# ATTENTION, READER: PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS IS NOT A FINISHED BOOK.

A BOUND GALLEY is the first stage of printer's proofs, which has not been corrected by the author, publisher, or printer.

The design, artwork, page length, and format are subject to change, and typographical errors will be corrected during the course of production.

If you quote from this galley, please indicate that your review is based on uncorrected text.

Thank you.

## THIRST Varsha Bajaj

ISBN: 978-0-593-35439-1 Trim: 5 1/2" x 8 1/4" On Sale: July 19, 2022 Ages 10 up • Grades 5 up 192 pages \$17.99 USA / \$23.99 CAN

Nancy Paulsen Books



## Also by Varsha Bajaj Count Me In



# VARSHA BAJAJ

#### Nancy Paulsen Books

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



Copyright © 2022 by Varsha Bajaj

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

Nancy Paulsen Books & colophon are trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Visit us online at penguinrandomhouse.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 9780593354391

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2 [Vendor Code TK]

Design by Eileen Savage | Text set in Maxime Pro

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

This one is for my father, Shashi Walavalkar, a lifelong Mumbaikar.

Water, water, everywhere,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink.

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge

**Sanjay and I** sit on the top of the hill and stare out at the huge, never-ending Arabian Sea. The salty breeze brings a little relief from the heat.

"It feels like the world is made of water from up here," I say. "That there's enough of it for everyone."

But I know there isn't.

In the distance, the flyover bridge soars into the sky and snakes across the bay. Its lights twinkle and outshine the stars in the night sky.

"The sea link bridge looks like an M," I say.

"It does," my brother says. "M for Mumbai?"

"M for me—Minni," I say. "And for Monsoon. I hope this year we have a good one." Lately the monsoon season comes later and later, which means less and less water.

Although water surrounds my island city, most of the people I know are always struggling to get enough. We don't have running water in our house. We just have a tap outside that we share with our neighbors. Ma has to wake up at the crack of dawn to fill our buckets because the authorities only supply water for two hours every morning and for an hour in the evening when the shortages aren't too bad. The rest of the day, the tap is dry. Every home has a big barrel outside the house, to store collected water for the day.

"Remember when Ma and the other women draped our leaky old tap with a marigold garland as if it was a god they could charm with flowers?" Sanjay says.

I do remember, and we laugh, although it's sad to think it was probably a frustrating day when the water trickled rather than flowed.

I look out at the ocean. Part of our view is blocked by bill-boards with glamorous Bollywood movie stars—billboards that are larger than our house.

The houses in our neighborhood are small and crammed on top of each other, but they do face the sea. Rich people who live in skyscrapers pay millions for the same ocean view.

Last year, a charity helped paint our homes and fix our leaking tin roofs. Some said it was because the people whizzing past in their air-conditioned cars on the flyover bridge didn't want to see decaying, moldy "slums."

I chose yellow for our house. I helped to sand down the years of moss and mold from our old tin and concrete walls. Baba, Ma, Sanjay, and I dipped our brushes in yellow, and the first coat of paint was like a ray of bright sunshine getting rid

of the darkness. My neighbors chose purple and blue, and red and orange. Our street looks like a rainbow.

"Sanjay," I ask, "will we have to worry about water when we are grown up?"

For a long moment, he is silent.

So I answer myself. "No. No we won't."

I point at the cluster of tall buildings shimmering in the distance where Ma works in the afternoons. I say, "One day, we'll live in one of those tall shiny buildings, where water runs from taps."

"Okay," he says, and links his arm in mine, as if I'm predicting the future. "Like the boy who was born here and studied computers and now has an office in a building and employs sixty people."

I nod.

"Can you imagine," I say, "that on top of some of those high-rise buildings they have a swimming pool full of water? Enough for our whole neighborhood to bathe. How do you think they built a pool on top of a building? Wouldn't you love to see it?"

Sanjay laughs. "You and your questions!"

"Well, they are awfully lucky to have so much water to spare . . ."

"Minni," he says, "I wish there was a way to make all this seawater drinkable. Then there'd be enough for us all."

"There is a way!" I say. "Our teacher told us it's possible—

she said it's called desalination. But it's expensive, and you need a huge factory to strain the salt out."

"Look how smart you are," he says. "You will live in a fancy building!"

"You too," I say.

Sanjay is fifteen, and after he graduated from tenth grade last year, he got a job in a restaurant. He dreams of being a chef, but for now he does food prep. It's good he likes what he's doing, because we didn't have money for college anyway.

I dream for him too. Chef Sanjay.

I pretend to be a palmist and study both our hands.

"Could I be like Meena Aunty?" I ask.

"Why not? Knowing you, you can do anything you set your mind on doing," he says. "And plus you're even named after Ma's sister."

"Like her, I will finish school and get a good job," I wish aloud

"Hmmm, Minni Meow, banker," he says, teasing me with my childhood nickname. "But I think I see you more as a scientist."

"That'd be cool—or maybe a builder," I say dreamily. "I bet those high-rise roofs don't leak like ours after the monsoon. Wouldn't it be great if ours didn't? And if they didn't get so hot?"

We head home as the sun starts to dip. There is a line for the water tap on the main street. Water pressure must be weak today. When it doesn't get through the web of makeshift hoses, people must line up at the main source. The water line snakes around the block, and we hear the sounds of insults being hurled and see some men shoving one another. There are shrieks. Women scatter. Angry noises fill my ears.

Another fight's breaking out.

We don't wait to see what happens. Sanjay grabs my hand, and we turn around and away from the scene and find our way home through alleys and side streets. My heart thumps along with my running feet.

Our father has told us a million times over the years, *If you invite trouble, it will come. It will stay for chai and for dinner.* 

We definitely don't want to invite trouble.

**Ma Makes the** most delicious daal in the world, and my father has eaten two bowls of it. "I might make the best tea and pakodas, but your ma is the greatest at everything else," he says, and sighs in contentment.

Ma blushes whenever Baba praises her cooking.

Ma's potatoes melt in your mouth too, and I've saved a few for the last bite of my meal. Sanjay's right hand hovers over my plate, and I slap it away.

"Minni Meow won't even give me a potato!" he says dramatically.

"Ma," I complain, "tell him to stop calling me that—I'm not five anymore."

But I can't help giggling and give him the bite anyway. I've never been able to resist his goofy ways.

We're seated on the floor in the center of our living space. Curtains separate this from our parents' sleeping area, and Sanjay and I sleep up in a small loft. Never-ending sounds of honking horns and smells of cooking food and the citronella that keeps away mosquitoes fill the air in our home.

"Something happened today in the water line, and there was another fight," my father tells us. Baba runs a tea shop named Jai Ho, which means "victory." It's where everybody in our neighborhood hangs out, so he hears everything that goes on.

Sanjay and I exchange a look because we know a little too well what Baba is talking about.

We don't mention it because our father also believes in the proverb illustrated by the three monkeys—one with his hands over his eyes, the second with them over his ears, and the third covering his mouth—symbolizing "See no evil, hear no evil, and say no evil."

Ma kisses her Ganesh locket. "I hope no one got hurt."

"The water pressure is too low already," Baba says. "Someone said they might have to order a water tanker. That usually doesn't happen till May."

Ma looks worried. Buying water means money. Money that we don't have.

Then she pulls a flyer from her bag. "This was on the bulletin board at the clinic."

Baba's sitting back in his worn-out wicker chair, but now he straightens up, alert. "Why were you at the clinic?"

"That's not important," she says.

"Yes, it is," Sanjay and I say together.

"My stomach hurt," Ma says. "So I went to see the new doctor, but the line was too long, so I couldn't wait."

I had noticed that Ma didn't seem to have much of an appetite lately.

"It's probably nothing. A little bug probably, like last year. Remember the doctor said we should *always* boil our water," she says.

"We almost always do," Sanjay says. "Are you feeling better?"

"I feel tired, but I'm okay. Now forget about me. I'm glad I went, because otherwise I might not have heard about the computer class," says Ma.

What? Computer class!

My eyes are wide. The small room suddenly feels spacious. It's as if the word *computer*, spoken aloud, has magically created windows in the walls where none existed.

Baba, who is usually a quiet listener, has so many questions. Who is running the class? Where will it be held and when? Who decides who'll get in? What will they teach?

Then Sanjay asks the important question: "Ma, how much does it cost?"

The room shrinks down to size again. Money: It rules everything.

"I don't know," said Ma, "but before leaving for work tomorrow, I will go back and find out."

Ma works hard. Every day she cooks and cleans not only

for our family, but also for a family that lives in one of the expensive high-rise buildings not far from where we live.

"One of my friends said her son learned computers right after school and got a job in a big office." Ma tousles Sanjay's hair. "Maybe our Sanjay could get a job like that."

"It will be Minni," Sanjay says. "She's the smart one. She's always first in her class. Plus I've got a job already."

"Perhaps you both will," says Ma.

Sanjay is downcast whenever Ma dreams of him getting another job. She doesn't believe in his chef dream like me. I wish she did.

"You'll be a star chef on TV with your own show, Sanjay," I say. "And I'll be in the audience and clap the loudest. They'll name dishes after you. Sanjay's bhindi masala."

Baba laughs affectionately at me. "Minni and her dreams," he says.

Ma jumps up, a big smile on her face. "I almost forgot. I have a surprise. Pinky gave me a mango. An Alphonso mango."

"Those are so expensive!" I say.

"Yes, they are," says Ma. "And the season has barely started."

Ma takes the mango out of her cloth bag and places it on a plate. It isn't overripe. It doesn't have any black or brown spots. It's golden yellow, with streaks of red. Firm to the touch and perfectly ripe, shaped like a kidney. The mango gleams. Three pairs of eyes turn toward Ma. We need to know more.

Ma giggles like a schoolgirl. Her smile lifts her cheekbones. "Pinky's hair was all in tangles, and it hurt too much when her mother tried to comb it, so I offered to help."

Pinky is the daughter of the family Ma works for, and she's about my age.

I imagine Ma's gentle hand combing through Pinky's hair and braiding it like she does mine.

"And for that she gave you an Alphonso mango?" Sanjay says.

Mama laughs. "You didn't hear how loud Pinky was yelling at her mom. Anita Ma'am said Pinky was giving her a headache."

Ma cuts the juicy fruit into four portions. I notice Ma's portion is smaller than the others, and Sanjay's is just a bit bigger than mine.

"Ma," Sanjay says, "you should comb Pinky's hair every day through the mango season."

"I would do it anytime," Ma says. "Pinky is a sweet girl. And Anita Ma'am's always been good to us, even paying Minni's school fees this year."

I stop mid bite. "You never told me that," I say.

"I didn't? It was back in December when I needed to send some money to your grandmother and was worried about being able to pay your fees. She offered." I wrestle with this knowledge. What would we have done if Ma's boss hadn't offered? Would I have been sent to the free government-run school instead of my current school, which is run by an educational charity?

How could Ma not tell me something that important? It's troubling to think my future was in the hands of someone else and I didn't even know.

**After dinner I** sit outside on our stoop. Moti, the neighborhood dog, who belongs to no one and everyone, comes up to me whimpering. Normally he hangs out at Naan Aunty's house, a couple doors down from us, where he gets handouts of her famous bread. We call her Naan Aunty because she makes the best naans—she bakes hundreds every day for the local shops, and for some fancy restaurants too.

Moti keeps whimpering, which is unusual, so I walk down the lane with him and see Naan Aunty's door is closed and the lights are turned off.

"Moti," I say, "this is odd. I wonder where they went."

The older men playing cards at the corner see me. "Naan Aunty's at the clinic with her husband," one of them says. "He was hurt in a fight at the water line."

Nooo!

I race back to tell my parents. Naan Aunty and Ma are

best friends. Uncle is such a meek man, I can't imagine him fighting.

My father leaps to his feet. "Let's go see if they need help."

Cars cannot enter our neighborhood because the streets are too narrow. So we don't worry about being run over as we walk toward the clinic. Instead we look out for bikes and take care to skirt around kids playing cricket, teens rapping, and older folks playing cards or carrom in the middle of the road.

We pass second-shift workers going to work and others returning home. I hear someone memorizing times tables and someone saying evening prayers. In this heat everyone's doors are open, making it easy to know each other's business.

Then I see Naan Aunty and her husband walking toward us. In my excitement, I practically knock over a game board placed on a stool, and everyone shouts, "Minni! Look where you're walking, girl."

"I'm sorry," I say, and I slow down a bit as I race toward Naan Aunty.

Uncle has a gauze bandage around his head, covering his forehead, and leans on Aunty as they take slow steps. They both look exhausted.

"A stone came flying at me," says Uncle. "Hit me right above my eye."

"We were lucky he ducked," says Naan Aunty. "He could have lost an eye."

My father steps forward. "Lean on me," he says to Uncle.

One of the men playing carrom comes and helps on the other side.

I hold Naan Aunty's arm as we walk home. I am so happy Uncle is okay. He didn't invite trouble, but it found him anyway. I guess you can be in the wrong place at the wrong time, so you have to be careful—and lucky.



THAT EVENING, I write in my notebook. Shanti, our friend and neighborhood storyteller, keeps a journal, and she encouraged me to do so as well. We both find it helps untangle our thoughts and calm our minds. I've also discovered I like writing poems, even though Sanjay teases me, calling me Minni Meow, poetess.

### Tonight I write:

The water reaches out to the horizon, as far as my eyes can see.

Sometimes the sea gently rolls, rocking the fishing boats.

Other days it whirls and rises up, smashing against the rocks.

They say water is life.

Does it know the trouble it causes?

The fights?

The lines?

The heartache?
Today, though, it's calm.
Beautiful, like yards and yards of a blue sari
woven with threads of silver.
But what will tomorrow bring?

**On our way** home from school, my best friend, Faiza, and I chatter like we always do, dodging stray dogs, sleeping cows, trash heaps, and street vendors without missing a step or a beat in our conversation.

"Minni," she says, "yesterday, Masterji taught us the dance steps to the song from *Student of the Year*."

"The movie?" I say.

Faiza nods. "I imagined that I was Alia the whole time."

"Why not? You are just as talented as any Bollywood actress," I say.

"You think so?" she asks.

"It's the way you spin and twirl, and your rhythm," I say. "If I tried that, I'd fall on my face."

Faiza reaches for my hand. "You are my best friend. For life."

Which is true. We've known each other forever. We've played hopscotch and fought over dolls. It has never mattered

that I'm Hindu and Faiza is Muslim. When Faiza's ammi makes kebabs for Eid, she always saves one for me. When Ma makes ladoos for Diwali, she saves one for Faiza.

When we are almost at the banyan tree, we hear Shanti blowing into her conch shell, so we race over and find her sitting under the tree's canopy. Faiza and I come here often, even when Shanti isn't telling stories. Sometimes the three of us just sit and talk about our world. Shanti's a teacher too and gives the best advice.

This afternoon, a lot of the neighborhood is here. Shanti begins. "Today I'll tell the story of a wedding and a most interesting dowry."

Everyone sighs. Who doesn't like a wedding?

We got to go to one last summer when our neighbor Reva got married. Faiza and I danced till our feet had blisters. They served the softest, sweetest jalebis at the feast, which burst into syrupy sweetness in my mouth. If I close my eyes, I can see the deep red sari that Reva wore, and the beautiful henna etched onto her hands.

The small crowd that has gathered is as excited as we are.

"Was there a song and dance party before the wedding?" asks Faiza. "It's not a wedding without a sangeet."

Yes! Yes! Everyone agrees.

"Shush," says Shanti. "This was a long-ago wedding and a different kind—a royal one. King John of Portugal's daughter, Catherine of Braganza, was to be married to Charles II of England. What do you think King John gave as a dowry?"

"A refrigerator?" I say.

"A car?" Faiza says.

"A house?" That's Sanjay's voice. He's joined the crowd too. Shanti laughs her wonderful huge laugh.

"This was four hundred years ago—there were no fridges or cars back then, and Charles II probably had all the palaces he needed. So King John promised Bombay to the British as part of Catherine's dowry." Shanti pauses again like a good storyteller.

"Bombay? The city we live in? Who gives a city?" I ask.

"Kings do!" says Shanti.

"Was Bombay King John's to give?" someone shouts out.

Shanti blows into her conch shell, and when the crowd quiets, she says, "Back then the city was seven disconnected islands, floating in one big swamp."

"Swamp?" someone asks.

"Yes, this was all swamp back then," Shanti answers. "So they gathered rocks, and they dumped them by the boatload into the sea."

"Then what happened?" someone says.

"The rocks were bigger than men," Shanti says. "And they built a wall to push back the sea. But the sea was having none of it. The sea crumbled the wall again and again."

If I close my eyes, I can see that wall collapse, like homes and roofs do during a fierce monsoon.

When Shanti winds up her story, Fazia has a question. "Were the people who lived on the islands part of the

dowry?" she asks. "Were we like cattle, of no importance back then?"

"We aren't exactly important now either," says Sanjay. "Which is why we don't get water. And get questioned before we enter fancy shops. As if we might steal."

"You are bringing up an important point," Shanti says, using her best teacher voice.



To LIGHTEN THE mood as we walk home, Faiza breaks out some of the new dance steps she learned.

"Nice moves," Sanjay says. "When you become a dancer in a Bollywood film, don't forget that I taught you how to hold a cricket bat."

"When you become a big-time chef, don't forget that I taught you how to dance a little better than you used to, which isn't saying much." Faiza laughs.

Amit, Sanjay's friend, comes running toward us, excited. "Sanjay, my uncle has that new car tonight. He said we could go for a ride."

Amit's uncle Ram is a chauffeur, and his employers travel a lot and are always needing to be dropped off or picked up the airport.

Sanjay's eyes light up. "I'm in—that moonroof is cool! And I bet the sound system is too."

"It is, and there are TVs on the back of the seats too." Amit sees my eyes light up, and he turns to me and raps:

"Ahh, Minni, the seats are made of butter-soft leather. Never sat on anything better. AC blasts out super icy, 'cause this car's the kind that's pricey. Any day I can I'm gonna glide in my uncle's borrowed ride."

"That's so cool, Amit. You can make a rhyme about *any-thing*," Faiza says. "Can Minni and I come too?"

"I don't know if I can twist Ram Uncle's arm," Amit says.

"Please, please, please? I'll teach you some dance moves." She tilts her head, and her eyes look like Moti's when he wants a naan.

"Okay, okay, I'll try. How can I say no?" Amit grins. "Meet us after dinner, and I'll try to convince my uncle to let you come."

"You'll thank me when you become a rap star," Faiza yells as we leave. "It's good to have some moves."

"She's right," I add. "Faiza will help you dance like Shah Rukh Khan—then you can be the next king of Bollywood. You won't regret it."

"King Amit! Okay, I'm down with it," Amit shouts back as he disappears into the night.

"It's a brand-new Mercedes," Ram Uncle is saying with pride. Then he sees me and Faiza. "Why are they here?" he asks Amit. "I told you one friend. You think I can give rides to all the kids in the neighborhood?"

"Sorry, Uncle," Amit says. "It's just that these girls work so hard, and I thought maybe you could give them a treat . . ." He gets in the front seat.

Amit's uncle doesn't look convinced, and I step back, ready to turn around and go home, but Faiza grabs my arm and whispers, "Not so soon."

"Uncle," she says in her sweetest voice, "I've never been in a Mercedes. Does it have cold air? Are the seats made of leather?"

Silence. One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . six . . . Amit's uncle sighs. "Okay, okay, get in, but don't touch anything."

Sanjay, Faiza, and I scramble into the back seat before

Uncle can change his mind. Then he turns the key, and we feel the throb of the powerful engine. He rolls the windows up and presses a button. A blast of cold air hits us and gives us shivers.

We are quiet for a bit, looking out at Mumbai at night. Then the roof of the car starts to open with a whooshing sound, and we can see the sky. Uncle sees our amazed faces. "Go on," he says. "Stand up, push your head out through the roof and look at the world."

He doesn't need to tell us twice. We kick off our flip-flops, stand on the seat, and poke our heads out. Sanjay raises his hands high and yells, "Mumbai! I'm Sanjay."

The night air is still hot and sticky, so the wind feels good. I raise my hands too, and in that moment it feels like I could conquer the world. Too soon, we hear Uncle's voice. "Enough! Come in."

The roof closes. Our laughter fills the car, and then Uncle turns on the radio and we sing along to the newest Bollywood song.

The car slows down, and Uncle says he needs to make a stop, pointing to a building. He says he'll be back in ten minutes. "Stay in the car."

Once he leaves, Sanjay scrambles into the front seat with Amit. The radio's off, but we continue to sing the song. Sanjay is so loud; his voice drowns out ours.

"Hey," Amit says, "what's going on out there?"

We all peer through the car windows and across the iron fence, where we see the Western railway tracks. Behind the tracks there's a huge water tanker truck. The kind the community orders when the water shortages get really bad and nothing runs from our taps.

"Why is a truck back there? Nobody lives there," says Faiza. Amit opens the driver's door. "I'm going to check it out." "Wait!" I say. "Your uncle said to stay in the car."

But Amit doesn't seem to care. "I'm just going as far as the fence—it's in the shadows, so no one can see us. It will be okay."

I can't believe Amit is disobeying his uncle, but Sanjay always said he was a daredevil. What I didn't expect is Sanjay getting out of the car too. "Sanjay, don't," I say, but he doesn't listen.

"Just for a minute," he says.

Faiza sees how upset I am and repeats what Amit said. "It'll be okay. Don't worry."

But I can't help it. I hear Baba's voice in my head about inviting trouble. This feels wrong.

For a few minutes Amit and Sanjay stand by the fence, then Amit begins climbing over. And Sanjay follows. How could he? Doesn't Sanjay remember *anything* Baba has taught us?

I feel trapped in the car and need to get air, so I open the door and step out. *Be careful*, I want to yell to the boys, but I don't. Something tells me I should not draw attention to

them. Once over the fence, they crouch and cross the tracks in the shadows and hide behind some bushes.

Faiza is standing with me. "Why did they cross the tracks?" Now Faiza's voice is nervous too.

"What if Uncle comes back and they are stuck on the other side while the train's passing?" I whisper to Faiza.

Now that my eyes have adjusted to the dark, I see that a hose attached to the tanker truck is draining water from the pipeline that runs near the tracks.

Faiza whispers, "Minni, why are they taking the water?"

It's a hot March night, but I shiver. In the distance we hear a train whistle

We hear the voice of an angry man. "Pay attention, you knucklehead. I'm not paying you to chat with your friends. Hurry up."

Then I hear Sanjay sneeze—and the man shouts, "Hey, who's out there? Who are you? You from one of those newspapers or the police? Or just little rats?"

The angry man gets closer, aiming his flashlight near the bushes where Sanjay and Amit are still hiding. In the glare of the light I can see the man has a scar on his cheek.

We watch as he grabs Sanjay. But Amit comes from behind and kicks the man hard on his leg. The man yelps in pain, and when he lets go of Sanjay, the boys race away.

"Ravi," the man shouts to one of his workers, "catch the rascals."

By now we can hear the click-clacking of train wheels. It's coming fast and looks like a racing dragon with its flaring headlights. Will it block Sanjay and Amit's pathway back to us?

I instinctively shut my eyes. I want to see no evil, but it is happening right in front of us.

I squeeze my hands together and pray.