

THE YEAR BEFORE THE RAIN

A NOVELLA



ANOO P S. WARRIER

THE YEAR BEFORE THE RAIN

A NOVELLA — FREE SAMPLE



ANOOP S. WARRIER

Chapters One through Three

DREAM FICTION PRESS

A Note to Readers

Thank you for picking this up. What follows is the opening of The Year Before the Rain — enough to get you into the story and, I hope, unable to put it down. I won't say more here; the book explains itself far better than I can. If it grabs you the way I hope it does, the full novella is waiting at the end of this sample.

— Anoop S. Warriar

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Small Things



THE DOG DIDN'T RUN. That was the strange part.

It just stood there in the ditch behind the cricket ground, ribs pushing against its skin like the bars of a cage, and let the first stone hit its side. A dull, wet thock. The dog yelped — short, almost polite — and dropped low into the mud, head tucked, as if it were apologizing for taking up space in the world.

“Again,” said Farhan, already bending for the next stone.

Vikram laughed the way he always laughed when Farhan wanted him to. A beat too fast. A beat too loud. He threw. The stone went wide, cracked against the ditch wall, and the dog flinched at the sound rather than the miss.

They never saw where it went after that. One moment it was there, pressed into the mud, eyes rolled half-white with fear — and the next, in the space between one thrown stone and the search for another, it was simply gone. No yelp. No sound of it running. Just an empty ditch and a smear in the mud where something had been.

Neither of them talked about it. Neither of them wanted to know.

They were fourteen, the two of them, and they had been skipping second period for three weeks straight, ever since they'd worked out that Mr. Correia never counted heads until after lunch. Nobody at home asked why the notebook signatures had stopped. Nobody at school called the house. They wore that freedom the way other boys wore new shoes. Loudly. Without a single thought of gratitude.

They found the kittens under the culvert an hour later. Three of them, blind-eyed and small enough to fit in one cupped hand, mewling into a wet flap of cardboard their mother hadn't come back to.

Farhan crouched down and picked one up by the scruff — the way you'd pick up litter off the street, not something that had ever been alive in any way that mattered to him.

"Eda," Vikram said, a laugh still caught in his throat, "put it back, da—"

Farhan didn't answer. He was already digging in his school bag, past the tiffin box and the cricket ball, until he found what he was looking for — a small tube of adhesive he'd nicked from the art room that morning, the thick, clear kind used for sticking paper to card.

"Watch this," he said.

He squeezed a line of it across the kitten's paws, then pressed the paws flat against a broken brick, holding them there, counting under his breath like a boy timing an egg. The kitten twisted and cried, a thin, high sound that didn't sound like an animal at all — it sounded, for one terrible second, almost like a baby.

Vikram's laugh died somewhere in his chest. He didn't stop Farhan. He didn't look away either. He just stood there, in the flat afternoon heat, watching his best friend hold a small animal down by its own stuck paws, and felt something cold and curious settle in instead — how far would this go, and why wasn't he the one to end it.

Farhan let go. The kitten scrambled, three legs working, the fourth dragging useless and glued fast to a chip of brick it could not shake free. It didn't get far. Somewhere past the culvert's shadow, its cries thinned out and stopped, and the boys did not go looking to see why.

They would remember, much later, that neither of them had decided any of it out loud. It arrived from nowhere, invented jointly and instantly, like a rumor neither boy could say he'd started.

The Shrine

THE SHRINE WAS THE KIND you stopped noticing after the first year of walking past it — a low, whitewashed platform under a tamarind tree, no bigger than a table, with a green cloth over it gone thin and pale at the edges from twenty monsoons. An old woman was there most afternoons. Nobody knew her name. She lit a single earthen lamp even in daylight, when the flame was invisible and pointless, and she never seemed to be praying for anything, only at something, the way you'd address a person in the room.

Farhan kicked the offering plate as they passed. Not hard. Hard enough.

The marigolds went into the gutter. The single lamp guttered and somehow — this was the detail Vikram couldn't explain afterward, to himself or anyone — did not go out, even lying on its side in the dirt, even with no wick left standing.

"Oi," Vikram said, already walking, already bored of it, "leave it, we'll get caught—"

The old woman didn't shout. That was what made them both stop, actually — not fear, just the strangeness of not being shouted at. She looked at them the way you'd look at weather. Something already known. Already arrived.

"You like small things that can't answer back," she said. Not loud. Not a question.

Farhan laughed — the too-loud, too-fast laugh, except this time it was his own, not borrowed for Vikram's benefit. "What's she saying,

mad woman —”

“You’ll know what it’s like,” the old woman said, “before you’re grown.” She said it the way you’d tell someone the time. Then she bent, without hurry, and began setting the marigolds back on the plate, one at a time, as if the boys had already left, as if they were already something that had happened rather than something happening.

They ran the rest of the way, laughing.

CHAPTER THREE

The Gap in the Tin



THE CONSTRUCTION FENCING went up around the east wing in July — green tin sheets, a faded municipal notice, a watchman who slept more than he watched. Everyone said the old block was finally coming down, the one with the cracked veranda and the well nobody used, to make way for a new science lab.

It was, naturally, the best place in the school to disappear into during a free period.

They went in through the gap where the tin sheeting had rusted loose at the base, into the packed-dirt yard behind the old block, still giddy, still narrating the shrine woman to each other in mocking voices — *you'll know what it's like, before you're grown.*

The gap took Farhan first, the way it always did, low and sideways, one shoulder and then a knee. Vikram went after him, and somewhere in the middle of the crouch the sound went.

END OF SAMPLE

The Rest of the Story



Vikram and Farhan are about to learn exactly what year they've fallen into — and exactly what it will cost them to get home. Only one of them does.

What's waiting: the number on the calendar, the debt they are told they owe, the weighing, and the price each boy is asked to pay — separately, in kind, with nobody watching.

It's a novella. An evening or two, start to finish — and it will sit with you a great deal longer than that.

Continue reading *The Year Before the Rain* to find out what happens next.



"The door isn't a door. It's a debt."

"Cruelty is shared easily. Paying for it isn't."

READ IT ON AMAZON



Want to know when the next one lands? One email, no spam - nothing else, ever.
the-year-before-the-rain.netlify.app



One last thing, and it matters more than it sounds like it should. A first book with no reviews is invisible - readers scroll past it, and no amount of anything else fixes that. If you finish it, three honest sentences on Amazon or Goodreads will do more for it than everything else on this page combined. Honest, please - not kind. A low rating fairly given is worth more to me than silence.

Thank you for reading — and for giving these two boys a chance.

— Anoop S. Warriar

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Two boys go into the past.
Only one comes home.

Vikram and Farhan are fourteen, and they have spent a whole term doing what boys do when nobody is watching closely enough to correct them — skipping lessons, testing what they can get away with, learning how easily cruelty turns into a game when there are two of you and neither has to be the one who started it. It begins with a stray dog and a handful of stones. It does not stop there.

An old woman at the roadside shrine tells them they will know what it is like before they are grown.

That afternoon they slip through a gap in a construction fence behind the school and come out in the same yard sixty years earlier — in a village that has not yet built the school they were skipping, where their own grandfathers are children, and where nobody is coming to look for them.

There is a way back, and they are told what it costs. They took from something that could not fight back. They will each be asked to give to something that cannot fight back either. Separately. In kind. Nothing says the two debts will cost the same.

And sixty years ahead, in a town where a torch beam is moving across an empty schoolyard, two families begin the eleven months of not knowing.

Cruelty is shared easily. Paying for it isn't.



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