

ZOMBIE BASEBALL BEATDOWN



BY NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

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*For Jobim, who said he wanted to read about zombies;
for Arjun, because it always is;
and for anyone who has ever wanted to save the world*



CHAPTER 1

Losing sucks.

Don't let anyone tell you it builds character or any of that junk; it sucks. It sucks that someone else is beating you. It sucks that you've worked so hard and it's going to mean nothing. It sucks that you can't hit the ball the way you want and can't field the grounder the way you imagined—a thousand things about losing suck.

But it sucks worse when you're stuck in the dugout on a 102-degree day in the humidity, and the heat index is 120, and sweat is pouring off you, and your team is losing—not because you suck at baseball, but because your baseball coach, Mr. Cocoran, sucks at coaching.

Mr. Cocoran won't listen to you when you tell him he's got the batting order wrong. He likes big hits and loves guys who hack at the ball and swing for the fences and all that junk, and he doesn't understand about getting runners on base. He doesn't know squat about baseball.

But you know the thing about losing that sucks even worse than that?

Knowing you're the one who's going to get blamed.

When you're finally up at bat, with Miguel on third and Sammy on first, and you're down by two in the bottom of the sixth, and you're the last and final hope of the Delbe Diamondbacks—you're the one everyone is going to remember.

Maybe I could hit a single on my good days (and if the pitcher was off his game), but basically, for me, the ball just moves too darn fast.

My dad says I swing with my heart.

Well, he said that after I struck out once and spun myself all the way around and all the other kids were so busy laughing at me—even my own team—that nobody minded so much that we'd lost another game.

After that game, my dad came up to me and put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Don't worry about it, Rabi; you swung with your heart. You were all in. We can work on your swing. As soon as I'm back from the rigs, we'll work on it."

Of course, baseball season was going to be over by then, so my swing wasn't going to improve in time to save me from more humiliation. Dad works oil and gas rigs—ten weeks on, two weeks off—so I was on my own.

There was no way I should have been batting cleanup, I can tell you that, but there I was, sitting on the bench, watching the lineup come down to me, like a slow-moving train wreck.

Miguel was sitting next to me, chewing gum. "What're the odds?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I don't know."

"Come on, Rabi." Joe, who was sitting on my other side, poked me in the ribs. "Do that trick you do. With the numbers."

A couple of the older guys, Travis Thompson and Sammy Riggoni, both looked over. Beefy dudes with mean piggy eyes who liked to hassle anyone who was littler than them. I didn't want their attention at all. I looked away.

"Nah," I said. "There's not enough numbers to do it. I need more stats. You can't do stats with Little League. You need a lot of numbers before you can predict anything."

"Come on," Miguel said. "You know you can."

I looked out at the bases, frowning. I studied the batters in our lineup, eyed the Eamons Eagles

defense, their catcher and fielders and pitcher. And then I started setting stats. It was a trick I used. I could set stats over the different players' heads in my mind, a little like health bars in *World of Warcraft*, and then I could figure out probable outcomes.

Numbers. Stats. I have a cousin in Boston who calls it my inner Asian math nerd.

But whatever it is, I'm good at it. The Eagles pitcher was still going strong, even after pitching most of the game. We hadn't worn him down much. I'd read up on his stats and seen how he normally did after pitching four innings. I'd been counting how many times he'd actually had to pitch against all our batters, and I knew he wasn't tired. Not a bit.

He'd just struck out Billy Freudenberg on three straight pitches. And now Shawn Carney, at the plate, had two balls and two strikes on him. But Shawn barely hit .225, even against a weak pitcher. Against the Eamons guy, he was more like .075. Shawn was always hacking at random pitches. When he hit, he hit with power, but the Eamons pitcher was smart enough to bait him into swinging at a mean little curveball.

Shawn was dead meat.

Then there'd be Miguel. Miguel was hitting .525 on the season, steady all the time, dangerous. And the Eamons pitcher was afraid of him. Miguel could get himself on base, for sure. He was a slugger and he hit for extra bases more often than not. After that, Sammy would be up—.305, but not with as much power as Miguel. Then there'd be me. It all added up to...

"You need a double or better," I said. "And Sammy needs the same for us to tie."

Miguel cracked his gum. "And if we do, that means you got to..."

"I got to do anything except strike out. Anything at all."

"What are the odds?"

I laughed. "If you two nail it? Twenty to one, against. If you don't?" I shrugged. "No shot."

"Don't sell yourself short," Miguel said. "You can get on, no problem."

"Numbers don't lie. It wouldn't be a problem if they moved me ahead of you two. I do better when there's no one on base, and no pressure. If Mr. Cocoran would just concentrate on getting players on base, concentrate on getting more walks instead of big hits, we'd already be winning right now. And this wouldn't matter at all. We'd probably be up two at this point. Game over, Delbe wins."

Miguel nodded out at Shawn, who was getting ready for his next pitch. "What if Shawn gets a hit?"

I looked over at the redheaded boy. "He won't. Not with two strikes on him. He always chokes out when he gets two strikes."

"Shut up, Rabi. You're on a team."

That was Mr. Cocoran, our king of a coach. Funny-looking guy with a big nose and a face that was red like a tandoori chicken. He was always irritated. Mostly at me. "You don't rip your own teammates," Mr. Cocoran said. "Especially with *your* batting average."

Sammy Riggoni snickered. "Yeah, Rabi, have you even hit a ball this season?"

I think somewhere in the Little League rule book, there's something about being a good sport, and everyone playing hard, and winning clean, and working together as a team. I'm pretty sure it's there, somewhere.

For Mr. Cocoran, that meant telling the good players they were amazing, and pretending the crummy players didn't exist. I mean, sure, I'm a terrible hitter. But so is Shawn. I'm not being mean; the kid's got a serious hole in his swing. When the count's 2-2, he always chokes. It doesn't do any good to stand around clapping and cheering and saying he can do it, after you've spent the entire season ignoring the problem.

My dad says there's no point pretending reality doesn't exist; otherwise, you can't fix anything.

Mr. Cocoran should have paid attention to Shawn and helped him get better. Instead, he spent his time helping Sammy, because Sammy was a “natural.”

That was how Cocoran rolled, and now, under Cocoran’s glare, I shut up. I didn’t want to argue with him, and I sure didn’t want to get in a fight with Sammy. Besides, two seconds later, the numbers lined up, just like I expected, and made my point for me. Shawn hacked at a crummy pitch and popped the ball straight up, and the catcher snagged it nice and easy. Two outs.

Cocoran glared at me even harder.

It’s got to be annoying when a middle school kid knows more about baseball than you.

Miguel was up. He went out into the sun, and just like the numbers predicted, he got a hit. He roped a double, which wasn’t as good as we needed. Then Sammy singled, which moved Miguel to third. If Sammy had tripled, then we would’ve had a chance... but no.

It was down to me, walking out to home plate.

It should have been Miguel standing where I was now. The guy who hits a double on his bad day. Cocoran had changed the batting order, Miguel could have driven runs in all day long. Instead he liked to get Miguel out there early, and tried to get him to steal bases.

Cocoran was standing at the entrance to the dugout, sweating and shouting for me to make it happen. I stood over the plate. The pitcher was looking at me, smirking. He had runners on first and third, which might have worried him, except he was facing me, a batter he’d struck out every time. He knew that I was the end of the inning—and the game.

Miguel was nodding encouragingly, willing me to bring him home. Sammy was just staring at me. I could tell he hated that he had to depend on a shrimp like me to do something right for once. Too bad for him that I’m a strategizer, not a slugger. I *think*. I don’t *do*.

The sun pounded down. The stands got quiet.

And then my mom started clapping.

Everyone swung around to look at her.

There she was, up in the stands, calling, “*Rabindranath! Ra-bin-dra-nath! Ra-bin-dra-nath!*” This crazy Indian lady in a bright yellow sari, with night-black hair in a bun and a red bindi in the middle of her brown forehead, was cheering for me. She didn’t care that everyone was looking at her, or that she was embarrassing me. She was all in, supporting her son.

I wanted to die.

I looked down at the plate, then up at the pitcher. He was grinning at me. He knew he had me now. And that made me mad, him thinking he could just whup me that way.

So what if I had a name no one could pronounce? So what if I had a mom who wore saris? I was going to take his pitch and knock the cover off the ball. I was going to teach them all not to laugh at me.

I looked at the pitcher, and I pointed, just pointed toward left field, letting him know where I was going to put the ball, staring him down, letting him know that I owned him.

Rabindranath Chatterjee-Jones was going to knock the ball out of the park.

Around me, everyone went quiet. Even my mom.

I was ready. I touched the plate. Wound up the bat.

The pitch came in high.

I let it go.

“*Strike one!*” the umpire shouted.

I stepped off the plate, trying not to let it rattle me.

The catcher snickered. “Shoulda swung at that one, huh?”

It didn't matter. I wasn't going to let him get to me. I just needed to think about the bat knocking the stuffing out of the ball.

"You should swing at this next one," the catcher said. "We're trying to make it easy for you, man."

I let the second pitch come by, too, knowing that the Eamons pitcher would try to fool me. It was coming low, this time.

"Strike two!"

What the...? I thought it was a ball, for sure.

But now, here it was: the pitch I'd been waiting for—fast and straight and right down the pipe. Perfect.

I swung like there wasn't ever going to be another tomorrow—and once again, I swung so hard I spun around and tripped over my own tangled legs.

I fell down in a pile.

Everyone groaned.

And that was it. End of the game. Everyone laughing at me... Miguel walking toward me, shaking his head... my mom, up there in the stands, sitting there like a bright yellow dandelion, looking sad, like I'd disappointed her—even though she never really liked baseball anyway and only cared about cricket... and Sammy Riggoni, coming over to me as I started to get up.

To my surprise, Sammy reached down to give me a hand up. I let him pull me upright, but then he jerked me close.

"Coach is right, red dot, you're a crummy hitter," he said in my ear, and then gave me a shove that made me stumble back.

Miguel and Joe saw it happen and charged in to back me up, but then Sammy's friends were there too. Rob Ziegler and Bill Tuffin and the rest of them, glaring. All of them bigger and stronger than us except maybe Miguel. There was no way we could beat them. If you stacked up the stats, a fight with Sammy's friends added up to GAME OVER.

"Come on, Rabi. Take a swing," Sammy goaded. "I want to watch you spin around again." He gave me another push. "What you got, red dot? Let's see that pretty twirl you do."

Parents were starting to stand up in the bleachers, trying to see what was going on between us, but they were too far away to help. Sammy gave me another shove. "Why don't you swing, twirly? Let's see your swing."

Miguel grabbed my bat off the ground. "I'll take a swing."

That got everyone's attention. Sammy took a step back, and I swear he looked scared. Joe gave a whoop of glee.

"Oh yeah! Now it's a *fight!*"

I grabbed the bat away from Miguel. "Are you crazy?"

"Someone's got to shut him up," Miguel said.

Mr. Cocoran came busting in between us as I turned around to glare at Sammy.

"What's going on here?" Mr. Cocoran shouted.

Sammy pointed at us. "They were going to hit me with that bat!"

"That's not what hap—" I started to say, but Mr. Cocoran shut me down.

"Cool it, Jones! I don't take shift time off from Milrow just so I can watch you pick fights on this team. Especially not after you lose a game."

"I didn't pick—"

"Is that a baseball bat in your hand?"

"Uh..."

Sammy was grinning at me from behind Cocoran's back.

~~"What are you thinking, Jones? You don't pick fights with your own team. And you sure as heck don't threaten another human being with a bat."~~

"Sammy's human?" Joe asked. "You sure about that?"

Mr. Cocoran swung around. "Save the smart remarks, mister. One more, and you're off this team.

I tried again. "I didn't pick the fight—"

But Mr. Cocoran was all wound up now. "Not another word, Jones. You're an inch from being kicked off this team yourself. You snark from the bench and you pick fights after you lose games. That's not good sportsmanship, not by a long shot."

I could tell Mr. Cocoran was going to go on, but someone honked a horn from the parking lot.

He glared at us all, looking from Sammy and Travis and Rob and Bill, to me, to Miguel and Joe. Parents were coming down onto the field now to see what was happening, including my mom and Sammy's parents. The car honked again. "You're lucky I've got to get to my shift," Mr. Cocoran said. "But we'll talk about this next practice. Don't think we're done here. Now clear out, all of you."

My mom came up behind me in her yellow sari. "Rabi, what's going on? Were you fighting?"

"It wasn't anything, Mom. Just some joking around."

"It didn't look like joking."

As everyone else left the field and walked up the low grassy slope to the parking lot, Sammy looked back at me one more time, making a face at my mom's back.

Red dot, he mouthed.

I was so mad, I could have gone after him right then and there. But Mr. Cocoran was watching me and I could tell he was just waiting for me to step out of line.

"Rabi?" my mom pressed, not seeing what was happening behind her.

"It's nothing, Mom."

I glared after Sammy, wishing he were dead. Hating Mr. Cocoran for taking Sammy's side. Hating them all.

I feel bad about it now, looking back.

When you're mad, you wish all kinds of things on people. Maybe you even think they deserve it. But it turns out that I didn't want anyone dead. I didn't even want anyone hurt.

Not even when Mr. Cocoran tried to eat my brains.

CHAPTER 2

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Mr. Cocoran didn't try to snack on my skull candy right away. I mean, he hated me right from the moment when I started asking questions about his baseball strategies, but that's not a brain-eating offense, right? It takes some serious weirdness to turn your baseball coach into a flesh-hungry maniac.

After the baseball game, I was going to stay behind with Miguel and Joe to practice batting, because no matter how crummy Mr. Cocoran was as a coach, I really had lost the game for my team. I had to be honest about that: I needed serious batting help.

My mom says that if you want to get good at anything, you have to practice at it, and practice really hard, otherwise you don't deserve to have anything at all. She speaks four languages—Hindi, Bengali, English, and French—because she practices. She likes to remind me about how my grandpa (my *dadu*, in Bengali) walked out of Bangladesh and into India with nothing to his name. Just a poor farmer who couldn't read or write or even do math, but he was crazy determined, and he taught himself all those things. Eventually he worked his way up until he was the finest sari merchant in Kolkata, taking custom orders for saris that had diamonds and gold woven into them for some of Bollywood's biggest stars. But he sweated it all the way.

So I knew that if I really wanted something, I had to be willing to sweat for it. And even if it was 102 degrees, I was willing to sweat for baseball, and Miguel and Joe were willing to help.

The problem was that Sammy and his friends decided to hang around the baseball field, too, looking to finish what Sammy had started. They were watching us from the bleachers, passing a cigarette back and forth among them, acting all tough. Now that everyone else was gone, they were starting to call us names.

"Looks like we're going to get that fight after all," Joe said. He didn't sound scared. Mostly just curious about what would happen next.

Just so you know, Joe is kind of crazy. His dad drinks a lot of beer and gets in a lot of fights, and the two things Joe seems to have learned from that are that he's never going to drink alcohol and that nothing is as scary as his dad—so Joe does whatever he wants, and doesn't worry much about the consequences. He's always wearing raggedy clothes, and he cuts his blond hair with clippers without using a mirror, so it always sticks up in chunks. He thinks everything is a joke.

Sammy took a drag on his cigarette and stood up. He pointed at me, real serious, like, *You're dead*. His buddies all stood up, too. One of them had to be six feet tall. Rob Ziegler had been held back for, like, three grades.

"They're going to turn us into mango pulp," I said.

"Doesn't your mom make that?" Joe asked.

"You're thinking of *aamar payesh*," I said.

"Oh yeah," Joe said. "I love that stuff. I could totally go for that right now."

We were about to get pounded, and Joe was thinking about mango rice pudding. Like I said, Joe's kind of crazy. My mom got really worried when I started hanging out with him, because she was sure it was the first step to me not going to college and not getting my engineering degree, which basically is the worst thing you can do to your mom if she's a mom like mine.

I grabbed Joe's and Miguel's arms. "Let's go to Milrow Park," I suggested. "They won't bother us there."

“That’s because it smells like dead dogs out there,” Joe said.

“You seriously going to let these idiots run us off?” Miguel asked, looking hard at Sammy.

Miguel won’t back down from anyone who acts like a jerk. He’s like a samurai from ancient Japan that way. If he thinks something’s not right, he doesn’t back down, no matter what.

Which is just how his dad used to be, too, and it didn’t do him any good at all. The apple didn’t fall far from the tree with Miguel. His dad made all kinds of trouble out at Milrow’s meatpacking plant. Even made a video of what it was like working inside the place and uploaded it to YouTube. He was crazy brave, like Miguel, but it ruined his whole family.

Now I was afraid we were getting to that point with Miguel, where it didn’t matter how bad the odds were—Miguel would step up and fight, just because it wasn’t right to back down.

“They’re not running us off,” I said. “It’s just being smart about the stats. You might be strong, and Joe might be crazy—”

“I like to think of myself as inspired,” Joe said.

“—but they’re all bigger than us. Even you, Miguel. And six against three doesn’t add up to anything other than a bloodbath.”

“You can’t live afraid,” Miguel said.

“I can’t live dead, either, so *come on*.”

“You ever stop to think maybe we could win?” Miguel asked.

“Yeah,” Joe said. “Like in X-Men. When the odds are against you, and you really step up.”

“Quit with the comic book stuff,” I said. “You’re both nuts.”

“You sure it won’t smell at Milrow?” Miguel asked.

I wasn’t, but I wasn’t going to tell them that.

“Oh yeah. It’ll be totally fine.”

CHAPTER 3

“It smells like dead dogs, Rabi.”

Miguel laughed at Joe’s wrinkled nose of disgust. “You didn’t actually believe him, did you?”

“It’s not that bad,” I said, trying to make the best of it. “At least we’re not downwind of the feedlots.”

We were sitting on our bikes, staring at the Milrow beef-processing facility, a whole series of big white metal-sided buildings and smokestacks puffing steam. A giant Milrow cow logo smiled out at us from the side of the nearest building, along with the words MILROW MEAT SOLUTIONS—MODERN FARMING EXCELLENCE MEETS ALL-NATURAL QUALITY.

Beyond that, it was feedlots to the horizon, an ocean of cows all packed together, practically knee deep in their own manure, feeding in long troughs full of whatever it was that Milrow gave its cows to fatten them up.

We were told in school that Milrow makes beef to feed people in seven states, but until you see cows and feedlots as far as the eye can see, you can’t really understand how big a deal that is. Acres and acres of cows, all waiting to go in one end of the plant as mooing animals, and pop out the other end as cuts of beef that would get packed into refrigerated trucks, where they’d be taken to supermarkets all over.

“Whew,” Joe said, covering his nose with his shirt. “I’ll sure be glad when they’re all steak instead of stink.”

I had to agree there. My family doesn’t eat beef, because my mom’s Hindu, but looking at all those sad, packed-together cows, it seemed like they’d sure be better off once they were turned into chunks of shrink-wrapped steak instead of a bunch of mangy and gross animals spattered with manure.

When I thought about it, though, it was kind of disgusting that this was where all that bright, clean-looking supermarket meat was coming from.

A big old semitruck was coming up the road, packed with more cows for the feedlots. We rolled our bikes out of the way as it rushed past in a blast of smelly wind and dust and loud mooing from inside the metal trailer. We all gagged from the stink.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s go hit some balls before we get run over.”

“It’s going to be just as nasty on the grass.”

“Look at it,” I said. “It’s a nice park.”

Milrow Park stood just a little way off from the processing plant, and it really was nice. Emerald-green grass, perfectly manicured, with picnic tables and clumps of trees scattered around for shade. Of course, it was also a ghost park, because feedlots and a meatpacking plant don’t make for a great view at your average Sunday family barbecue and touch football game.

My dad said Milrow only made the park because it had to clean up a huge sewer lagoon from its feedlots. There was some kind of tax deduction for turning a big lake of cow poop into a park, so they made Milrow Park and called it open space. At first, all the trees and grass died, but they’d finally figured out how to make things grow, and now, if you held your nose and just focused on the park, it was actually pretty nice—that is, if you’d run out of all other options.

“If you want to complain, go ahead,” I said. “This is the only place where Sammy and his thugs aren’t going to bother us. Better get used to it.”

“I’m getting sick and tired of Sammy pushing us around,” Miguel said. He was looking at the

meatpacking plant as he said it, but I knew he was thinking about his mom and dad. And if he was thinking about his mom and dad, that meant he was thinking about Sammy's dad, too—the guy who ran Milrow Meats, and who had probably been the person to go after Miguel's family after Miguel's dad posted the meatpacking video on YouTube.

"Just be glad you were born here in America," I said. "Otherwise, they might have gone after you, too."

"Milrow doesn't care about me. Just people who make trouble in there. They don't bother us when we're being cheap, quiet workers, but as soon as you stand up... Bam!" Miguel drove his fist into his palm. "They bounce us right out of the country."

"You don't know for sure that's what happened," Joe said.

"My dad made that video of the plant, and the next day, ICE raided. That wasn't a coincidence. That was Sammy's dad, sweeping out noisy workers."

"Yeah," said Joe, "but still, your dad was illegal. He was breaking the law. It was bound to happen sometime."

"Nobody at Milrow cared about that before," Miguel said. "He worked there for fifteen years. But as soon as he started saying the line was getting sped up too much and that people were getting hurt, suddenly he's a troublemaker. And next thing you know, Milrow sics ICE on my family. There're still tons of people working in there who don't have passports or green cards or anything, and Milrow doesn't mind them. Just my dad and my mom. Milrow threw them away like garbage."

I didn't know what to say. For sure, Miguel's dad had been making trouble at Milrow, and for sure he and Miguel's mom were both illegal immigrants, so when the department of Immigration and Customs Enforcement raided, they hadn't stood a chance. They'd gotten swept up and thrown into detention, then thrown out of the country. Miguel ended up living with his aunt and uncle—who hadn't been making trouble at the plant, and hadn't been raided.

"Well," Joe said, "at least you're a citizen. At least they can't deport you."

Miguel shook his head. "You never know with ICE. Sometimes they don't seem so picky. If they get my aunt and uncle, what happens to me then? Foster home? Or maybe ICE dumps me over the border, too, 'cause I got no family here."

"Forget that!" Joe said. "If you needed a place to live, you'd live with me."

"With your dad?" I said. "No way. Miguel would live with me."

"No. He'd live with me. I've got the comic books."

"Yeah, well, my mom makes all the good food," I said.

"TV dinners are great!" Joe said.

"How come you're always sniffing around my house at dinnertime, then?"

"I'm just trying to be nice. Miguel eats meat. All you vegetarians eat are nuts and berries."

"We're not vegetarians," I said. "We eat chicken and fish. And you know it, because you stuff yourself every time you come over."

"Yeah? Well, my house is the one with the bacon." Joe grinned. "Bacon and comics. You can't be that. Baaaaacon. Mmmmmmmmm."

Miguel started to laugh. "You guys are both crazy. If I had to pick, I'd take Rabi's mom's cooking and your comics." He seemed to have shaken off his funk, though. "Come on. Let's go play some ball," he said.

We went out onto the park's green grass and started practicing, with Joe pitching and Miguel helping me with my swing. After a while, we barely even noticed the smell coming from the feedlots or the mooing of the cows.

Miguel watched me swing and miss.

Swing and miss.

Swing and foul one off.

Swing and miss.

“You always tense up at the plate,” Miguel said. “You got to stay loose.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a ball flying at me,” I said. “Of course I tense up.”

“No. There’s a ball flying *past* you.”

Joe laughed at that. “Except that one time, remember? When Rabi got beamed in the head? He fell right over. Just like in a cartoon.”

Joe pretended to be me, splatting on the grass, his arms and legs spread out in a big X, and his tongue sticking out of the side of his mouth, like he was unconscious.

“We’re supposed to be building up his confidence,” Miguel reminded him.

Joe opened his eyes and sat up. “Come on, you got to admit it was funny.” He fell back and threw out his arms again. “SPLAT!”

“Aaanyway,” Miguel said, making a big thing about ignoring Joe, “that’s why you got the batting helmet, right? It’s armor. Just like with Iron Man in Joe’s comics. You got to think like you’re armored, like you’re a baseball-killing machine.”

“You ready or not?” Joe called.

I nodded. *Baseball-killing machine*, I thought. Not afraid of the ball, or how fast it was going, just hunting for it, wanting it—

Joe whipped a fast one at me.

WHACK!

I totally got a piece of it. The ball blasted across the field, fast and low. It bounced and bounced and then rolled into the shade under a couple of trees that Milrow had planted.

Miguel and Joe both cheered. “Nice shot!” Joe said.

“Would have been a hit, for sure.”

Miguel declared it was good to end on a high note, so after that we just started throwing the ball around and talking.

Joe told us about a new stack of comic books that he’d ordered using his mom’s credit card when she wasn’t looking, and he was supposed to get delivery in a couple of days.

“I just hope she’s not home when the package shows up. If I’m there for UPS, she’ll never even know.”

“You’re going to get busted,” Miguel said.

“Nah.” Joe hucked the ball, fast and hard, to me. “She orders tons of junk on Amazon all the time. I already deleted the receipt from her e-mail, so she might not even notice it’s on her card with all those other charges.”

I sent the ball to Miguel, and Miguel fired it off to Joe. *Thwock*, solid in his glove.

“So what did you get?” I asked.

“X-Men, and a new Spider-Man, and I got another Transmetropolitan.”

I perked up at that. Transmetropolitan is this crazy comic about a journalist named Spider Jerusalem who lives in the future and investigates all these stories about corruption. He’s kind of burned-out, so it’s not really, you know, good role-model stuff. When my mom caught me with it, she gave me a big lecture about drugs and drinking and violence and girls and all the other things in the comic, and how these things weren’t supposed to be glorified. Then she threw the comic away.

I didn’t mind, really, because I knew she meant well, but all she would have had to do was point a

Joe's dad if she wanted to talk about what drinking or drugs got you, because walking into that guy's house when he was drunk was scary enough that you never wanted to drink, ever.

To me at least, Spider Jerusalem's craziness never seemed like the point of the comic. The point was that the guy was always trying to fight the good fight and uncover corruption, even though everyone around him was too lazy or greedy or stupid to care. Kind of like Miguel, or even Miguel's dad, when he stood up for things and got socked for it. It was that whole samurai thing: too much honor to sit and lie low. Spider Jerusalem kept on fighting anyway.

Also, Spider Jerusalem had a cat with two faces, and he ate things like takeout monkey burgers and cartons of caribou eyeballs for breakfast.

How cool is that?

So anyway, I wasn't allowed to have those comics at my house, but Joe's mom hardly paid attention, and if we avoided his dad, we could go over to Joe's and read them there.

We kept chucking the baseball and talking about nothing in particular. And I think that's the most important thing: We were doing something that felt so normal, and at the same time, everything around us was already starting to get weird. Things were normal... and then they weren't.

"What's that smell?" Joe asked.

Miguel and I sniffed. *Nasty*. "Is that the feedlots?"

"I think it's coming from Milrow." I gagged.

"Whoa!" Miguel said. "That's just wrong."

The smell was definitely coming out of the meatpacking plant, and it was bad.

But telling you the smell was bad is a complete understatement. It smelled like a combination of cow manure and rotten meat.

Even that doesn't describe it, because, basically, manure and rotting meat is what Milrow smells like a lot of the time—it's disgusting, but it's totally normal.

This was worse.

Bucket-of-puke-that-you-left-out-in-the-sun-and-then-poured-over-hot-coals worse. Ashy-barfy-rotten-meat-dead-cow-manure-sewer nasty.

"Oh my god!" We were all gagging. "What is it?"

Joe retched. "I thought you said it wouldn't stink out here, Rabi!"

I was covering my mouth with my T-shirt. "It never smells like *this*."

We all started for our bikes, holding our shirts over our noses, covering our faces with our baseball gloves. Anything to cut the stench.

"Agh! It's killing me!" Miguel said.

As we climbed onto our bikes, we suddenly saw a bunch of workers scrambling out of the meatpacking plant. I saw Miguel's uncle and aunt and a whole bunch of the other Mexican workers piling out the door and running for the parking lots.

A siren started going off, and more people came pouring outside.

Miguel's uncle caught sight of us staring at the commotion. He changed direction and hurried over.

"What are you *niños* doing here?" He was holding a blood-covered apron over his face. Cow blood. I guessed. He hadn't even changed out of his work clothes before he ran out of there.

"We were just playing baseball."

Mr. Castillo glanced back at the plant. I swear he looked frightened. "You shouldn't be here. Go play by your school."

"Why?"

I mean, it was pretty obvious why. The whole place smelled like rot-poop-dead-cow-puke—but,

you know, other than that.

Mr. Castillo just shook his head and didn't answer. "You shouldn't be out here. This air is very bad. *Muy malo. Muy muy malo.*"

"Why's everyone running?" Miguel asked. "What smells so bad?"

But Miguel's uncle wouldn't say. He just made urgent shooing motions at us like we were a bunch of chickens or something.

"*¡No más preguntas! Just go on! ¡Váyanse!*" he said, and he looked so serious, we didn't dare to ask any more questions. We stood on our pedals and got out of there.

But this smell wasn't like other smells. It didn't get better as we pedaled for town; it chased us the whole way, making our eyes tear up and making us cough and gag.

It was the kind of stink that made you want to hunker down under a blanket to keep the air out. It made you want to duct-tape the windows closed and hold your breath, praying the smell would just pass you by—because, if you were honest about the thing that was billowing over the cornfields and chasing us back to town, there was only one name that fit:

Pure Evil.

CHAPTER 4

Mom opened the door ahead of me, making a face at the outside air. “Where have you been, *khoka*?”

“We were at the park. Over by Milrow.”

“Is that where this smell is coming from?”

I was gagging as I ducked inside. “Yeah.”

Mom shut the door quickly, but the smell followed me in. We turned up the AC to try to filter it out, but it didn’t help.

“Go take a shower,” she said. “You smell.”

“It’s not me! It’s the air.”

But she wouldn’t listen. “Go clean up.”

I went and took a long shower and soaped myself three times. Even after that, I kept smelling the stink, but I couldn’t decide if it was actually still on me, or if it was bad air sneaking into the house, or if it was just my mind going crazy. When the water turned cold, I gave up scrubbing.

By the time I came downstairs, the stink was being replaced by other smells: cumin and coriander and mustard seeds frying as Mom started to work on dinner.

“Rabi,” my mom said, looking up from the stove. “What was it that happened after your baseball game? It looked like you were in a fight with that other boy. The Riggoni boy.”

“It was just kid stuff. He doesn’t like that I can’t hit.”

“You can hit. I’ve seen you.”

“No, Mom. I can’t. I suck.”

“Don’t use that word.”

“It’s not a curse word. Vacuums suck.”

My mom said something in Bengali under her breath. “My son thinks he is so clever.” To me, she said, “The word is the word, and we both know it’s not nice.”

“Yeah, well, Sammy calls me ‘red dot.’ I guess that’s not nice, either.”

I went into the living room and turned on the TV, started flipping channels. My mom shut off the stove and followed me in.

“Do your other classmates say these things, too?” She stood in front of me, blocking my view, a whole wall of yellow sari.

“Nah. It’s just Sammy. He’s a jerk. He probably went to Chicago and learned it from some of his jerk friends. There’s no way he came up with it on his own. He’s not smart enough.”

Which was true, because, let’s face it, if you’re Indian and you live in the middle of nowhere, nobody knows how to stereotype you. Half the people in America can’t even find India on a map, let alone know what the culture’s like. You might think I’m joking, but I’m serious: Unless I’m in a big city, if I tell people I’m half Indian, they usually think I’m talking about Native Americans—Sioux or Arapaho, people like that. They definitely aren’t thinking Bengali.

And what confuses people even more is that my dad’s white. Or, if you want to get all specific, he’s German/Swedish/Scottish, with maybe some Polish. Born and raised in Delbe, just like me. So I’m like a third-generation Bengali/German/Swedish/Scottish-with-maybe-Polish, Delbe Iowan. One hundred percent mutt, I like to say. My dad says that actually means I’m 100 percent American.

“Has Sammy been saying this long?” my mom asked.

I started to answer, but I caught a glimpse of the TV and was surprised to see Sammy’s dad starin

out at me from the screen. It was almost like I'd summoned Mr. Riggoni by talking about his kid. "Uhh..." I leaned to the side so I could see around Mom to the TV.

"Rabi?"

I tore my eyes from the TV. "No, Mom. He just learned it. He'll probably forget it tomorrow and go back to picking on someone else. It's nothing. He's a jerk." I pointed at the TV. "Look. They're talking about Milrow."

Mom turned around and we both watched. "That's Sammy's father, yes?"

"Yeah," I said, thinking about what the guy had done to Miguel's mom and dad. "He's a jerk, too. It runs in the family." I turned up the volume.

"Why do you say so?" Mom asked, and I realized I'd probably said too much. She didn't know that most of Miguel's family was here illegally.

"It's nothing," I said, and hit the volume up another couple notches. "Can I watch this?"

Mom finally moved clear so that we could both see. Sammy's dad was standing in front of the Milrow plant with a reporter.

He was saying, "... Retrofitting for the processing systems will take no more than a few days. Obviously, when we open closed systems like this, there are some local impacts—"

"You mean the air—" the reporter started, but Mr. Riggoni overrode her.

"—is completely safe." He took a deep breath, which I thought was pretty heroic considering how nasty I knew it was out there.

"Entirely safe. We're overseen by both the USDA and the EPA, and we take our obligations seriously. Milrow Meats is entirely in compliance with relevant environmental regulations. Any impacts should be entirely gone by nightfall."

The reporter looked like she was fighting not to gag, but she managed to make herself smile and turn back to the studio. The news anchors all smiled as well and turned to face the camera. "That's right, folks. Just keep your windows closed for another hour or two, and things should clear up."

It was weird, looking at the anchors in their news studio and the lady reporter behind them on the screen, everyone smiling along with Sammy's dad. Everyone pretending that the air outside wasn't foul and that Mr. Riggoni wasn't full of it.

"They're lying," I said. "This smell wasn't planned. No way."

"Don't be silly, *khoka*."

"I was *there*. All the workers were running away. Miguel's uncle told us to run, too."

"Don't make up stories."

"I'm not! There were sirens and everyone was running out of that place like they expected it to explode."

Mom still gave me her best *I don't believe you* look.

"Okay," I said, backtracking. "Maybe it wasn't going to explode. But Miguel's uncle looked *scared*. Sammy's dad is a total liar."

"You're just saying this because you're angry at Sammy."

"I'm saying it because it's true! Sammy's a total jerk, and his dad's a liar. That guy would do anything for money. Lying's nothing to him."

"How do you know?"

I bit my tongue. I didn't want to go into that. Miguel didn't like having people talk about his family situation; he'd only told me and Joe about his parents' immigration status because we were best friends. And he'd sworn us to secrecy.

"I just do."

Mom looked at me a moment longer. “Don’t make up stories, Rabi. Mr. Riggoni is very respected. I could tell she was disappointed in me as she turned and went back into the kitchen. “No more stories *khoka*. Come and help me make the *papad* and set the table for dinner.”

I nodded, but I didn’t get up right away. I just couldn’t take my eyes off the TV with its smiling news announcers. It was like he’d hypnotized them or something. He was covering everything up, and he was getting away with it. He made lots of money and looked real good in a suit, so everyone trusted him—even when he was lying out of both sides of his mouth.

Even my mom trusted the guy. She was already laying chunks of fish into the simmering spices of her *macher jhol*, ready to go back to regular life. She believed every word he’d said, because he was “respected.”

Why wasn’t anyone challenging him? The newspeople weren’t saying anything. The workers weren’t saying anything, even though they’d all been running away, too. It was like all the grown-ups had decided not to tell the truth, or even bother to look at it.

The TV news switched over to some story about Homeland Security, breaking the spell. I wasn’t sure exactly what needed to be done about Sammy’s lying dad, but I was starting to think the answer lay in Joe’s comic books.

Good old Spider Jerusalem was practically screaming at me, telling me what he’d do if he saw some lying fat cat like that, right on the news.

Spider Jerusalem would have stuffed himself on caribou eyeballs, and then he would have gone out and investigated.

CHAPTER 5

Unfortunately, Spider Jerusalem didn't have a mom and a bunch of family back in India. My whole plan to go poke around Milrow got derailed by real life.

In the middle of the night, my mom got a call from India.

India calls only at oddball times of the night because they're on the other side of the world when it's daytime for them, and when they call, it's only for three reasons:

- 1) A wedding
- 2) A new baby
- 3) Someone died

I was pretty sure no one over there was getting married, because the next cousin I had who was going to get an arranged marriage was fourteen, so he had a while to wait yet. And the next in line after that was Mishtu, and she was twelve. And none of my already-married cousins had any babies on the way.

I got a cold, sick feeling in my stomach.

Mom was talking fast on the phone in Bengali, and a couple minutes later she came in and said, "Rabi, there's been an accident in Kolkata family. *Mashima* has been in a car crash."

Mashima—that could have been any one of my mother's five sisters. My mom seemed to read my mind. "Dhira Mashima," she supplied.

It was still hard to remember which one she was; they were all a blur of saris and older ladies who sometimes gave me candy or rupees for gifts. I searched my mind and finally placed her. She was the second-oldest sister, with a big smile and who used to give me chocolate when we visited her flat.

She basically only spoke Bengali, so there wasn't a whole lot I could really know about her, unless my mom or one of Dhira Mashima's kids was around to translate into English. Mostly she would just smile at me, and I'd smile back, and then the silence between us would stretch and stretch until I had to leave the room because I couldn't take not actually being able to say anything except "hi" and "how are you?"

"Is she okay?"

"We're not sure. She's in the hospital. I'm going to make tickets to fly tomorrow, if we can find seats."

I was still trying to get the sleep out of my eyes, but Mom was bustling around, talking about tickets and driving to Chicago, and who she could get to come over and take care of the yard.

"Mom?"

"Yes, *khoka*?"

"Do I have to go, too?"

Mom turned and looked at me, shocked. "Of course you have to go. She's your *mashima*. Your family needs you."

"But..." I kind of understood what she meant about family, but really, what good was I going to do over there? My mom was the kind of take-charge person who could push around hospital doctors and nurses. She could probably help, but me?

"Won't I just be in the way?" I asked.

“It’s important to show you care. You must come.”

~~Spider Jerusalem didn’t have to deal with stuff like this. I didn’t want to be a jerk, but how was I going to figure out what Sammy’s dad had been lying about if I was in India?~~

After the news report on the TV, I’d called Miguel and Joe. They’d both seen the news, too.

“Total liar,” Joe pronounced. “Full-on Magneto evil liar.”

“Yeah,” Miguel said. “My uncle saw that, too. He said it was bogus.”

“So what’s the scoop?” I asked.

“It’s gonna chill your blood.”

“Yeah???”

But Miguel wouldn’t say any more. So all night I’d been lying in bed, waiting for daybreak so that I could go over and shake the story out of him.

And now India was calling.

Saying that I didn’t want to go wouldn’t do any good. I needed a different plan. Appeal to family and duty.

“If I’m over there, I’ll just be in your way,” I said. “I can’t speak much Bengali, and everyone’s going to be busy. But if I stay here, then you’d be free to go to the hospital and help Dhira Mashima. I’d be fine. I don’t mind. I just don’t want to be in the way when you need to be taking care of your sister.”

Mom looked doubtful. “But where would you stay?”

“I could stay with Miguel.”

“Don’t be silly. You can’t just impose on his family like that. I could be gone a week. More, maybe.”

“They wouldn’t mind—” I almost said, *They’re working so hard they’re hardly around the house at all*, but that wasn’t a good thing to tell your mom, so instead I said, “They like having kids around. It wouldn’t bother them. They love kids.”

“That must be why they’re taking care of Miguel while his parents are looking for work in California.”

That was the story we’d been telling everyone about where Miguel’s parents had gone. “Yeah. They really like kids,” I said, nodding vigorously. “Love ’em.”

“All right,” she said, doubtfully. “I can call them. But no guarantees.”

By morning, Mr. and Mrs. Castillo had agreed to let me stay, and I was packing a bag to stay at Miguel’s. I felt a little guilty for misleading my mom, but it was for a good cause, I figured. Now, as I zipped up my duffel and slung it over my shoulder, I couldn’t wait to get the inside scoop from Mr. Castillo about what had really happened at Milrow Meat Solutions.

Spider Jerusalem was on the trail of a scandal, and he wasn’t going to let up until all the rotten corruption had been brought to light.

CHAPTER 6

To be honest, Miguel's house wasn't my favorite place in the world.

Mr. and Mrs. Castillo were nice people, but they also really did work all the time, because Milrow didn't pay much. Half the time they were working crazy shifts at Milrow, and the other half, they were doing other odd jobs and work. Miguel had to do a lot of the cooking and clean up the dishes and do laundry for himself. And on top of that, Miguel had a job where he'd go out and mow lawns so he could help contribute to getting his folks back across the border.

Mrs. Castillo would sometimes try to take care of us, and she'd do cool things like let us drink *café de olla*, a kind of coffee that has cinnamon in it and a ton of sugar. But it wasn't like my house, where you could just hit up your mom for a snack of mango pickle and rice; at Miguel's you had to go dig in the fridge and hope that you didn't also have to go to the grocery store, and if you did, you had to hope that someone had the cash to do it.

I ended up helping with a lot of the housework, too, because if you're going to freeload at someone's house, it's what you do. I did dishes, helped Miguel mow lawns, chopped vegetables for dinner, whatever needed doing.

But you know what? It was all worth it, because Mr. and Mrs. Castillo had a story to tell, all right, and I would have worked twice as hard to hear what they had to say the first day I got there.

We had just finished dinner, and Miguel and I were washing the dishes by hand because they didn't have a dishwasher. Miguel kept giving dishes back to me to scrub twice.

"Do it again," he said.

"I already did."

"Feel that." He rubbed his finger on the plate. "You got to get the oil off, too, not just the food. I thought Indians knew how to work."

"I'm only half Indian."

"Half Indian, but pure momma's boy."

I got more soap on my sponge and did it again, while Miguel watched me like a hawk. Behind us, Mr. Castillo was practically asleep at the table, after finishing a brutal shift, but Mrs. Castillo was wiping down counters and putting everything back in order.

Finally, I couldn't hold back anymore. "So?" I elbowed Miguel. "What happened at the plant? You said you were going to tell me."

In a single second, the kitchen went from happy and relaxed to dead silent. Mr. Castillo, who I'd thought had been dozing, was suddenly looking at Miguel, his brow knitted.

"You told him?" Mr. Castillo asked.

Miguel looked down. I'd never seen him look embarrassed before. In school or on the baseball field, he was always a rock. But when Mr. Castillo looked hard at him, he seemed to shrink.

Mrs. Castillo was looking from her husband to her nephew, her warmth and friendliness gone entirely. "What are you thinking?" she asked.

And then she turned to Spanish. She aimed rapid-fire words of authority at Miguel, her hand chopping the air for emphasis. I caught *mamá* and *papá*, but the rest of it went by in a blur. Her expression was hard and disappointed. She finished up with "*¡Muy peligroso!*" and a final chop of the hand.

I'd always thought of Mrs. Castillo as a pretty quiet woman, a nice lady who always smiled at me

even after a long day at work. But she didn't look that way now. I wouldn't have crossed her, not in a million years, looking like that.

But Miguel turned stubborn under her words. "He's my friend," he said, and the way he said it, he looked just like he did when he was about to go out and try to beat up some bully, even though he was outnumbered. Straightening up, all determination. "He's my *best* friend."

I looked from Mr. and Mrs. Castillo to Miguel, feeling like I was in the middle of a standoff, and something terrible was at stake.

"I won't tell anyone," I said. "I can keep a secret."

Mr. Castillo frowned at me. "Good secrets are kept by telling no one at all."

"I know you're here illegally," I said. "I haven't told anyone about that. You can trust me. I didn't even tell my parents that Miguel's mom and dad got grabbed by ICE. I don't tell secrets."

"Secrets." Miguel's uncle laughed sharply. "Yes. Secrets. If you know half the things that happen in Milrow..." he trailed off. "You know nothing. You know less than zero."

"I know something went wrong out at the meatpacking plant. And I know Sammy's dad is a liar."

"That man..." Mr. Castillo made a face of disgust. He seemed to make a decision. "That man would do anything for Milrow. They want money, money, money. All they want is for workers to work harder. *Más duro, más duro, más duro*. Always it is *más duro*. They do not care if people are hurt, because there are always more people from Mexico or Honduras or Ecuador. I have seen people lose arms and legs and fingers in that place. In those machines. Those fast knives..." He trailed off. "It is sickness in that place. They care about nothing except making a little more money. And now they feed their cows strange things to make them grow faster. They give them drugs to make them not die when they live in dirt and filth. They use the feathers and droppings and bits of chickens from their chicken factories and grind them up and give them to their cows for food, because it is cheap to feed their cows the trash of other places.... I see all of this, and I do not complain, because they will deport me like *that*." He snapped his fingers.

"But now, I tell you, these Milrow men in their fine suits, and their scientists in their clean white lab coats, they are doing new things.... They are finding new drugs to make the meat taste better, to make it grow fat, and these drugs... these things that they feed them... they make the cows strange. The animals do not act as they should, and their meat does not smell as it should, and when you cut them, they do not bleed and die as they should—"

"Raúl," Mrs. Castillo said. "You frighten them. You do not see such things."

"I have eyes," he said stubbornly. "I see the cows when they come into the line to be killed by my hand. I see how they stagger. They are not natural. Something was always wrong with the cows, because so many were sick and fed on bad things, but now it is getting worse."

"I think something is changing out there in the feedlots. All those cows packed together, fattening on strange things, and sick near to death. These cows are not cows as I knew them when I was a boy and worked on my father's ranch in Tamaulipas. It is not the same. These cows are not cows."

"Of course they are cows," Mrs. Castillo said. "You're telling the boys ghost stories now."

But Mr. Castillo shook his head stubbornly. "No, Nina. Something is different. It is changing."

CHAPTER 7

I spent the night with strange dreams, and all of them were about cows.

Cows from India like I used to see when we went over to visit family. White cows with high humps on their backs and garlands of marigolds on their short horns, people feeding them grass and getting blessings from the priest who cared for them. A sacred act. And then others: cows in feedlot trucks blasting past us on the highway as we pedaled our bikes out to Milrow Meat Solutions, their furry faces pressed against the grates of the truck trailers, the animals mooing with panic and stinking with manure as they disappeared into the darkness of the plant.

And then other dreams—weirder ones. Steaks that talked to me and asked me for directions back to their ranch. Cafeteria hamburgers that jumped off school lunch trays and dashed for the doors, with a bunch of us kids chasing after them. I kept saying, “But I don’t even eat cow!” as I grabbed at bacon double cheeseburgers that hopped around like grasshoppers, and dove for sliders that were zipping down hallways and dodging us like feral cats.

I woke to Miguel shaking me.

“What?” I mumbled groggily. I was covered with sweat and felt like I hadn’t slept at all.

“Time to work,” Miguel said.

I groaned, but dragged myself out of bed and let Miguel prod me out into the sweat of the summer to mow lawns.

Miguel had a Weedwacker and a beat-up gas mower, so I’d do the mowing while he did all the careful edge-trimming work, and if we got the work done fast enough, we would be free until baseball practice and the humiliations of Mr. Cocoran.

Neither of us could have guessed that the world was about to fall apart.

“Hey, Miguel?” I said as we shoved the mower over the curb and rattled down Poplar Street on the way to Miguel’s next job. “You think your uncle’s right about the cows at Milrow being unnatural?”

Miguel shrugged. “My uncle’s always telling stories. All about the *chupacabra* coming to suck the blood out of goats. Things like that. He likes to tell ghost stories.”

“But you don’t think he’s doing that now, do you? Mr. Riggoni was totally lying. We know that. And that smell was all kinds of wrong.”

Miguel shushed me suddenly. I realized where we were.

The big old house before us had, like, an acre of grass around it.

“Seriously? You do their lawn?”

We were staring up at Sammy Riggoni’s house.

“It’s money,” Miguel said.

“But his dad’s the guy who got your mom and dad—”

Miguel cut me off with a hard look. “I don’t got the luxury of being all prissy about where my money comes from.”

“Sorry. Okay.” But it seemed so wrong.

I’d never guessed that Miguel would have to work for the people he hated most in the world.

I guess that’s what not having money does. It takes away choices. The people with the cash get to make the decisions, and you just got to swallow your pride.

But then, to add insult to injury, Sammy came out the front door, sucking on a lemonade and smiling like he was getting the biggest, bestest Christmas present ever. He plopped into a chair with

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