

## HOPE CAME IN A SMALL BLUE PACKAGE

By Naviya Gupta, 14 years

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Smoke. Thick black ribbons of smoke bolting through the air, obscuring the dim tendrils of sunshine that seeped through the tiny opening above miles and miles of soot-caked walls. Darkness enveloped his already dim surroundings as 11 year old Willie clutched his dusty broom, his pupils dilating to adjust to the darkness. For a moment, an eerie quiet descended upon him and he stood in place, petrified to move even a step in the all obscuring blackness. A strange chill crept up his spine. *No, not this again*, he thought, dread filling his rapidly beating heart. Sure enough, the smoke seeped into his lungs, filling them with dust, with soot, with pain. He struggled to breathe, feeble, rasping breaths exiting his mouth. Then came the coughing scraping his throat raw as he opened and closed his mouth like a fish out of water, his eyes swam with tears as the pain racked his body, and slowly the blackness seemed to take over...

Willie sat up, gasping, searching for air and gratefully gulping it in as it rushed into his parched throat. His hands fisted the threadbare sheets and he glanced around. A tiny lamp hung in the corner of the room, its faint glow barely visible in the inky darkness of the night. He could make out the outlines of his ten siblings, all sandwiched together on the abysmally small mattress, their pale, bony hands and legs hanging out of the edges. His father slept on the cold hard ground, shivering ever so slightly, the cold seeping into his already brittle bones, his battered blackened lungs which were already filled with ash whistling out faint snores.

He had dreamt again. Dreamt of the all-obscuring darkness of the damp, filthy walls, the constant smell of smoke, sweat and burning wood scratching his throat with every inhale. It was the chimneys. How he feared them. How he feared rising at the crack of dawn every morning squinting at the faint wash of colour and the diluted glow of the rising sun, only to be whisked away into the blackness of the chimneys once again.

He had been working in London's convoluted network of chimneys for a year now. He went to work with his father every morning, putting on those unwashed suspenders and ash covered breeches, filled with holes and the acrid smell of smoke constantly lingering around them. He had no choice. It was the only way to somehow earn a few pence and sustain his family, just a little longer, make sure there was at least one meal on the table, that his already skeleton-like siblings didn't perish from starvation, that they all survived for one more day.

He put on his battered clothes, his father and younger brother Eddie taking out the meagre leftovers from last night: a diluted mixture of cornmeal and water. Once the three of them were dressed, brooms in hand, the two boys were whisked away to another day of toil and misery, another day during which they would be left grasping for their childhood in the dark, only to realize that it had slipped away from under their feet long before.

It was Eddie's first day at the chimneys. He chattered excitedly on the way, just like Willie had once done, when the grim realities of the world had not fully presented themselves to him. Eddie perceived the chimneys as a place of hope, of hard work and he felt an

independence and pride which comes from earning for one's family. His father was mustering weak smiles to encourage the boy and to keep his hope alive.

Suddenly, Eddie stopped his quick banter and paused, his bright eyes enlarged with wonder on his pale, bony face. Willie turned, beckoning his brother and found him crouched on the street, examining something on the cobblestones. It was a flower. A blue one. Its petals slightly withered, but it stood, bravely sandwiched between two cobblestones, facing London's polluted air with temerity. It was such an anomaly, such a miracle that Willie and his father both felt their faces stretching into a smile, their cheeks hurting from being in a position that they had so rarely been forced into.

The flower had no business being on those filthy English streets. It couldn't have grown amongst the grime and the cigarette butts and the steady stomp of peoples hard soled shoes. It had been watered plenty, of course, because of the rainy English weather, but the cold couldn't stop it from braving the icy winds and fighting for survival.

Willie, for all of his eleven years knew that it was going to be a chimney sweep's life for him. A short childhood, a short adulthood and a short life of blackness. But the darkness, the soot and the grime were the same cold and the rain and the acrid air that the blue flower had bloomed in.

Willie was certain that the soot had addled with his brain because as his father hurried him along, that moment, that minute of his life seemed a little more bearable. He knew he was probably going mad, but somehow he found that the blue, withered flower was exactly like him. It was a shoot, which was forced into the most unhospitable of environments, enveloped by darkness on all sides. It wouldn't survive, Willie knew that, not for long, but it was fighting for its life and it was fighting for a chance. It had become its own light among the blackness.

“Jo Khud Jal Ke Jahaan Roshan Kar De, Ekla Jolo Re” (He who himself burns to light up the world, burns alone)

- Rabindranath Tagore

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