*and*

*Bob, Chris and Savannah*

*It is the bright day that  
brings forth the adder . . .*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

*Julius Caesar*

Act II, Scene I



# 1

**A**warm breeze whirled through the station, catching and whipping up a page from the last copy of *The Mumbai Sun* and blowing it along the railway platform. Ajay chased it down, ducking past the railway guard blowing his whistle, around a woman in a midnight-blue sari glittering with tiny mirrors, and through two boys, playing with plastic rockets, to catch it.

Another gust and it would sweep up out of reach!

Ajay dived, just as it was about to blow upwards and away, and caught it with his free hand like one of India's cricketing fielders at their best.

Ajay held up the faluda-pink paper in triumph

(although sadly, no one else seemed to have noticed his amazing feat of skill and dexterity). Breathing heavily, he dusted himself off, looking around as he folded and smoothed the page back into shape over the rest of the paper. It was evening – there wasn't much time left to sell the last copy. Bathed in the silvery light that spilt from the open roof, the last clanking trains were leaving the station, the bustling crowds of commuters were eager to get home, and the hawkers were closing up their tiffin boxes of fried round puris and hot pepper curry.

‘Utter garbage. Should have let it fly off!’

Ajay turned. Another customer! He smiled winningly at the bald-headed businessman who had spoken, and who was now returning Ajay's smile with a look of utter distaste.

Ajay was not disheartened. After all, he was not just a twelve-year-old (or thereabouts) railway kid now. He was the editor of *The Mumbai Sun*!

‘Ten rupees to buy *The Mumbai Sun* – the paper that brought down a corrupt billionaire, saved a slum and that I, myself,’ Ajay added modestly, ‘am the editor of.’

The bald-headed businessman snorted. ‘All of that’s in the past. I want to know – what’s in it today?’

Ajay felt his spirits drop. Everything they had done was yesterday’s news already! Then he rallied. ‘We have new cartoons by *The Mumbai Sun* illustrator, Yasmin.’ (Yasmin was also about twelve, lived in the slum and was Ajay’s best friend.) ‘We have recipes from the Secret Cook, Vinod, who now has his own food stall at the station. And we have cricketing news of Jai, the kid from the slum and the best batter in all of Mumbai!’

He waited for the businessman to be impressed.

The businessman looked down at him, a smirk across his face. ‘Let me give you some free advice. People of substance aren’t interested in what happens to people like you. All they want is information that will help them get rich. How to invest in the projects of billionaires – like Mrs Surya’s private Space Programme for instance.’ There was a crafty look in his eye. ‘I don’t suppose you have any inside knowledge to share?’

Ajay felt *The Mumbai Sun* crumple in his hand.

All that anyone in Mumbai – in fact anyone in the whole of India – was talking about was the billionaire Mrs Surya, her company, WECU, and the WECU Space Programme which was building a rocket to go to the moon. All that anyone wanted was more news of it. He really should be over the moon (so to speak) at the sudden demand for newspapers.

There was just one problem.

The Space Programme was TOP SECRET. Even Mr Gupta, Ajay's friend and editor of *The City Paper*, had been denied access. There was no way that Ajay and his friends, kids who had been abandoned on the railways or who lived in the slums, would be able to get in.

And no news of the Space Programme would soon mean no newspapers sold.

The bald-headed businessman's train clanged and hissed as it rattled up to the platform.

There was no more time.

Ajay shook his head sadly.

The businessman laughed. 'I should have known that a newspaper run by railway rats wouldn't be able to find real stories!'



Ajay rallied. 'I don't have inside knowledge, but I do have something better.' He looked around, and then motioned the businessman to bend down. Ajay whispered in his ear.

The businessman's eyes became wider. He jumped up. 'A ticket to space! A chance to be like other billionaires. A chance to look down on Earth and all the people left on it.' He snatched at the paper. 'Give me that!'

'Ten rupees,' said Ajay firmly, holding it to one side.

The businessman tossed over the money, grabbing the paper out of Ajay's hand and tearing it apart until he found the page he was looking for. His face turned bright orange. 'What is this?' he said, holding out the page that had inked on it, 'Free ticket to Space (and a Rocket samosa on the presentation of this coupon!).'

Ajay waved in the direction of the stall being manned by Vinod. 'It is the name of the Secret Cook's food stall.' He coughed and put on a deep voice. 'Space: A place that will take you out of this world, sizzle your senses and make you see the world differently.' Ajay paused, nodding for extra

emphasis. He felt very proud of the slogan – he’d come up with it with tears flowing down his face after eating half of one of Vinod’s extra-spicy samosas.

The bald-headed businessman’s face turned a deeper shade of orange. ‘Why you little—’

Ajay quickly stepped out of the way. ‘You’d better hurry – or you’ll miss your train!’ said Ajay, pointing as the businessman’s train started to roll out of the station on its heavy, clattering wheels.

The businessman looked at the train, at Ajay, and then back at the train – and started to run.

As the train left, with the businessman on it, waving a clenched fist at him, Ajay waved back.

It was a shame that the businessman hadn’t been able to get to Space that evening, but it would always be there waiting for him.

And in the meantime . . . Ajay rummaged in his pocket, found the remaining half of the super-spicy Rocket samosa, and bit into it, tears flooding his face.