

Training with Jack

Debjani Chatterjee

‘Congratulations, Aarav! What impressive jumps – consistently over 1.8 metres. Unbelievable improvement! Where’ve you been training?’

‘Oh... er... the park near home.’

Coach Bernie looked incredulous. Sheffield Stadium had been shut for months, and, like everyone else, he had been isolating. But here was a youngster whose jumps had been less than mediocre when he joined the coaching class last year. With the stadium shut and no coaching all this time, he had fully expected the little progress that the teenager had made in training with him to vanish. But, instead, the lad was clocking amazing heights in their very first week back at the reopened stadium! His jumps could make him a contender for a British juniors’ title.

With mounting excitement, and bushy eyebrows permanently raised, Bernie had lifted the bar another inch. None of his athletes could clear this height – and most had trained with him for quite some time. But, Aarav, the latest and rawest recruit, seemed to have a new confidence about him; he took a fast, running jump and sailed over the bar – with inches to spare!

‘Jumping jellybeans!’ said Bernard. ‘But Monument Gardens Park has no equipment! What on earth were you jumping over?’

'Oh, there were bushes and a few benches, Coach. Boundary walls, too. Even a gate.'

'Hmph!' Coach Bernie's eyebrows stayed raised and his voice was sceptical. 'And you say you just trained in the Monument Gardens by yourself!'

'Er, not quite. I...'

'You had another coach? In lockdown! Anyone I know?'

'Dunno. I don't think Jack's a pro like you, Coach, but he sure was a pal; he helped me a helluva-lot.'

Aarav was ambitious and had a competitive streak his Indian middle-class parents had nurtured. He told his coach about how he had felt at home – he and his widowed mother forever getting in each other's way. Early one evening, he had left home disgruntled and walked to the park for fresh air.

'I'd gone there just to do the core exercises you'd told us all to do in the garden. I really felt I needed fresh air. Lockdown was claustrophobic – you know Ma and I live up in the Park Hill flats.'

'Yes – yes.... So, who is this super coach, and how did you meet?'

Aarav told Bernie he had been sitting on his own on a park bench for an hour or so, feeling sorry for himself. The dusk was deepening, and a light mist descended, when suddenly he realised he didn't have the park to himself. He observed a tall figure leap over the half-open steel gate – amazing – and run around the park. The speed was unbelievable; he caught

flashes of a dark cloak, lifted only by the wind generated by the run. But what really struck him was the fact that the gate was really high – the stranger’s casual high jump was the coolest thing that Aarav had ever seen. He witnessed another couple of leaps – one taking the man over a boundary wall onto Norfolk Road and another from the private Belmonte Gardens estate and back into the park. And then, incredibly, the cloaked man seemed to leap over the tall Cholera Monument – neither his feet nor his cloak touched the cross that topped the stone monument.

‘That was it. I knew straight off that I had to learn from the guy. I called to him and begged him to teach me. Coach, Jack’s one ugly dude – I never did learn his second name. His long hair is wild and there’s a permanent grimace on his face. He’s kinda bony and with shiny eyes that probe right into you. But he agreed straight off! I guess he was kinda lonely in lockdown – as I was. We met every evening for practice. He made me think I could jump any height! We’d run around the park, me following and holding onto the end of his cloak. I felt so light. I guess it was always in me – I’d no fear of crashing or falling any more. I jumped for hours every day. Higher than the bars today. I still can’t leap over the Monument, of course, but the park walls are easy now. Even the gate’s no big Hey, what’s up, Coach? You’re looking kinda peaky.’

‘Aarav, didn’t you ever notice the pictures etched on the park’s steel gate?’

‘Sure! There’s Sheffield pictures like the Turret House where Queen Mary was jailed, and a deer coz of the animals she hunted in Sheffield. At the bottom there’s Spring-heeled... Jack.’

Aarav's voice trailed off and Bernie nodded. 'Aye, lad. It's well known, Spring-heeled Jack has haunted the park and neighbouring Clay Woods for centuries!'

Debjani Chatterjee

Debjani Chatterjee MBE FRSL has been called a poet 'full of wit and charm' (Andrew Motion), 'Britain's best-known Asian poet' (Elisabetta Marino) and a 'national treasure' (Barry Tebb). She grew up in India, Japan, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Egypt and Morocco, before settling in England. She studied at five universities: Cairo, Kent, Lancaster, Sheffield and Leeds. She has worked in industry, teaching, community relations and creative arts psychotherapy. An acclaimed international poet, children's writer, translator, Olympic torchbearer and storyteller, her awards include an MBE for services to Literature, Sheffield Hallam University's honorary doctorate, and Word Masala's Lifetime Achievement in Poetry Award. A former Chair of the National Association of Writers in Education and the Arts Council's Translation Panel, she is a Royal Literary Fund Fellow and patron of Survivors Poetry. She has had residencies at Sheffield Children's Hospital, Ilkley Literature Festival, Barbican Centre, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, and various universities. Her 70+ books include: *The Elephant-Headed God & Other Hindu Tales* – a Children's Book of the Year, *Animal Antics*, *Namaskar: New and Selected Poems*, and *Do You Hear the Storm Sing?* Her award-winning anthologies include *The Redbeck Anthology of British South Asian Poetry* and *Barbed Lines*.

A recording of this story can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

© Debjani Chatterjee