

Aqueil the Newspaper Boy meets the Angel

Aqueil always got up early, no matter what. He had newspapers to deliver to ‘VIPs,’ who were, as he informed other boys proudly, very important people, and who knew what ‘national impact’ it would have if he went about his business late, and a great sahib couldn’t get to the phone on time? With such considerations energizing him, he always stole out of their three-room tenement without disturbing Ami, for she would insist on making him a cup of tea if she saw him leave. She worked hard enough, as it was, stitching petticoats on her old sewing machine, for prompt delivery by ten at Model Fashions.

As he pedaled happily up the steep street, his pyjama ends carefully tucked up to prevent grease from the cycle chain soiling them, the long striped shirt of his father’s flapping in the breeze, his hair carefully tucked into his white cap, Aqueil would hum some recent film hit, just braking the cycle with one foot to toss a thick newspaper into a driveway. When he had first got the job, he thought it would be impolite to do so, and would enter the gate respectfully and try and ring the door-bell. But once or twice he had got bitten by watchful Alsatians, that had come roaring from the back, disturbing everyone in the commotion. The Sahibs didn’t like being woken up by him in any case, and had ordered him ‘to just toss the paper in, for God’s sake.’

But the birds were very few, such and colour, and perfectly, far, far better than the cars on the road, which always got into a jam.

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One day, he might have a car, well, that didn’t seem likely, but at least he would get an auto like Abu had. When he thought of his father, his eyes would cloud over, remembering that thick black beard he had nestled up to as a child, that big wide smile, and the smell of tobacco, when he came home from work in the evening, with vegetables for Ami, and a small packet of sweets or biscuits for him and his sisters. How they would all run round their father while he held the packet up, laughing, turning, till he would give it to one or the other with strict instructions to share. They had not been well-off, like middle-class well-off, but they always had something to eat everyday, and at Id, new clothes, and biryani.

He didn’t want to think about food, for that would make him come over all weak, and he still had several streets in Jubilee Hills to cycle up and through. He stopped for a minute, and took out that special *paan* he bit into when hungry. He would not think of the past, it was the Will of Allah, as Ami said so often, but why would Allah want to deprive them all of Abu, who was such a good man, he would go to all the houses in their little *basti* on Id, or Divali or Dassera, to greet everyone. Everyone liked him, but then... those men who had come were not from their *basti*, that is what Ramprasad Bhai had told Ami. When he himself would die he would ask Allah why, and he would meet his Abu happy in heaven at last, after all those years of hard work with his auto. Aqueil stopped and