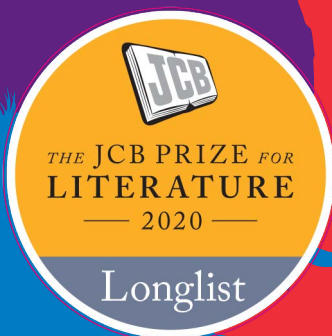


DEEPA ANAPPARA



DJINN
PATROL
ON THE
PURPLE LINE

'A brilliant debut'
IAN McEWAN

'Storytelling at its best'
ANNE ENRIGHT

'An entertaining, wonderful debut'
CHIGOZIE OBIOMA

Djinn Patrol by the Purple Line

by Deepa Anappara



THE JCB PRIZE *FOR*
LITERATURE
— 2020 —

An exclusive extract from
the JCB Prize for Literature

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

THIS STORY WILL SAVE YOUR LIFE

When Mental was alive, he was a boss-man with eighteen or twenty children working for him, and he almost never raised his hand against any of them. Every week he gave them 5Stars to split between themselves, or packs of Gems, and he made them invisible to the police and the evangelist-types who wanted to salvage them from the streets, and the men who watched them with hungry eyes as the children hurtled down railway tracks, gathering up plastic water bottles before a train could ram into them.

Mental didn't mind if his rag-picker boys gave him five Bisleri bottles instead of fifty, or if he caught them outside the cinema when they should have been working, wearing their best clothes and standing in a queue for a First Day First Show ticket they couldn't even afford. But he turned on them the days they showed up with their noses red, their words mixing together like blood and water, their eyes swollen like full moons from sniffing whitener. Then Mental stubbed out his Gold Flake Kings on their wrists or shoulders, and he called it a waste of a good cigarette.

The pungent fumes of burnt flesh trailed his boys, and washed away the sweet, short thrills of Dendrite or Eraz-ex. He knocked some major sense into their heads, Mental did.

We never met him because he lived in this neighbourhood long before our time. But the people who knew him, like the barber who has been shaving stubbly cheeks for decades, and the madman who smears ash across his chest and calls himself a saint, still talk about him. They say Mental's boys never picked fights about who got to board a running train first, or who could claim a stuffed toy or a bump-and-go racing car wedged into the gap behind a seat-berth. Mental taught his boys to be different. That's why, of all the children who worked at all the railway stations across the country, they lived the longest.

But Mental himself died one day. His boys knew he hadn't planned on it. He was young and healthy and had promised to hire a tempo and drive them to the Taj before the monsoon came to the city. They cried over him for days. Weeds flowered in the bald ground watered by their tears.

Then the boys had to work for men who were nothing like Mental. There were no chocolate bars or movies in their new lives, only hands scorched by railway lines gleaming like gold in the summer sun, the temperature forty-five degrees by eleven in the morning. In winter, it bellyflopped to one or two degrees and sometimes, when the mist was white and grainy like dust, the knife-edge of the icy tracks skinned their blistered fingers.

Every day after scavenging, the boys cleaned their faces with the water dribbling from a leaky pipe at the station and sent a collective prayer up to Mental to rescue them before a train's wheels ground their arms and legs to bone-dust, or a belt whistled through the air to snap their hunched spines into two and they never walked again.

In the months that followed Mental's death, two boys died chasing after trains. Kites circled their splintered corpses and flies kissed their

blue-black lips. The men who employed them thought it a waste of money to have their bodies picked up and cremated. The trains didn't stop and the engines screamed late into the night.

One evening soon after the deaths, three of Mental's boys crossed the road that separated the railway station from the hotchpotch of shops and hotels whose terraces were packed with red-and-white mobile-phone towers and black Sintex tanks. Neon signs flashed **PURE VEG FOODS** and **STATION VIEW** and **INCREDIBLE INDIA** and **FAMILY COMFORT**. The boys were visiting a place not far from here: a brick wall with iron railings on which Mental had dried his clothes, and below which he had slept at night with everything he owned tied up in a sack that he hugged tight as if it were his wife.

In the yellow-pink light of the letters that formed **HOTEL ROYAL PINK**, they saw the small clay gods that Mental had arranged in a niche in the wall, Lord Ganesh with his trunk curled up in his chest and Lord Hanuman lifting a mountain with one hand and Lord Krishna playing the flute, sun-dried marigolds pressed down with stones at their feet.

The boys knocked their foreheads against the wall and asked Mental why he had to die. One of them whispered Mental's real name into the wind, which was a secret known only to them, and a shadow stirred in the lane. The boys thought it was a cat or a flying fox, though there was a charge in the air, the metallic taste of electricity on their tongues, the flicker of a rainbow-coloured bolt of light, gone so soon they could have only imagined it. They were worn out from hunting bottles and light-headed from hunger. But the next day, rooting through the trash on the floor of a train, each one of the three boys found a fifty-rupee note under different seat-berths.

They knew the money was a gift from Mental's ghost because the air around them rippled with the warm breath he exhaled, smelling of

Gold Flake Kings. He had come to them because they had called him by his real name.

The boys started leaving cigarettes for Mental at his wall, and tinfoil bowls of spiced chickpeas tangy with lime juice and garnished with coriander leaves and slivers of red onions. They cracked rude jokes about the smells and sounds that Mental had produced the afternoon he ate a quarter-kilo of chickpeas in one sitting. His ghost didn't care for their wisecracks and afterwards they found cigarette holes in their shirts.

Mental's boys are scattered across the city now, and we hear some of them are grown up and married with children of their own. But even today, a famished boy who falls asleep with Mental's true name on his cracked lips will wake up to find a white tourist buying him ice cream or a grandmother-type lady pressing a paratha into his hands. It's not much, but Mental wasn't a rich man, so he didn't become a rich ghost.

The funny thing about Mental is that his boys were the ones who gave him that name. When they first met him, they saw he was tough in many ways but his eyes turned soft if they showed him a missing toe or a scar thrashing like a dying fish on the back of their thighs where they had been whipped with red-hot iron chains. They decided that only a man who was *Mental* could be half-good in this crooked world. But first they called him *Brother* and the youngest boys called him *Uncle* and much later they started to say *Mental, look at how many bottles I found today*, and he didn't mind because he knew why they had settled on that name.

Months after he became Mental, on a spring night when he had drained several glasses of bhang, he bought the boys creamy phirni in clay cups and whispered to them the name his parents had given him. He told them he ran away from home when he was seven because his mother cuffed him for ditching school to hang about with the town's

Roadside Romeos, who burst into shrill song each time a girl walked past them.

His first few weeks in the city, Mental lived in the railway station, wolfing down scraps from the half-eaten parcels of food that passengers threw out of train windows, and hiding from the police in the alcoves beneath footbridges. Every thumping step above him felt like a blow to his head. For a while he believed his parents would arrive by train to find him, scold him for frightening them and take him home. At night he slept fitfully, hearing his mother call his name, but it was only the wind, the rattle of a train, or the glassy voice of a woman announcing that the North-East Express from Shillong was delayed by four hours. Mental thought of going back home but he didn't, because he was ashamed of himself, and because the city made men out of boys, and he was fed up of being a child and wanted to be a man.

Now that Mental is a ghost, he wishes he were seven again. We figure that's why he wants to hear his old name. It reminds him of his parents, and the boy he used to be before he hitched a ride on a train.

Mental's real name is a secret. His boys won't tell anyone. We think it must be a name so good, if Mental had gone to Mumbai instead of coming here, a film star would have flicked it from him.

There are many Mentals in this city. We shouldn't be afraid of them. Our gods are too busy to hear our prayers, but ghosts – ghosts have nothing to do but wait and wander, wander and wait, and they are always listening to our words because they are bored and that's one way to pass the time.

Remember, they don't work for free. They help us only if we offer them something in return. For Mental, it's a voice calling his true name, and for others it's a glass of hooch or a string of jasmine or a kebab from Ustad's. It's no different from what gods ask people to do for them,

except most ghosts don't want us to fast or light lamps or write their names over and over again in a notebook.

The hardest part is finding the right ghost. Mental is for boys because he never hired girls, but there are woman ghosts and old woman ghosts and even baby girl ghosts who can guard girls. We need ghosts more than anyone else maybe, because we are railway-station boys without parents and homes. If we are still here, it's only because we know how to summon ghosts at will.

Some people think we believe in the supernatural because we inhale glue and snort heroin and drink desi daru that's strong enough to put a moustache on a baby. But these people, these people with marble floors and electric heaters, they weren't with Mental's boys on the winter night the police chased them out of the railway station.

That night, a bitter-cold wind blew across the city, scoring lines into stone. The boys didn't have twenty rupees between them to rent a quilt for eight hours, and the quilt-wallah swore at them when they asked if he could lend them one on credit. They sat shivering under a dark street lamp with a shattered glass cage, outside a shelter with no more beds free for the night. Spokes of pain turned in their hands and legs. When they couldn't bear it anymore, they called Mental.

We are sorry to disturb you again, they said. But we are afraid we will die.

The broken street lamp crackled and glowed. The boys looked up. Beams of light syrupy and yellow with warmth tumbled down.

'Wait,' Mental's ghost said to them, 'let me see what else I can do.'

I Look at Our House With—

—upside-down eyes and count five holes in our tin roof. There might be more, but I can't see them because the black smog outside has wiped the stars off the sky. I picture a djinn crouching down on the roof, his eye turning like a key in a lock as he watches us through a hole, waiting for Ma and Papa and Runu-Didi to fall asleep so that he can draw out my soul. Djinnns aren't real, but if they were, they would only steal children because we have the most delicious souls.

My elbows wobble on the bed, so I lean my legs against the wall. Runu-Didi stops counting the seconds I have been topsy-turvy and says, 'Arrey, Jai, I'm right here and still you're cheating-cheating. You have no shame, kya?' Her voice is high and jumpy because she's too happy that I can't stay upside down for as long as she can.

Didi and I are having a headstand contest but it's not a fair one. The yoga classes at our school are for students in Standard Six and above, and Runu-Didi is in Standard Seven, so she gets to learn from a real teacher. I'm in Standard Four, so I have to rely on Baba Devanand on TV, who says that if we do headstands, children like me will:

- never have to wear glasses our whole lives;
- never have white in our hair or black holes in our teeth;

- never have puddles in our brains or slowness in our arms and legs;
- always be No. 1 in School + College + Office + Home.

I like headstands a lot more than the huff-puff exercises Baba Devanand does with his legs crossed in the lotus position. But right now, if I stay upside down any longer, I'll break my neck, so I flump to the bed that smells of coriander powder and raw onions and Ma and bricks and cement and Papa.

'Baba Jai has been proved to be a conman,' Runu-Didi shouts like the newspeople whose faces redden every night from the angry news they have to read out on TV. 'Will our nation just stand and watch?'

'Uff, Runu, you're giving me a headache with your screaming,' Ma says from the kitchen corner of our house. She's shaping rotis into perfect rounds with the same rolling pin that she uses to whack my backside when I shout bad words while Didi talks to Nana-Nani on Ma's mobile phone.

'I won I won I won,' Didi sings now. She's louder than next-door's TV and next-to-next-door's howling baby and the neighbours who squabble every day about who stole water from whose water barrel.

I stick my fingers in my ears. Runu-Didi's lips move but it's as if she's speaking the bubble language of fish in a glass tank. I can't hear a word of her chik-chik. If I lived in a big house, I would take my shut-ears and run up the stairs two at a time and squash myself inside a cupboard. But we live in a basti, so our house has only one room. Papa likes to say that this room has everything we need for our happiness to grow. He means me and Didi and Ma, and not the TV, which is the best thing we own.

From where I'm lying on the bed, I can see the TV clearly. It looks down on me from a shelf that also holds steel plates and aluminium tins. Round letters on the TV screen say, **Dilli: Police Commissioner's Missing Cat Spotted**. Sometimes the Hindi news is written in letters that look like they are spurting blood, especially when the newspeople ask us tough questions we can't answer, like:

Does a Ghost Live in the Supreme Court?

or

Are Pigeons Terrorists Trained by Pakistan?

or

Is a Bull this Varanasi Sari Shop's Best Customer?

or

Did a Rasgulla Break Up Actress Veena's Marriage?

Ma likes such stories because she and Papa can argue about them for hours.

My favourite shows are ones that Ma says I'm not old enough to watch, like *Police Patrol* and *Live Crime*. Sometimes Ma switches off the TV right in the middle of a murder because she says it's too sick-making. But sometimes she leaves it on because she likes guessing who the evil people are and telling me how the policemen are sons-of-owls for never spotting criminals as fast as she can.

Runu-Didi has stopped talking to stretch her hands behind her back. She thinks she's Usain Bolt, but she's only on the school's relay team. Relay isn't a real sport. That's why Ma and Papa let her take part though some of the chachas and chachis in our basti say running brings dishonour to girls. Didi says basti-people will shut up once her team wins the inter-district tournament and also the state championships.

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Deepa Anappara's *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* is one of ten books on the 2020 JCB Prize for Literature longlist.

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