

A hand is shown holding a rusty, cylindrical metal tiffin. The tiffin has a yellow label with black and red text, which is partially obscured by a large, faint watermark that reads 'MAHTAB NARSIMHAN'. The background is a textured, brownish surface.

# the tiffin

**MAHTAB NARSIMHAN**

Silver Birch Award-winning author of *The Third Eye*

## praise for *the tiffin*

In *The Tiffin*, Mahtab Narsimhan has produced an engrossing story that is as richly descriptive as it is mesmerizing. Readers will be transported to the gritty reality of Mumbai, and a young man's perilous search for hope and home.

—Valerie Sherrard, author of *The Glory Wind*



I read *The Tiffin* in a single sitting and was hooked from the first paragraph. What a powerful novel! I love how Narsimhan plunges the reader into the underbelly of Mumbai, immersing us in the sights, sounds and especially the smells of this teeming city. Kunal is a compelling character and the reader roots for him on every page.

—Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch, author of *Stolen Child*



If you liked *Slumdog Millionaire*, you'll adore *The Tiffin*! This vividly realized novel plunges you headlong into the vibrant chaos that is contemporary Mumbai. Once you're completely immersed in its clamorous streets, you'll be further captivated by a poignant story of family lost and family found. Portraying how love can flourish in even the most unlikely places, *The Tiffin* is, quite simply, a wonderful book.

—Helaine Becker, author of *Trouble in the Hills*

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MAHTAB NARSIMHAN

DANCING CAT  BOOKS

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*For Pervin Mehrotra*

PREVIEW

## author's note

The tiffin delivery service is a hundred and fifty years old, and available only in the vibrant city of Bombay (Mumbai), India. The dabbawallas deliver home-cooked food to the thousands of white-collar workers who subscribe to this service, and return the empty tiffins to their homes after the meal has been eaten. These semi-literate tiffin carriers employ a primitive alpha-numeric code for tracking, and, using every manner of local transport available, deliver the hot food on time, every day. They have an enviable track record — only one box in six million is lost.

## chapter one

April 1982

*My dearest A,  
I'm so scared! You have to meet me  
tonight...*

ANAHITA STARED AT THE NOTE. The letters glared back at her. She imagined Anurag reading it, trying to absorb the news. His green eyes would widen, he'd take a deep breath, exhale. She could imagine every emotion that would play out on his handsome face. What would he do next? Call her? Come running over? Or would he ignore the note?

The shrill doorbell jerked her out of her reverie.

"Young memsahib, are the tiffins ready?" a man called out. She heard every word clearly through the thin wooden door of their flat.

Anahita folded the note with trembling hands, put it into a bit of plastic, and tucked it between two warm chapatis in the first of the tiffin's three compartments. The other two had already been filled; one with dal and the other with spicy cauliflower-potatoes. She slid the tiffin into its cylindrical aluminum case carefully, and snapped the clasp to lock it.

"Coming," she called out. She grabbed three more tiffins from the kitchen counter and hurried to the door with her heavy load. Her mother was praying in the living room, swaying from side to side as she recited the words softly. She glanced up as Anahita passed by, then frowned and waved her on, her lips continuing to move in prayer.

"I'm leaving," the whiny voice continued. "The trains don't wait for anyone."

"Coming," said Anahita, louder this time, stoking her anger. If she was angry enough, there would be no room for the fear that gripped her heart.

Anahita placed the tiffins on the floor and flung open the door, ready to give the dabbawalla an earful. A scrawny vulture of a man stood there, pulling at his beaked nose.

"Who are you? Where is Amit?"

The sweaty dabbawalla wiped his face with a filthy red rag, flicked off his Gandhi cap, slapped it against his thigh, and set it back on his head at a jaunty angle.

"Amit is sick. I am his substitute and almost late," he said.

He had the air of a man who had repeated his story many times already. He held out a grimy hand for the tiffins.

Anahita passed them over — all except one, which she clutched to her chest. This wasn't just food, it was her future. And she was about to hand it over to a stranger. Of all days, why did her regular dabbawalla have to be sick today? Was this a sign?

“How do I know you won't run away with my tiffins?” she whispered, struggling to keep her voice steady.

The man sighed and stepped aside. Behind him on the landing lit by the harsh white of a tube light, a long rectangular wooden carrier cradled fifteen tiffins. Anahita glanced at the familiar aluminum cases with colourful alphanumeric symbols on their lids, some in so shaky a hand it seemed as if a person with fever had painted them.

“Young memsahib, an empty tiffin box costs ten rupees in the market. With the food, it's worth maybe fifteen rupees. Do you think I could retire after I steal it?” the man said. “I'm getting late. Do you want your husband to get his lunch or not? That last one's for him, isn't it?” He jerked his chin at the tiffin Anahita was still hugging.

*Husband.* Anahita repeated the alien word to herself silently, savouring its taste on her tongue. She handed over the tiffin with a trembling hand.

“Are you okay?” he said in a softer voice. “You look ill.”

Bile rose in her throat. Anahita glanced behind her furtively. "I'm fine," she said. "You're sure this will reach Anurag Parekh? At Mittal Towers, Nariman Point, eleventh floor? You won't lose it, will you? Because you see he ... er ... has a weak stomach. He can't eat any other food. He must get this tiffin."

She knew she was babbling. The man raised his hand to stop her.

"Young memsahib, this tiffin has reached your husband every day, no? Why should today be any different? Anyway, the address is right here," he said, tapping the lid of the tiffin, "and it will reach him no matter who delivers it. Besides, I have never lost a box."

"Shhhh, you don't have to raise your voice," said Anahita. "I'm not deaf." She stole another quick glance behind her. The hallway was still deserted but she knew it wouldn't be for much longer. The moment the prayers were finished, her mother would be eavesdropping. She turned back to the dabbawalla and stared at him. "Are you telling me the truth? You've never lost a tiffin?"

The dabbawalla dropped his gaze. "Well, just one — a long time ago," he said. He looked up again. "But I won't lose yours. Your husband will get the tiffin. He will come home a happy man in the evening. Trust me."

Anahita took a deep breath. Yes, let him come tonight. Please. He has to! She imagined the look on her mother's face,

the disappointment in her father's eyes. She couldn't face it all by herself. She needed Anurag's support.

The dabbawalla arranged the tiffins in the carrier, chattering away. Anahita watched her precious missive nestle among the others, snug and comfortable. Safe.

The dabbawalla hoisted the carrier onto his head with a grunt. A cloud of foul-smelling body odour wafted her way. Anahita clapped her hand to her mouth and backed away, the urge to vomit overpowering. She took deep breaths and the feeling subsided.

The dabbawalla descended the gloomy staircase, carrying her tiffin further away with each step. Anahita had a mad urge to run and snatch it back. She still had a chance. Once the dabbawalla merged into the river of people on the street, there would be no recalling the note. Should she call Anurag instead? But that would mean using the public phone booth and having to endure the questioning looks of the neighbours and vendors who knew her.

Suddenly, she wasn't sure she had done the right thing. Not sure at all. Blood pounded in her ears and her legs trembled. She had to retrieve the note. This was a huge mistake!

Anahita hurried towards the stairs. A shuffling of feet arrested her steps. Her mother stood by the door, questions written all over her face. Too late. Anahita pushed past her mother and raced to the window just in time to see the

dabbawalla turn the corner of their lane and vanish from sight. She closed her eyes, clasped the pendant of Ahura Mazda in her clammy hands, and recited an Ashem Vohu, feeling her mother's eyes burning holes into her back.



ANDHERI STATION SEETHED WITH PEOPLE. In a corner of the platform, a group of men in white dhoti-kurtas and Gandhi caps waded through a sea of tiffins, sorting them at top speed. There was no shade at that end of the station and the sun beat down fiercely, heating up the tiffins, as well as the tempers of the dabbawallas. Sporadic bickering broke out among them.

The leader, Vinayak, distinguished only by a red band around his right arm, shaded his eyes and peered down the length of the platform.

"Where is that replacement of Amit's?" he said. "He should have been here by now!" He spat out a mouthful of betel-nut juice onto the train tracks, narrowly missing a passerby on the platform. "I hate it when my team member is not on time!"

"He's new to this route, Vinayak," one of the men replied. "He may be a bit slower in collecting the tiffins. Plus, you know what the housewives are like when they see a substitute. They will ask ten questions before handing over their tiffins — as if they contain gold." He rolled his eyes and a couple of dabbawallas laughed.

The plaintive cry of a train's horn sounded in the distance. The ten a.m. to Churchgate was arriving.

Vinayak cursed under his breath and paced. If that idiot of a substitute was late, he would ruin the timing of so many others. The dabbawallas prided themselves on being punctual. Always. The tiffins had to be delivered by twelve sharp to their customers spread all over Bombay. No one ever went hungry because of a lost or delayed box.

"There he is," someone shouted. Vinayak saw a battered tiffin carrier sailing towards them at top speed, high above the heads of the throng. Behind them the train chugged into the station. A whiff of unwashed bodies and rusting metal filled the air.

"Come on," yelled Vinayak. "Move or we'll all miss the train!"

Amit's replacement, panting and dripping with sweat, flapped towards them with an ungainly gait. Four pairs of arms slid the carrier to the ground and, with machine-like precision, started sorting. Until the tiffins were further sorted according to final destination, none of the carriers could be loaded on the train. People were already climbing aboard, blocking the entrance.

"Jaldi," said Vinayak, urging them on. His team members' hands were blurs as they obeyed him. The metal tiffin cases clanged against each other, adding to the cacophony.

Within seconds the sorting was done. The sound of the horn pierced the air again and the train started moving. Four dabbawallas ran alongside and slid their carriers into separate compartments, onto the toes of commuters who crowded the open doors. A volley of yells and curses fell on deaf ears as the men jumped in. The train clattered over the steel tracks, settling in to its familiar staccato rhythm.

Already exhausted from the sprint to the station, Amit's replacement was the last to get on. He slid the heavy carrier into a compartment. Something blocked its way and half the carrier still hung out. The train gathered speed. He jogged alongside, trying to shove the carrier inside.

"Get in and pull, you moron!" Vinayak yelled out to the dabbawalla's receding back. The crowds moved in and Vinayak lost sight of him.

The compartment had almost reached the edge of the platform when the dabbawalla managed to jump on board. He pushed the passengers aside and dragged the carrier in just as they passed a telephone pole. A corner of the carrier slammed against the pole with a resounding crack.

A tiffin at the very end leaped into the air, somersaulted towards the glistening steel tracks, and rolled to a standstill on a wooden sleeper.