

The Game I Will Never Forget

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[Title Art To Come]

Orion
Children's Books

ORION CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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For my brother Zak,
the chess champion of my world.

For my nani, Shaista Shelley Khanom,
and all grandmas(ters) whose legacies we,
their grandchildren, carry forward.

For my 'Colet Flat' nani, Julekha Rahman,
stolen from us by dementia too soon.

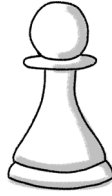
And for Mum. Always.

*‘If you want to be a champion, you must think
differently from the crowd.’*

— Judit Polgár, Chess Grandmaster —

*‘It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards,’
says the White Queen to Alice.*

— Lewis Carroll, Author —



1

The Opening

Pew-pew! Pew-pew! PEW!

‘Zak, put that down, please . . .’

Ignoring my dad’s voice, I pressed the buttons on my gaming console harder and faster and threw out a few more *pew-pews* at the giant robot that was trying to destroy my empire.

‘ZAK!’

Pressing pause on my game, I looked up with a ‘Whaaaaaat?’ and then frowned. I hadn’t realised that both Mum and Dad had ignored my KEEP OUT sign made of foil and come into my room. I couldn’t remember the last time they’d both come to see me together. And on a Sunday morning too.

Thinking fast, I tried to remember if I had done

anything wrong . . . Nope, there was nothing. I hadn't accidentally broken anything recently, my room wasn't too messy, and I hadn't got into trouble at school even once this term. In fact, Ms Koumi had said she was super impressed with my work at the last parents' evening, so there was definitely no reason for Mum and Dad to come and tell me off. In fact, if anything, they probably owed me a few awards for how good I'd been!

Giving me a big smile, Mum sat down on my bed and said, 'We've got something important to tell you.'

The second she said that, I knew something bad was about to happen. Whenever a parent says they've got 'something important to tell you', it usually means you're about to be a pageboy at some random wedding of relatives you've never heard of, where old people pull on your cheeks and tell you that you've grown – as if that's not something kids do every day. But when your parents say that *and* sit down on your bed, then it basically means there's a ninety-nine per cent chance your life is over.

I watched as Mum bit her bottom lip nervously, like a rabbit that had run out of carrots, and Dad's ears

turned so red they looked as if they were about to sprout strawberries.

I put my console down and waited.

Mum pushed a strand of her shiny black hair behind her gold-hooped ear and leaned in closer. ‘Well, actually, there are three things we need to tell you. Do you want the really magnificently important, best news you’ll ever hear first? Or the only marginally less best ever news first?’

‘Or do you fancy a news sandwich – with the it’s-not-really-all-that-bad bit of news in the middle?’ asked my dad, looking down at me, his wide brown eyes getting wider and wider.

Whatever this sandwich was made of, it was definitely going to give me a tummy ache. The last time Dad’s eyes had got so wide was when he had to tell me my TX-200 console was broken and couldn’t be fixed, which meant weeks and weeks of having no games to play after school. And, even worse, being forced to play Monopoly with him and Mum at the weekends, because for some reason, they thought making a tiny top hat and a car hop around on a board collecting fake money was as exciting as destroying zombies and red-eyed robots.

I quickly glanced over at my new TX-200 – the one I had got on my birthday after two whole months of Monopoly torture – and instantly felt better. Whatever Mum had to say, it couldn't ever be as bad as losing my games and points and bonus levels. Or hearing everyone at school talk about the latest games that I couldn't play. As long as my TX wasn't being taken away from me, I could handle anything.

'I don't mind,' I said, shrugging at the pretend-sandwich options. News is news, no matter what order it comes in. It doesn't matter what bit parents tell you first or last because it's all already happened before it reaches you and you can't control any of it.

Giving a nod to Dad, Mum reached out and took my hand, instantly making me even more worried. Why was Mum taking my hand? Did she have an incurable disease? Or did Dad? Or was something wrong with *me*? I hadn't been to the doctor at all this term. Not unless you counted my evil dentist who said I might need braces. So it *couldn't* be me . . .

'Well, the first piece of super-exciting news is . . .'

I saw my dad give my mum's shoulder a squeeze,

before she took a deep breath and finally cried, ‘You’re getting a BABY BROTHER OR SISTER!’

For a single second, I’m pretty sure a nuclear explosion went off in my brain. It made my mouth and hands go numb, and my eyes forget how to blink.

‘TA-DA!’ sang my dad, waving his hands at me as if he had joined an invisible jazz band.

I stared up at my parents and tried to say something. But all my mouth could do was bob up and down like an apple dunked in a water barrel.

‘Oh, Imran, he’s speechless with joy,’ whispered Mum, giving my dad’s hand a happy tap.

‘Not sure about that . . .’ said Dad, his forehead crumpling. His eyes searched mine as he asked, ‘You all right, Zak?’

Opening my mouth again, I tried to make some sort of noise come out. But there was nothing. Even though I could hear police sirens going off in my brain and shouts of, HOW COULD YOU DO THIS TO ME? I was ten! That made me WAY too old to have a baby brother or sister! And everyone knew babies ruined everything – they cried all night and pooped at least EIGHTY-SEVEN times a day.

I knew all this for a fact because my best friend on the planet, Dahlia, had been given a baby sister by her parents two years ago, and she was *still* coming into school talking about poop and nappies and looking like a slightly electrocuted zombie. She says babies aren't legally allowed to let anyone get any sleep at night, so that means her hair gets extra frizzy because they can't get any sleep either. She's even been in detention twice for falling asleep in lessons with her eyes open.

I didn't want to talk about poo and look electrocuted and sleep with my eyes open. And I definitely didn't want my hair going weird – especially not just before moving over to the big school. It was going to be bad enough being at a new school next year with all new people and teachers and other, way bigger kids, but becoming a big brother to a pooping machine too? I shook my head. Nope! Mum and Dad would just have to stay in the hospital forever with it, or send me off to an orphanage so I could get adopted by someone who didn't have any babies in the house.

But before my mouth could say any of that out loud, Dad gave my hair another ruffle and said, 'You're going

to be a *brilliant* big brother, Zak. And guess what? We have someone coming to live with us – to help us out – even before the baby gets here.’

‘That’s right,’ said Mum, smiling. ‘That’s the second bit of the magnificently brilliant, wonderful news. Do you want to make a guess who it is?’

HOLD ON TO YOUR MEAT SAMOSAS, I wanted to cry out! So it wasn’t enough that a baby was about to move into the house, but someone else was coming too?

Sitting up straighter, I pulled out as many noises as I could find in my voice box and cried out, ‘Noooooooooooo . . . Whoooooooooooo?’

‘Well!’

Dad looked at Mum, and Mum looked at Dad, like two presenters at an awards ceremony about to announce the winner. Then they both turned to look at me like I was the envelope waiting to be torn open, before shouting out together . . .

‘YOUR NANI!’

‘Isn’t that just the *best*, Zak?’ squealed Mum, stroking my face. ‘You love your Nani Shelley, remember? Remember how she always used to make you her

famous chips with the skin on? And her lentil boras? And how you used to hang on to her scarf and bark after her like a puppy?’

I shook my head – because no! I couldn’t remember. Who would want to remember barking after their grandma like a puppy anyway? All I could remember was a pair of greyish-brown, crinkly eyes and someone who always smelled of tea and sugar and toast. But I hadn’t seen my nani since I was five. That was the last time we had visited her in Bangladesh. And now she was coming to *live* with us?

‘How – how many days is she coming for?’ I asked. I knew from all my cousins that when old people came to stay in your house, they hardly ever left again. But Nani had her own farms and a huge mansion. She’d *hate* being in a small house in freezing-cold England, so hopefully she wouldn’t stay long.

‘We’re not sure. But at least for half a year,’ replied Mum.

‘Half a YEAR!’ I shouted. She might as well have said forever and got it over and done with!

‘At least,’ said Dad, before grinning happily. ‘She’ll be a godsend to us, you’ll see. Now, you ready for the

middle part of that good-news sandwich I was telling you about?’ he asked, also sitting down on my bed next to me.

Oh no. Now I had *two* parents sitting on my bed. If there had been any security alarms in my room, all of them would be have been going off right about now.

Feeling a bit sick, I looked up at my dad and waited. But it was Mum who got there first.

‘Now, darling, do you remember a long time ago we talked about changing the attic room into a lovely extra bedroom?’ asked Mum. Without waiting for me to answer, she continued, ‘Well, that’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to clean it up this week and get it all nice and cosy.’

‘F-For the baby – or – or Nani?’ my mouth asked, while my throat gulped the rest of my questions down.

‘Well, the baby can hardly get up there now, can it?’ laughed Dad. ‘Not for a good few years, anyway.’

‘And your nani can’t keep going up and down that ladder at her age,’ said Mum, shaking her head at me and laughing too. ‘No . . . We thought she could move

into your room, especially as it's right next door to ours and the bathroom too. So . . .'

'So . . .'

added Dad, throwing a nod my way before he waited for me to catch it.

Slowly, like all the communication lights of a spaceship flickering on one by one, I finally got the message.

It was *me*.

I was the one getting kicked out of my room! I was the one who was being banished to the attic. The same room Mum called a spider's paradise and Dad was always dumping boxes of junk in! Was that what this baby was turning me into already? A piece of junk, to be hidden and stored away in the attic with my old games and Dad's broken bits of furniture that were waiting to be fixed 'one rainy day' – even though there had been four million rainy days since he'd first said that.

I jumped off the bed, my heart kicking at my chest so fast it was making me want to kick something too.

'B-But I don't want to move out of my room!' I shouted. 'It's MINE! And the attic is full of spiders! And it's too small! Why can't Nani move there? You can get proper stairs for her, or a lift or something!'

Mum shook her head while Dad scratched his forehead.

‘Zak, we know this isn’t easy and we know how much you love your room.’

Looking away from Dad, I stared hard at my homework table and my three bookshelves, filled with all the Lego models I had made and collected, and my cool Iron Man and Ninja Turtle posters, and my signed Salik Rehman poster – the coolest football player that had ever lived. I couldn’t believe we were all getting kicked out faster than even one of his footballs.

‘Listen,’ said Dad, placing a hand on my shoulder. I couldn’t really see his face because my silly eyes were filling up with angry tears, so I stared at the floor and waited for whatever lie he was going to tell me next.

‘I promise we’ll make that attic room into the *best* bedroom ever,’ said Dad. ‘And before long you’ll forget this was even your room, OK?’

‘Exactly,’ said Mum. ‘Once it’s done, you can invite your friends over – it’ll be like sleeping up in a treehouse. You can choose whatever colour you want to paint it and we’ll get you a nice new bed and one of those big

blobby lamps you've always wanted. And whatever else you think might look nice up there.'

Not knowing what else to do, I wiped away my tears and stared harder at the floor.

My silence was enough to make Mum whisper, 'That's my boy!' and Dad to give my cheek a squeeze and say, 'Good lad,' before they both headed over to the door.

'Wait,' I cried out, before they disappeared.

'Yes?' asked Mum, turning around.

'When is Nani coming exactly?' I asked.

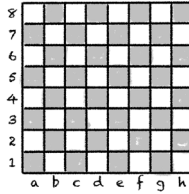
'She flies in next Saturday, darling,' said Mum. 'She's been wanting to see you for years, Zak. You're all she asks about half the time.'

I wanted to shout out, 'A WEEK? A WEEK? *SHE'S COMING TO TAKE OVER MY ROOM IN A WEEK?*' But instead I just stared at the floor again and waited for Mum and Dad to leave MY room and close MY door with MY KEEP OUT! sign. As soon as the door clicked shut, I ran to my desk and ripped out a sheet of paper from the back of my homework book extra angrily. At the very top, I wrote in giant letters:

B a t t l e P l a n

Mum and Dad might THINK they could take my room away from me forever and banish me to live in the attic until I probably turned into a spider myself. But if the games on my TX consoles had taught me anything, it was how to fight back against an enemy force trying to invade my space. It didn't matter if that enemy force was an Egyptian mummy zombie, a monster robot with red eyes, or a little old grandma who made boras and chips all day long.

There was no way I was giving up my room without a fight.



2

The First Strike

‘NOOOO!’

Dahlia’s wide brown eyes moved side to side in shock.

‘Not you too!’ With a sorry shake of her head, she stopped colouring in her version of the world map and gave me a look of pity. I gave her one back, because her map looked like a luminous blue ball that had got chickenpox and made me secretly glad that mine looked a bit better.

‘What’s the big deal?’ asked Milo, looking at us with a frown. ‘It’s only a baby. I mean, it’s a bit disgusting that your mum has to . . . you know . . .’ Leaning over, he whispered, *‘Push it out of her* and stuff! But it’s just a baby. Some of them are all right to play with when

their heads aren't too big for their bodies. That's what my grandad says, anyway.'

'Ew,' I said. I'd never thought about Mum having to push a new baby out and instantly felt sorry for her.

'I wish *my* mum would have a baby,' said Aoife, twisting some of her straw-coloured hair around the tip of her colouring pencil. 'It would make her and Dad leave me alone and not want me around them all the time. I read in a magazine once that parents with more than one kid are way less stressed about everything. Apparently, it's because they get sleep deprived and turn into zombies.'

Dahlia snorted and shook her head. Aoife was always secretly reading her mum's magazines and coming out with strange facts. Or telling us what our star signs said was going to happen to us.

'Trust me. If you had an older brother who wanted to use you as his karate practice dummy and a sister who drooled slime everywhere, you wouldn't be wishing for your mum to give you a baby anything,' Dahlia said. 'Plus, you've never had to change a nappy.'

'*You've* never changed one,' Milo reminded her,

rolling his eyes and shaking his head. ‘You only *saw* your dad changing one.’

‘Same thing,’ said Dahlia. ‘I was so close it nearly ended my actual life. And the smell! It made—’

‘Your nose go blind,’ said Milo, Aoife and me all at the same time, shaking our heads. This was about the five hundredth time we’d heard about what the smell of her sister’s nappies had done to Dahlia’s nose.

‘Well, it did! I still don’t know how something so illegal can come out of something so tiny. No wonder parents are always in a bad mood. They had to smell that stuff for years with us!’

‘And what smell would that be, Dahlia?’ asked Ms Koumi, appearing like a teacher-shaped magician at Aoife’s end of the table. She was grinning at us, so I knew she knew the answer already.

‘Nothing, miss,’ said Dahlia, her cheeks turning instantly bright pink.

‘Poo, miss,’ said Milo, enjoying being able to say the word out loud to a teacher. ‘Baby POO! You know, POO that comes out of a baby.’

‘Ah,’ said Ms Koumi, her mouth wrinkling into a small smile. ‘Still traumatised, I see?’

Dahlia gave a serious nod. ‘Miss, I can smell it everywhere. Even in my dreams.’

‘Dreams don’t smell!’ cried out Amitav from behind us, making us realise that the rest of the class were listening.

‘Mine do!’ shouted back Dahlia, turning around to narrow her eyes at him.

‘Well, I am sure the memories – and the smell – will all fade with time. Now, let’s not have all this poo talk stop you from finishing your maps before the bell goes,’ ordered Ms Koumi, heading back to her table at the front. The whole class went back to colouring our maps more quietly, while I grabbed a brown pencil from the pot in front of me and thought about the baby brother or sister that was coming to take over my life. And the nani that was travelling from halfway across the world to come and steal my room. I hadn’t even told Dahlia, Milo and Aoife about her. The news would probably make Dahlia’s head explode.

I planned to tell them at break-time . . . And then at lunchtime . . . But I couldn’t find the right words. Maybe I didn’t want to say them out loud because that would make it all true.

Before I knew it, somehow it was home-time. Since I only lived one road away from school, I usually walked home alone after Dahlia's dad and Milo's gran and Aoife's aunt came to get them. But today, Dad was waiting for me.

Dahlia and Milo both instantly looked over at me, frowning. 'What's your dad doing here?' they asked with their eyes. It was the same question I was asking myself, even though I was so happy to see him.

Aoife cried out, 'Hello, Mr Shah!' and ran right up to him.

'Hello there, Aoife,' said Dad, giving her a high-five. Aoife loved Mum and Dad. Mum was her family's GP doctor, and Dad rescued people whose cars had broken down, and had rescued her favourite uncle once.

It was cool having a mum who was a doctor and a dad who drove around saving people too. Except when they were away working, which was nearly all the time. I couldn't remember the last time either of them had come to pick me up from school. Usually during the day Mum was at work and Dad needed to sleep or had to cover for someone on another shift. I didn't really mind. It was only when they showed up

for things when I wasn't expecting them to that I realised how much I missed having them around. Like today.

'Ready to head out, Zak?' asked Dad, ruffling my hair.

I nodded and, giving Dahlia, Aoife and Milo a wave, proudly began walking next to him. I could tell everyone in the playground was looking at us or busy waving at Dad. When I grew up, I wanted to be like that. Someone who people remembered, even when they hadn't seen you for months.

'How come you've come to pick me up, Dad?' I asked, as we left the school gates behind us. 'How come you're not on the motorways or sleeping or something?'

'Ah, well, I've taken a few days off,' said Dad. 'Got a bit of a special project to complete. You'll see when we get in.'

A special project? I'd never seen Dad do any kind of project, let alone a special one. It had to be something to do with the baby. Typical. It was already getting special treatment.

I pulled on his arm and asked him to tell me but he shook his head and gave me a wink. 'You'll see!'

When we got in, Dad threw his keys into the keys bowl and asked me what I wanted for a pre-dinner snack.

‘Can I have *anything* I want?’ I asked, dumping my rucksack on the floor and following him into the kitchen. My stomach growled, suddenly hungry.

‘Sure,’ he said, opening the fridge. ‘If we have it.’

‘Can I have fish fingers? Pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeease!’

Dad pulled out the extra-large box of fish fingers and looked over at me. ‘I meant like a crumpet or some fruit. Not these!’ he said, shaking his head. But he was smiling as he said it. He knew that I thought fish fingers were the best food ever created in all of history, and that I loved them more than anything else in the world – except chocolate which it’s tied with. I tried the two together once, and dipped a fish finger into a bowl of melted chocolate that was really meant for rice krispie cakes. But it was *disgusting*. You’d think mixing your most favourite things ever would make an awesome new dish. But it doesn’t. Sometimes life just doesn’t make any sense.

‘We’ll have three each then,’ said Dad, turning on the air fryer. ‘And nothing else. That way, you won’t spoil

your appetite for dinner. I'm making seekh kebabs from scratch tonight.'

I nodded, feeling even happier. Dad's kebabs were totally the best.

'Right, while that's cooking, want to see the special project I've started?'

Nodding, I jumped down from my chair and followed Dad up the stairs.

'Are you building a cot for the baby?' I asked.

'Nope, not yet. There's a good few months before we need to do that, hopefully.'

Dad passed my room and the bathroom to stop in the middle of the landing, right underneath the square-shaped attic door above our heads. Except the door that was the colour of the ceiling wasn't there any more, and the usually tidy landing had old boxes and frames and a cobweb-covered hockey stick piled up under the window.

Smiling, Dad pulled down the foldaway ladder. As the stairs clicked into place, I felt something snap inside me too.

'Come and see,' he said, his head disappearing into the hole right in the middle of the cream-painted sky above us.

I watched his shoulders, legs and feet get swallowed up like spaghetti by the black hole and told myself to move. But my hands and feet wouldn't do it. Then my ears decided to join them in protest because I could hear Dad's voice but couldn't understand a single word he was saying.

'ZAK?' Dad poked his head back out of the hole. 'You coming? Don't you want to see what I'm doing to it? Come on! *Thara-thari!*'

Whenever Dad said '*Thara-thari*', it meant he wanted me to move at lightning speed. Usually it was because he had to go save a stranded life. But this time it was to end mine as I knew it.

Pushing my legs forward through what felt like an invisible swimming pool of treacle, I slowly climbed the stupid stairs to the stupid attic and poked my head up into the stupid black hole. At first I couldn't see anything – it was too dark. But the light from a large, dirty window gradually began blowing rays of sunlight mixed with floating dust my way.

'See how big it is?' asked Dad proudly, standing up and immediately bumping his head on the triangle ceiling. 'We've just got to give it all a good clean, a bit of a

paint, and then we can start moving your things in right away. What do you think?’

I stayed where I was, my feet glued with invisible chewing gum to the ladder, and looked around at the prison cell Mum and Dad were so happy to banish me to. There were spider’s webs all along the roof and in all the corners, but no spiders that I could see. They had probably realised they’d accidentally built their webs in a rubbish room and left too.

‘It’s going to be beautiful when I’m done with it,’ lied Dad. ‘You’ll see.’

As he began to talk about vacuum cleaners and windows and wooden planks, I realised Dad’s special project was to push me out of my room way before Nani had even landed – and that the battle for me to save it had already begun.