

AJAY AND THE TREASURE OF THAR

VARSHA SHAH



Chicken
House

Text © Varsha Shah 2024
Illustration © Sònia Albert 2024

First published in Great Britain in 2024
Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Chicken House/Scholastic Ireland, 89E Lagan Road, Dublin Industrial Estate,
Glasnevin, Dublin D11 HP5E, Republic of Ireland

Varsha Shah has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and
Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted or utilized in
any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or
otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses,
organizations, places, events and incidents are either the product of the
author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is purely coincidental.

Cover and interior design by Steve Wells
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed in Great Britain by Clays, Elcograf S.p.A



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-915947-04-8
eISBN 978-1-915947-44-4

*To Mum, Tomoko San and Sunagawa San,
Sheila and Mike*

and

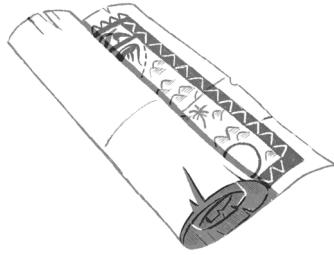
Joanne, Katie, Stacy, Kate, Yoko

and

The Wombats

*. . . what is peculiar to our own age
is the abandonment of the idea that
history could be truthfully written.*

GEORGE ORWELL



1

The sun radiated down on to the platform at Mumbai railway station. The tracks glowed hot silver, looking as if they were about to buckle and melt, and heat-exhausted early morning commuters stumbled towards their trains pressing bottles of ice-water against their foreheads.

Ajay wiped his brow with his handkerchief and leant against the concrete station pillar – only to jump forwards again as he felt it burn like a clothes iron against his skin. How was it early morning and already so hot? He looked down at the faluda-pink copies of *The Mumbai Sun* – the newspaper he and his friends had created! – and bit his lip. At the age of twelve, or thereabouts, he

had spent his whole life on the railways after being abandoned on the platform – it had never been as hot as this! The only vendors making money were those selling glasses of sweet-and-sour lime water. No one was buying *The Mumbai Sun*. All anyone wanted was a way to keep cool.

Ajay looked at the papers. The first rule of business was to give the customer what they wanted . . . a grin spread across his face. He picked up one of the papers and started folding.

Ten minutes later, Ajay looked down with satisfaction, wiping the sweat from his brow. A pile of copies of *The Mumbai Sun* were spread all about him – each one a pink concertina fan! He called out, ‘Ten rupees. Ten rupees for a special offer! Two in one: a folded fan with the latest news. Keep cool – and read all about it – in the morning edition of *The Mumbai Sun!*’

From his side came a sharp voice.

‘Give me that! I am a businessman—’

Success! Joyfully, Ajay turned and held out one of the fans made out of *The Mumbai Sun*.

The bald-headed businessman snatched it from him.

‘—and unlike street kids lazing around all day, I need a cool head to make deals that will bring in money.’

Ajay shaded his eyes from the blazing sun with his hand. ‘You are welcome, sir! You now hold in your hand a copy of *The Mumbai Sun* and owe me just ten rupees – a bargain for a newspaper that has taken down a crook, reported a moon landing, and has been edited’ – here Ajay gave a modest cough – ‘by the humble young man standing before you.’

The bald-headed businessman stopped fanning his face with *The Mumbai Sun*, bent down and looked at Ajay with a crafty glint in his eye. ‘Owe you? Ah – but how can I be expected to pay for something that is not in pristine condition? This newspaper has been folded. You cannot expect me to pay for that! Not unless . . .’ The businessman’s eyes became filled with mist as he looked into the distance, ‘you have a story about the Auction Mr Jhoot is holding of his Collection of Marvellous Objects. I would give my life to buy his Collection. Imagine how envious people would be when they came to my home and saw

my riches!’

Ajay felt his heart sink. No one – apart from other billionaires – could get tickets to Mr Jhoot’s Auction. Even the location of it was Top Secret – and yet it was all that anyone could dream or talk about.

Ajay lowered his voice dramatically, and said in a conspiratorial whisper: ‘Kind sir, I don’t have a ticket to the Auction.’ He took a deep breath. ‘But I do have a piece of India’s greatest treasures in pristine condition and therefore valuable beyond all measure. If Mr Jhoot knew about it, I guarantee even he would be jealous!’

The bald-headed businessman’s eyes widened. ‘You own a piece of India’s greatest treasures?’

Ajay nodded. ‘One definitely worthy enough to get into Mr Jhoot’s Auction,’ he improvised. ‘I found it,’ he added for good measure.

‘Fallen off the back of a truck?’ The businessman’s eyes gleamed. ‘No – don’t tell me. Finders keepers and all that!’ He bent down, almost dropping *The* (folded) *Mumbai Sun* in his excitement at his plan. ‘Look – your sort can’t keep precious objects safe. Sell it to me instead – five rupees

should be sufficient for you? After all, anything much more than that and I would have to alert the police – and they don't take kindly to railway kids.'

Ajay stared at him for a moment and held out his left hand. 'Ten rupees.'

Glancing around to check no one was looking, and whipping out his wallet, the businessman handed over the money.

Tucking the ten rupees safely into his pocket, Ajay carefully took the precious object out.

The businessman, who had been rubbing his hands with glee, stopped. 'What's this?'

Ajay smiled at him. 'A seed.'

'What—' the businessman spluttered. 'A seed? But where's the gold? The treasure?' At Ajay's blank look – 'Why you little—'

Ajay smiled at the businessman, cutting his, no doubt grateful, thanks mid-flow. 'You are welcome, sir. It is a seed from a jackfruit tree in the Hanging Gardens. Jackfruit trees are among India's greatest treasures! You don't need to thank me! But your train, sir! You'd better hurry if you want to catch it!'

The bald-headed businessman turned bright

like a jackfruit himself. Then, seeing the train pulling out of the station, he threw the seed down in front of Ajay, and ran to get his seat.

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

Ajay waved back at him, picked up the seed – precious beyond all measure – and tucked it carefully away in his pocket, alongside the businessman’s ten-rupee note.

Despite the heat, it was going to be a good day! And afterwards, when he had sold all his papers, to celebrate, Ajay would return to the shade of the Hanging Gardens, eat another dripping gold jackfruit, and plant the seed in the sun-cracked earth. There it would grow – a wonderful, fruit-filled, precious, priceless, one-of-a-kind tree.

Ajay picked up three copies of *The Mumbai Sun* in each hand and fanned himself cool, licking his lips, dreaming of a rain of deliciously golden fruit.