

'An exhilarating dream ride through a city of memory and desire, mixing Emily Dickinson with *tapani* English'

Jerry Pinto, author of *Em and the Big Hoom*



# Ib's Endless Search for Satisfaction



ROSHAN ALI



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by Roshan Ali



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CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

# CHAPTER 1

## ONE

I am an empty man in an empty city, and every time I begin to fill up, the city sucks it all out again. An empty city is the subject—the subject of everything—and I am the object. What is it about cities that empties me like this? Maybe it's the density, the fullness, stuffed with people of such lofty stuffing that the natural technique of nature to empty the filled and to fill the empty is reversed by this overdose of man and his mischief; and thus a thin man like me gets the stuffing sucked out of him, till he is hollow and restless. So it is necessary for any objects that move about a city to have these lofty notions of man and society, to contribute, to fit in and thus avoid the mad dissatisfaction of being hollow. A samosa, as someone once said, is better stuffed than empty, whatever the stuffing, if only to give you some satisfaction that you're getting what you're paying for, leave the side effects aside. Some things are certain. Like, death is certain. I know death because it is certain and all around, though sneaky, invisible, oddly so for something this black and big and this is another thing about cities: how they hide death. But I have never experienced death, never seen death. Yet I know death is painful. Death is dark and deep and does not stop because it has so

much to do. Death--that thing with feathers--comes out from the unknown, leaps on to the road, sticks and stones ready, and leaves you bloody and a broken nose. It is only afterwards that you know: Death was there all along, crouching by the side of the road, and became known only when it jumped out into your headlights. History is certain too--maybe it is a lie, told by the ones who know how to lie, or a nightmare--but it is certain. These things that are certain--death, history-- don't really need to be told because they are well known. My history is well known to me--the only one who needs to know--and I go about things (but wait, that's been told), but must be repeated. I am like lighter fluid--easily flammable--yet I require that spark, the right temperature and conditions. And in many ways isn't that better? Where would you store such a lighter fluid that combusts itself in regular weather and pleasant rooms? Thus I begin: I am Indian, city-born-- cities, those empty cities--and go about things . . . but that's enough. And not really true. Where should I begin? The signs of my birth were absent. I came, plonk! and the nurse was surprised. It is possible that her mind was briefly distracted into attention by this entity shaped like a peanut. At once she must have thought about weakness. Something so magical for the parents; so dull to her that her mind was almost at once back to some boy or the other, and nail polish, or the evening. Also, nobody cares about things that have no signs (except signs themselves which seldom have signs, and if they do, to propose that these signs had signs too would be stretching any reasonable rights to speculate. A sign of a sign is utter confusion: Imagine a road with an infinite regression of signs. Where will they end? Or rather, where will they begin? These

are questions worth asking.). And speaking of this, there must be some connection with our lives, some hints, some clues of uniqueness, or blessing. Maybe, in the old, black, round-bum Fiat, many weeks before my slimy, unmiraculous birth, Amma said, tapping Appoos's shoulder and pointing towards the sky, 'Look, Kamran, that cloud looks like a boy!' And father replied: 'All the clouds or just that one?' And mother said, 'Shtap, no. You always make fun of me. But see, it can be a sign.' These things are fun: The stars wait quietly in their silent formation; nothingness heaves a deep sigh; and time is released like a river of red confetti into the darkness of space, like a trumpet of victory for every unique, human peanut occasion; and thus forming the universe itself. And like this every day, universe after universe is born and then dies. These are the stuffings of excitement, and I've been told--there are many who make it their business to do so--that I rip the stuffings out of excitement wherever I go. This is my fate: To not only be a blanket soaked in some universal ether of grimness, but to rip the stuffing out of whatever kind of exciting mattress is being used in that particular venue. I have been called many things--fun isn't one of them. In fact, here is another lie--I have never been called anything but my one name. Perhaps, this is a sign of a miserable life: I am the one-headed, one-brained, monkey-eared, one-named, one. And in the event that you are still hoping for magic and mystery: No there were no signs of my birth, and allied to tedium and every expectation, I wasn't born any time even close to midnight. My mother had a nice face, a nice ear; the other ear not so nice and quite normal. She was nice--a deceptively small word that is exactly as simple as it sounds--and never yelled at any servant,

and even refused to call them that. Sometimes she had two baths a day. Father, father deluded, was mad as a flag in a storm, was rocking crazy and fun in his own crazy way. He went nuts shortly after my birth, and nobody seemed to know why. But is there a why to these things? And I sometimes wonder if I am going to go mad too sometime in the dim future (the future is always dim). Thus I had no father, or no fatherly father, thus no father, and fatherless I found my own patrons. There was Nooby, the wise, old, sexually excited ant; Frauntfraunty, a cancer-stricken housemouse (‘Metastasized master, metastasized,’ he used to say); BringOverMarty, the once popular sitcom star from one of those United States who now managed a dhobi ghat and spoke in riddles (‘I wringa- wring-a rose dress, bring-a-bring-a coal-grey dress. Is this yours? Is this yours? Is this yours?’) which weren’t really riddles but possessed a manner of rhythm and tune; and finally, Shaktidas Murali Broom, a retired besom with an unusually straight back who understood the deep, complex problems of life but alas, could never articulate himself (‘God make naise too much, he not ther. Man make noise too much, he ther, but aalvays he try disafeer. Naat nice.’). Amma, with her nice, oval face and tiny height, survived. Sometimes, and even Darwin said, survival is a matter of fitness, yet mother was never fit—though her hair was remarkably black and neat. She was Hindu by birth (or so she was told), nothing by choice, then Buddhist by choice and songbird by next birth—this is what she believed. Amma, shortly after father went mad, went quietly sane, saner than she had ever been, and forgot her dreams of being reborn as a songbird. She was a quiet, sane woman after that, never looking at clouds. Sometimes I recall her nice

face, through the steamed lens of childhood by my bedside, as Shaktidas Murali Broom sat, straight-backed, listening (he never interrupted—this is a sign of a good friend). She spoke for hours softly. I don't remember much—the past is dim—yet I remember her hands contained in her lap and her mouth moving slowly; her sad, neat mouth and her very white, clean teeth. One evening as she left my room, Shaktidas said in my ear, 'Human bean many sadness. Heavy, heavy harat.' And Nooby, who was hiding in the closet, stuck his head out and added, 'Dude, you have a very beautiful mother; if I had little more strength . . . and in this old age . . . difficult to move. But I would really give it to her right in the . . .' And BringOverMarty appearing suddenly beside my thin legs cut him short. 'Quiet ant, stupid ant, lingers over things. Quiet boy, bright boy, what's your heart think?' he sang. And I said to myself, 'One day I will make my mother a machine that will listen to her stories and give her high fives.' Nobody laughed and everything was quiet. Quietness occupied a large part of my childhood. Amma was, above all things, one who avoided conflict and everything, like herself and her room, was clean and she believed in not talking about things. Conflict—that pinsand- needles feeling that comes with every position a man takes for too long—was quite efficiently swept under rugs and other warm things like caramel pudding. And everyone knows spiky things must never be swept under rugs: Often, when it was least expected, these things pierced through and slowly tearing apart, exploded into the quiet living room space. Appoos was mad after all, and one couldn't sustain a fight too long, as it collapsed over the weakness of one party to maintain a point over the course of even one

sentence; so the shouting faded only to be replaced with a strained and tight peace in the air, a volatile mixture that was set-off at the least signs of trouble. It followed that there was not much talking in our home lest this strange peace was disturbed and I spent my days in this or that world. Amma also often did things to make herself feel better regardless of the final product, which was counter-productive because it was the final product, usually, that affected her. Her husband, Appoos—called Kamran by everyone other than his son; once a stout and upright guy with an impressively maintained moustache and hard, thick arms, but now a shrivelled and fluttery fellow who rarely stood up—was harmlessly schizophrenic, and was good Ib's company when there was nothing serious to discuss. But when critical topics were brought up, there was only that laugh; that merciless, non-discriminatory laugh; and this tore up Amma, who was trying to take life seriously. There was no place for humour in Amma's life: Her wounds were too grave for laughter to be any kind of medicine. In those days, when she was patient, and when Appoos and her ate together (later he ate alone, and watched something through the window), she would quietly tell him to pay attention, to quiet down, to be normal, as if his madness was just another state of his annoying mind that could be reasoned with, to be told off and controlled by words. He was terrified—of what we didn't know— and I felt scared too. The table at meals was always cold with an unspoken tension. Sometimes, when Appoos had an episode, it was like our quotidian family dinner was interrupted by a rakshasa in work clothing, all ready to kill, but disguised as an office man (and if you looked carefully, the blood glinted red in the white of the light under

his perfect length blazer-sleeve), and mother's jaw would clench and something inside her would begin to swell and make her hands shake. Then, like she normally did, when things began to explode, she would leave. I wondered if everything would be better if my mother did just hit him. That poor woman—maybe she needed the violence, the licence for violence. Maybe violence can save lives. And is there anything worse than people happy for no reason? I mostly hated mental Appoos but pretended not to—that's the truth; I swear on my father. Appoos had good days and bad, but this was what he said and we all knew most days were bad though this wasn't really his fault and came down usually to the net amount of seriousness in the universe. I, little coward, was never around; usually in my room trying to get rid of seriousness, and bad things, by swatting at them like one would do against flies and other motley creatures with wings; distractedly dodging and swiping at these bad things that I somehow sensed in the world but could never explain, or articulate. I don't really remember much of a small, conveniently close school, perhaps because my mind had driven out the stuff that made it untidy, a nervous mess, but I remember a cane and a sharp pain, but nothing more and nobody's face to put it to. Often it is just a kind of sharp, painful fog, somewhere in the space of my mind, the rest of which tries its best to forget those smoggy days. I was told much later that one day, there was a mark on my arm. Amma saw it while changing my shirt and she screamed and cried and I screamed and cried and the next morning there was no school, and I was overjoyed, running up and down the stairs. What I remember is, I came back every evening from that school, before mother made a fuss and took me out, and there

was a tune. It went like this. Na, Na, Na, Na, Na, Na, Na. Shaktidas liked it, even though he said he didn't, but I knew it moved him, like it moved me. It moved something deep inside me, physically and solidly. I felt something shift inside, in the unknowable spaces between thoughts and ideas, feelings and actions. The tune came from a piano in a corner, from lonely hands somewhere in the neighbourhood. But then one day it was gone (I have found that things usually do). And then I relied on Shaktidas; I would say to him, 'Hey, Broom (this annoyed him). Sing that song, na.' And he would sing, na na na na na na, but it was over much too fast, much too swiftly. These are the things that really annoy me: the good things that get over too soon and perhaps the bad ones that linger. The oddly scented, dimly lit mist of the past has obscured much, and I can barely remember some things, and yet others remain clear, perhaps a little too clear. Like that house we lived in: Completely white on the outside, and completely dull, with a flat roof, flat walls, flat everything. The door, which I can feel even now, was rough and heavy and made of some reddish wood and smelt of polish. Bars criss-crossed every entrance, every potential entrance; black, hard, shining, and obscured every opening into the world with a jail-like texture. Inside. The furniture was dull, faded cloth on unpolished wood, and smelt of old things left alone for too long. A long, narrow corridor led from the door to the dim insides of this animal that I was raised in. A kitchen clanked further on, and to the left a neglected guest bedroom, unused for years. To the right, a narrow staircase that took you past cobwebs. Upstairs. A large bedroom with the lightness of my mother's scent, arranged and neat, and attached, through a corridor, past the bathroom

that nobody used, a tiny room, mine, with a view of empty plots, and far away, a road, and far away, buildings, and far away, the city. I also recollect an uncle with nothing, who visited once a year; an uncle from some cold, snowy country with signs of air travel hanging off huge suitcases. He brought shiny shoes, shell-shaped chocolates, till he lost his money—as it inevitably leaves—and then brought keychains and empty boxes and gave them to me with the same eagerness, with the same words and the same expression, as if, if he pretended, nobody would notice how poor he had become. Foreign Uncle—this wasn't his name—smoked like a dragon and I am aware that dragons are extinct. Of course this is beside the point. He was outspoken in a careless way, and around him people found themselves fidgeting very often. While Amma was like this and grimaced and shuffled when Foreign Uncle brought up sex—which he very often did because he said I needed to be 'well versed and knowing' on these things—Appoos laughed, and he was probably a liberal in the way that he wasn't against anything really. Some forbidden topics often started a strange argument between them: Appoos couldn't really argue, but Amma having an easy opponent, continued to force points. And while this one-sided debate occurred, Foreign Uncle, smoking a cigarette, and resting his hairy arm on the chair I sat on, smiled and coughed. One day, it was Saturday evening, late March, cornering me in the corridor next to the bathroom that nobody used, he reached into his shirt and brought out a long box of Marlboro cigarettes. I had seen the long boxes before, in the glass windows of shopping malls, a red and white brick, so crisp and foreign, and of course, by that point, I was 'well versed and

knowing' on this topic of nicotine, but the look on my face betrayed my nervousness, because never before had nicotine and my mother been in such close proximity (she was maybe ten feet away below me, putting out dinner). He handed them over quietly, his eyes darting towards the door behind me. 'You better hide them,' he said quietly. 'And not before you're fifteen.' Then he walked past quickly and I heard his heavy steps going down the stairs and then his muffled voice as he innocently asked Amma a question about dinner. I didn't understand then why Foreign Uncle had given me that box of cigarettes. I was only twelve, and had only just begun to discover the twin pleasures of nicotine and rebellion. And of course I assumed all the adults were part of some worldwide undercover operation to crack down on teenage smoking. But apparently Foreign Uncle wasn't one of these strict, rule-loving adults, and I immediately liked him more for it. And now it was our little secret to glance at about over dinner or tea. And of course I never told him that I smoked almost immediately after he gave me the cigarettes, on the terrace, braving the sun. But say what you want about Foreign Uncle, he wasn't a stupid man. He certainly knew I would smoke, and gave them to me despite this. Years later, when I told Major, he said, 'He obviously wanted you to smoke, lb. He wanted to set you free from your parents.' This made sense. After all, he was miserable like all the adults, and maybe he was trying to live through me, his only young relative, and gain some joy by setting me free. Foreign Uncle was Amma's brother. He was younger by a few indistinguishable years. Amma never liked him much. He's always complaining, she said. And he was— constantly irritated and grumpy about matters that he couldn't

control, depressed about some state of affairs in a country I didn't know existed, but unwilling to think beyond his anger and frustration. In the winter of some year, the last night of his annual trip to the country of his birth and the last time I saw him, he came home late and drunk and smelling of smoke. Amma was upset when she opened the door and went upstairs without saying a word. She was too upset to even put me to bed, so I sat there on the landing and watched his clayey frame standing still in the living room, till he heard Amma's door shut, then he sat heavily on the sofa and closed his eyes. Then he rose and walked around, stopping occasionally at a picture on the wall, or at the fish tank with its three still-alive fish, and artificial plants. All at once, as the orange light from a street lamp outside fell on his shapeless face, I seemed to see beneath his expression and his form, and suddenly felt a deep sadness that I had never felt before. And suddenly I felt angry at mother for being so upset and insensitive. Couldn't she see how miserable he was? He was so lonely and sad. He seemed to sense my presence, and called out softly. I went down the stairs on my toes. He sat down and lit a cigarette. 'Did you see?' he asked, not looking at me. I nodded and he sighed. 'Forget it, Ib. You shouldn't worry about such things. At least not yet.' He smiled. 'Don't you have school tomorrow? Go, go. To bed.' I scampered up the stairs, and before I reached the landing, I turned and glanced one last time at my sad uncle. He hadn't moved, still sitting there, looking down at the floor. Later at night as I lay in bed, Shaktidas Broom, who had been attending to personal problems all day, came and sat beside me. 'Man,' he said, 'is monkey. But he naat know. That is problem.' The next morning, my uncle was gone and I never

saw him again. \* \* \* Every time Foreign Uncle left, there was suddenly another kind of quiet. He was a bit crazy too, sometimes. Stories floated around among relatives who had nothing else to do: Once he invited people for a party, then locked himself in the toilet till the guests left, perplexed. Another time, he made a stack of photographs and took photographs of the stack and made a stack of those. The word was that he was crazy anyway. But the relative who sometimes dropped in for tea usually made it a point to distinguish Appoos's real madness to this pretend nuttiness that Foreign Uncle displayed. 'He's lonely, no,' they said. 'He can become depressed'; as if loneliness leads to sadness. 'There is a tendency for solitary people to become depressed,' said one distant, pale uncle with strange wrists who was a local doctor, but I didn't pay much attention because only his friends went to him. Tea was served with a sense of occasion, but mild occasion because one must always be careful about the level of occasion and because on all occasions there is someone disappointed. Amma knew about disappointment. Tea was generally served with snacks; and was tea and snacks but just called tea. This was another domestic euphemism commonly applied and there were many others that I cannot recollect. Sometimes Amma, depending on her mood and independent of our appetites, made entire meals or just a few biscuits. Appoos ate without trouble, belching and enunciating every detail of his process. I found it difficult sometimes, but with Amma there was no way of avoiding. She never asked and was always serving and taking for granted that I would eat everything that was served. 'You're getting thin. Eat. Clean your plate. Or you'll get pointy like barbed wire,' she always said. And Appoos laughed a bloated laugh

with things coming out of his mouth. As luck would have it, and maybe the universe had something to do with it, I never grew fat and never have, despite my natural laziness. Later, somebody said to me, 'You think too much. All your food is going away to feed your imaginary persons.' Such is my physical form. \* \* \* As a quiet child, I had many dreams. I dreamt I would become a star-traveller, hopping galaxies, fixing dying suns, watering dry planets, freeing a people. I dreamt I would be an electric god, lighting currents in all the dark parts of the world, giving light to darkness, freshness to mouldy areas, with just a wave of my hand. And finally that I would become a singer of magical songs, with words that mended bloody wounds and a tune that calmed the worst of wars. Shaktidas was always supportive of all my dreams and even gave me suggestions on how to achieve them. 'You start drawing,' he used to say. 'Drawings are path to greatness.' And so I drew: I drew the stars and the planets, galaxies and black holes, even the universe, and me in a black astronaut suit, floating about, not to scale. When Amma found these drawings she was struck by how dull they were, but it amused her and she used to smile and go through them one by one. 'Aren't there more colours in the universe, babu?' she asked me once. 'Not visible to the human eye,' I replied. She said, 'So what? Why don't you just colour them? They'll look so pretty.' 'I don't want to draw lies. I want to draw the truth.' 'OK, babu,' she said, amused, exasperated, and tender at the same time. 'You draw the truth, but what's the point if the truth is dull? Isn't there enough of that all around us?' And as she finished the sentence her face fell, and she got up, letting the drawing slip from her hand on to the floor. She was back in her Appoos mode,

the mode in which she took care of things. There was no joy in that mode. 'Do the dishes later, OK? Ratna is not coming tomorrow,' she said and went out, closing the door behind her, as if to preserve the relative happiness that was present inside my room. Shaktidas crawled out from under the bed and stretched out his back. 'Need draw colours, Ib,' he said, 'or else you are sadden your mummy.' 'It's not my problem that she's so miserable.' 'She is mummy or not? Mummy are always son's problem.' 'If only I had a sister. She would take care of Amma and I could go on drawing things. And where am I going to get colours from?' I cried. 'There's a shop by the bridge,' Nooby said. 'Nooby, where have you been? Do you think I should add more colours?' 'Look, Ib,' said Nooby seating himself comfortably on the floor. 'You know what I feel about your mother. I think she needs a good . . .' 'Hey, yenough,' Shaktidas said angrily. He glared at Nooby, who couldn't have cared less. 'Fine,' he said shrugging his shoulders, 'you asked for my opinion. No banging? Then, certainly, add some colour to her life. This is the only colour she has.' And then suddenly, Nooby disappeared. Right in front of my eyes; one second there he was, and the next, he was gone. I jumped out of bed and rummaged through the cupboard but he wasn't there. 'Shaktidas, where the hell did Nooby go?' I asked and turned to look at Broom, but he was nowhere to be found either. The others too were gone and the room felt empty. Fearful of my life, I hid under the blankets and fell asleep. Later, when I woke up, it was the middle of the night and to my relief, Shaktidas was asleep on his favourite shelf. I took their advice to heart (perhaps because of their strange disappearing act), and the next morning I told my mother my

immediate desire for colours. She pressed some notes into my small palm. 'Take a left by the bridge, it's next to the chicken shop,' she said, 'and talk with respect to Sharmaji. He knows your father.' I remember there was an unusual cold in the air that morning. But it wasn't that unusual because it was the beginning of winter, and a cold was beginning to form in the sky. In the empty plot on my street a line of silver oaks stood up tall and straight, grey swaying sentries, shushing sternly at the breeze, made to watch over abandoned land. Below them a pig had made a nest and was leading a line of piglets across the road towards their home. Eager and afraid, they bumped into the back of their siblings, all rushing to catch up with their muddy mother. Further on, by the bridge, a mad man roamed the street, shouting at strangers. When he saw me he smiled and I hurried past. Here's Sharmaji, an oiled, shapeless man, with dents in his fleshy arms like the ones on an overripe papaya. He wore a dull gold shirt, a bright gold chain and an even brighter gold watch, and watched a cricket match on a tiny television on a shelf, muttering occasionally to himself and complaining to his assistant—'The state of Indian cricket I tell you, these days. Arre, Mahesh, look at this guy, yaar, he's so bad. Why is he in the team?' And Mahesh's job was to agree—'He doesn't know anything. Kick him out.' 'Somebody is paid, some match-fixing.' 'Everything is fixed, sir.' They shook their head in exasperated wisdom. I called out and they turned and for a second they couldn't see me. Then Sharmaji spotted my head over the counter and said impatiently, pushing something red to one side of his mouth, 'What do you want?' and without waiting for my reply, went back to watching the match, clucking with wise disappoint-

ment. Unfazed, I set out my list on the counter and waited. He picked it up, his eyes still glued to the screen. 'Poster coloursh? Watercoloursh?' he asked, his 's's smooched into 'sh's by that devil shit in his mouth (Appoos's term). 'Uncle, what can I use on paper?' He sighed and spat out a red blob that flew past my head on to the pavement. 'Beta, you can use anything you want,' he said, his turgid face finally turned towards me. 'You want a light finish, use watercolours, you want solid finish, use the poster colours. But I suggest poster colours because they are easier. My children always use poster colours. My daughter is your age only. How old are you? Yes, correct. My son, he's older. But very good at studies. Where do you stay? Kamran's son? What's your name? Ib, what name is that? Muslim name must be. Me and Kamran, same college. What happened to him, yaar? I must come and visit.' Mahesh, the assistant, had meanwhile collected the colours and placed them on the counter. 'Choose,' he said grumpily. I did, pointing them out one by one with my finger. At the level of my eye, the colours were bright and solid like small skyscrapers. Red, blue, green, orange, yellow. The assistant wrapped them in newspaper and put them in a bag. 'Thank you, uncle,' I said after paying, but he paid no attention and Mahesh grumbled and waved me away. On my way home, the mad man was sitting on the roadside talking to himself. 'Shruti said that, yes, Shruti said to go away. Where is Shruti, where is she?' he was saying, over and over again. I hurried past and once beyond those tall silver oaks, I felt safe. \* \* \* It seemed to my small and innocent brain that Nooby, Shaktidas and the others were going for sudden and short vacations. They would suddenly disappear in the middle of conversations, games,

debates. I felt that maybe they were going to do some grown-up things, involving girls, beer and cigarettes, so I never brought it up. And they never spoke about it either because, I assumed, they didn't want to make me feel bad about the whole thing. I was still a child after all. I was around ten when Nooby disappeared one day and never came back. It was one of those days, the kind of day that feels strange in retrospect, because our minds are made in such a way as to see connections where none exist and to see coincidence in randomness, meaning in meaninglessness. Such as it was, I had no feeling of strangeness on that day, but now after all these years, coloured by the sepia lenses of nostalgia, that melancholy of oldness, a yearning for lost things, all combined in fateful ways to produce the kind of feeling that makes you think the past matters more than it actually does. Such is the way that life revolves. It was a Tuesday, I think, but accuracy of memory has been replaced by feelings, and it might have been Wednesday or even Friday. A small meeting was under way in my room, and Shaktidas as always was taking the lead on various projects such as how to imitate lizards in the best way. 'Do a clucky sound, man, chluck, chluck, but not like chigen,' he was saying, sitting straight-backed and very serious. The topic was brought up because Nooby being an ant was worried about lizard movements, which according to him were increasing uncharacteristically for this time of the year. How better to chase away lizards than in their own language? Frauntfraunty was convinced he knew how to say 'go away and never come back' in lizard language. And so it went back and forth between Broom and Frauntfraunty and neither gave in. Broom's irritation was growing every second and finally when he

couldn't argue any longer, he turned to Nooby to ask for a final decision. Where was Nooby? He was nowhere to be seen. Not in the cupboard either. Shaktidas grew concerned and said, 'He is make many fight and all, sir, very strange.' I nodded and agreed. He had been unusually feisty and absent alternatively. Usually he was back in a few minutes so we decided to wait, and meanwhile practise the spider stare, the only known way one could chase away those eight-legged beasts. But suddenly BringOverMarty began to cry and say a sad poem, 'The one who is gone, is never coming back, the one who is gone, is likely in a sack, heading to the deathly kingdom, from where we all come, and then return, we are all doomed . . .' In the usual way, his rhyme began to collapse towards the end, and Broom comforted him with a whisky arm around his small shoulders. 'Sorry, sir,' he said finally, 'Emotions are unstable these days, one day angry, one day scared, forgive me, sir, for I am weak . . .' I cut him short and patted his head and we were all quiet. But Nooby never came back. We adjusted quite soon, but that emptiness when a friend goes away is never filled. All meetings thereon had a voice missing and sometimes we found ourselves waiting a little too long, as if unconsciously we still waited for Nooby to say something, something silly and dirty like he always did. With a lump in my throat it was always I who said, 'OK, let's move on', and I would look sadly at Nooby's cupboard and wonder what happened to my strange little ant friend. Over time all my friends disappeared, one by one, into the darkness of the universe, without saying a word about their departure. Only Shaktidas, the wise one, hinted at it one night as we lay in bed. 'Ib, you're grown up now. You'll have to do things on your own.' 'Why,

Broom?’ I asked. ‘Adults need help, too.’ ‘Yes, from other adults you know. Not from small people like us.’ ‘But I like you guys,’ I said. He smiled and looked around helplessly. ‘You have us now, and we won’t go anywhere if we can help it. But the world is a dark and dangerous place, and I don’t think we can last for long outside this room. Besides, things aren’t in our control.’ ‘I’ll protect you guys, I promise.’ Broom laughed. ‘Who knows, maybe you’ll be better off without me. The world is dark and dangerous . . .’ It was the first time Shaktidas had spoken so clearly. In the morning he was gone and soon I realized that they were nothing more than figments of my loneliness, manifested as friends, but that was much later, when I was truly grown up. It was lonely without them, but I found I went outside more often now that I had no meetings to attend, no discussions to moderate. I missed Shaktidas’s wisdom, Nooby’s bad language, BringOverMarty’s songs and Frauntfraunty’s devotion, yet I saw more of the world, and learnt to see things differently, as a loner, and digest them into my mind. There was no one to cry to, no one to complain to, and this worked out well.

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