

Vanishing Winds is a young adult contemporary fantasy part-slice of life and part-murder mystery story with an overtly comedic tone. It's roughly 82,000 words long. The story follows 14-year-old Sanjay who is forced to move to Texas and gets into all sorts of supernatural and mundane teenage shenanigans. This is the second draft and while I'm satisfied with the general direction of the story, I want to see if someone else other than me finds it engaging as well.

Here's what I *would* like feedback on:

- Pacing. Anywhere where the prose moves too fast or too slow, important things that are brushed over, long sections of dialogue which could do with more narration in between, and anything along those lines.
- Readability. Whether there are any places where it's hard to figure out what's happening, important information is glossed over, whether the exposition becomes too overbearing
- Plot holes, inconsistencies, out-of-character moments, loose ends that don't get tied up. Things that feel like they'll be important but don't go anywhere.
- Just because I'm happy with the structure etc. doesn't mean it's perfect. If something in the plot sticks out as Really Bad And Will Need Lots Of Changing you should still tell me.
- Overall impressions. What hooked you, what didn't, thoughts on characters/plot as the story progressed.

Here's what I *would not* like feedback on:

- Grammar. This is not a finalized draft and as such, will possibly have a lot of typos but for now, I'm looking at the bit picture stuff and seeing if it makes for a broadly engaging story
- Teen cringe. The main characters are teenagers and will do things that might make you want to pluck your eyes out. If that feels like something that would bother you, this is not the book for you

Just so you know what you're getting into, the first chapter is on the next page. If you'd like to beta read, chuck me a message and I'll send you a copy of the full thing in whatever format you desire.

Chapter-1

Sanjay prayed that Lord Krishna would give him chicken pox. Before that, he'd prayed to Lord Ganesh for the flu, Lord Shiva for tuberculosis, and last but not least, Lord Brahma for polio. The Hindus had a ton of gods. He knew he had a good shot. Some might consider it reckless but if it meant not going to school, disease was a price that Sanjay was willing to pay.

Sanjay was not a bad student, far from it. His grades had always been excellent, he'd been class representative more than once, and the teachers couldn't have been nicer if they tried. Dehli Public School was the best part of his life.

However, this was not Dehli Public School. This was Ashen Falls High. And if there's one thing Sanjay knew about Ashen Falls High, it's that it wasn't Dehli Public School. This was no five-minute car ride from his house on the curse-spouting, horn-blowing, corner-crowding streets of New Dehli. This was Ashen Falls, Texas, and Ashen Falls, Texas, was not his home. This was not his city, his state, or even his country, for that matter.

ASHEN FALLS HIGH SCHOOL - WHERE DREAMS BECOME REALITY

The words were plastered over the main gate in imposing golden letters. Sanjay wanted to turn around and go home but the stupid school bus had already scurried away. He thought he had really bonded with the bus driver on his ride over. But as it turns out, he could not count on anyone. Least of all Craig, the thirty-eight-year-old divorcée with a gambling problem.

"No matter," he told himself. "Just gotta stick to the plan."

As Sanjay shifted the schoolbag over his shoulders and tiptoed through the crowd at the main gate, he was half-certain that he was not going to make it through the day.

"Step one, keep a low profile." He pulled the hoodie over his head, pushed his fingers into his jean pockets, and prayed to Lord Rama that no one noticed him. According to his research, Ashen Falls High took in nearly twelve hundred transfer students every year. So, even calculating for the fact that he'd joined a month late, the chances of him getting singled out on his first day were astronomically slim.

“Hey you, new kid!” A menacing voice thundered behind him. *An eleventh grader, judging by his tone and large, very large, from the sound of his footsteps. Probably a bully. Best to avoid him.*

“I’m talking to you, you little brat!”

Keep moving. He’s not calling you.

“You! Skinny kid in the red hoodie.”

Sanjay quickened his steps. *Maybe it’s some other skinny kid in a red hoodie?*

“Hey! You deaf or something?”

Sanjay felt a tug over his bag and his heart immediately retreated into his stomach. He wanted to look to the heavens and cry about the betrayal but his mother had raised him to be respectful. So, he just settled for blaming Craig, the bus driver.

Sanjay sighed as he was lifted off the ground and turned around against his will. He’d seen forum posts about this on the school page so he wasn’t exactly caught off-guard.

According to soywojack_horseman: “My first day of ninth grade, they took my glasses and didn’t give them back for the entire month. I couldn’t find my classroom so I just sat in a random class every day. That’s how I discovered my talent for pottery, basket-weaving, and even met the love of my life in twelfth grade mathematics. We’re getting married after I graduate. 10/10 would get bullied again.”

“Why didn’t you listen when I called you earlier, huh?” The bully yelled.

Sanjay straightened his face to deliver a clever comeback, realized he barely came up to the guy’s chest, and made the advocate decision of lowering his gaze right back down. “Sorry, I didn’t know,” he muttered softly.

The boy pushed a thumb into his own mouth and pressed it against Sanjay’s forehead. “New kids get spit-stamped. That’s the rules, idiot. No leaving before your intro.”

Sanjay nodded silently as the disgusting Cheeto-smelled saliva dripped down his forehead.

“What’s your name?” the boy demanded.

“It’s-”

“It’s useless. Your name is useless. You hear me! That’s your name now. Say it! What’s your name?”

Sanjay stepped back without saying a word.

The boy flexed his biceps in Sanjay’s face and growled, “Say your name or you’re getting the premium intro.”

Sanjay concluded that if the gods weren’t going to save him from getting punched in the face, there was little reason in being respectful to them. Before the boy could throw a punch, Sanjay reached into his pocket, pulled out a can of pepper spray, and gave the bully’s eyes a taste of authentic Indian spices in full view of the entire school.

As the boy fell to his knees, rubbing his tearful eyes in helpless agony, Sanjay clutched his blubbering cheeks and spoke loudly enough that every student could hear him, “The name’s Sanjay. That’s San, as in the sun, and Jay, as in blue jay. San-jay. And I hate bullies.”

The crowd parted around him as he walked off into the main building.

Sanjay had always known that he wasn’t gifted in the physical department. His build was, to put it as generously as possible, like a cotton candy stick without the cotton candy. Despite hopeful words from his parents, he had given up on his growth spurt a long time ago.

Therefore, having read the forums about the “friendly atmosphere” at Ashen Falls High and not being especially fond of having his head shoved into toilets, he had come prepared. He had brought with him a fresh can pepper spray. But even more than that, he understood the value of a strong first impression. His take-down of the bully was going to become news. After that, the entire school would know not to pick on him and he’d be free to enact his plan.

He could already hear them whispering in the corridor. All of them were talking about him. He pushed his hands into his pockets to ensure that they didn’t see him shivering. Sanjay was proud of how he’d mimicked the opening scene from his favorite Bollywood movie “The Return of Panther” but now, the adrenaline was gone and he really really wanted to pee.

He’d spent all night watching Loora Khan movies preparing for just that moment. Sanjay was a movie fiend. The last time he’d seen one of those films, he’d gained the strength to confess his love to Rohini Kapoor in eighth grade.

But right now, he felt as weak in his knees as when she had turned him down with a slap. Back then, his friends had been around to comfort him. Today, he looked around the mint-scented hallway where no two outfits were the same and saw nothing but strangers. He took a deep breath and kept walking as the rumors about his “intro” spread like wildfire. With every step he took, the others would retreat further back or grip their notebooks just a bit more tightly.

He grit his teeth in frustration but kept moving. *This is for the best. I do not belong here. I will never belong here.*

Sanjay had made up his mind long before he had set foot inside the building. He was going to find a way back home. And his plan was already in motion.