



Excerpt from “After the Delhi Rain”
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Michelle was leaving Delhi in three days, and there was nothing he could do about it. So he sat in the Metro like this was an ordinary day in a week of ordinary days. He stared blankly at the slum he passed every day, a slum in a city of ordinary slums, people squatting outside it in the aftermath of the monsoon rain, boys playing cricket in the drip-drip mud, amidst the mounds of earth and shit dotted with colourful debris.

The slum was calling to him. He got off at the next stop. Outside the station was a spanking new Fortis hospital, rooms laddered one on top of another, a modernist spa, somewhere people could come for a medical holiday. His sense of direction was poor at the best of times, but this sparkling behemoth threw him and he had no idea how to get to the slum. It was a bad idea in any case. He was supposed to meet Michelle in Connaught Place to do some shopping that she could take “back home” as she called it – as she had never stopped calling it, even though they had been living in Delhi, not London, for three years now. Had she ever thought of this place as home? Had he ever been home for her, like she had been and still was for him?

He sat down now, suddenly, on a pile of bricks right by the railway tracks. And without warning, his body was wracked by a spasm, and he heaved and cried into his arms. When the heaving finally stopped, he looked up and there was a little girl next to him, a hand on his shoulder, smiling at him. And for a second, all he wanted to do was to put his forehead down on her bony little shoulder and cry again. And he wanted her to tell him, “It’s okay, Mister. *Sab theek ho jaye ga.*”

This was his place, this slum. This city. That's what Michelle didn't understand. He belonged here. The girl was holding out flowers. He was touched at the sight of the fat red roses, sweating with rainwater, and he held out a hand.

And she said, "One hundred twenty rupees, okay?"

He shook his head, automatically said, "No more than eighty, okay?"

"One hundred twenty, with this," she said, holding out a packet of tissues. Tissues he desperately needed, because his shirtsleeve was wet with his tears. He fished in his pocket and pulled out his wallet, and suddenly the girl had a knife in her hands. He cringed and scrambled to his feet, but she didn't notice, just grinned at him, flashing a missing tooth, as she cut off some thorns from the rose stems before handing him a small bunch. He handed her five hundred rupees, because that was all he could find.

"No, no, Sir," she said, shaking her head, the note held clumsily in her hand. "No change. No take five hundred from Mister Sahib."

But he was already on his feet. "Keep it, keep it," he said, still seeing the knife sticking out of her grubby belt. And he couldn't get out of there fast enough.