

### **I Look at Our House with—**

—upside-down eyes and count five holes in our tin roof. There must be more, but I can't see them because the black fog outside has wiped the stars off the sky. Inside our house, the light bulb swinging from the ceiling is as dim as Runu-Didi and, like her, always itching to snooze. I picture a djinn crouching down on the roof, his eye turning like a key in a lock as he watches us through a hole, waiting for Ma and Papa to fall asleep so that he can draw out my soul. Djinn's aren't real, but if they were, they would only steal children because we have the most delicious souls.

My elbows wobble on the bed on which I'm doing the headstand, so I lean my legs against the wall. Runu-Didi stops counting the seconds I have been upside down and says, 'Arrey, Jai, I'm right here and still you're cheating-cheating only. You've no shame, kya?' Her voice is high and jumpy because she's too happy that I can't stay upside-down for as long as she can.

This headstand contest is not a fair one. The yoga classes at our school are for students in Class Six and above, and Runu-Didi is in Class Seven, so she gets to learn from a real teacher. I'm in Class

Four, so I have to rely on Baba Devanand, who says on TV that if we stand upside-down, children like me will:

- never have to wear glasses our whole lives
- never have white in our hair or black holes in our teeth
- never have puddles in our brains or slowness in our arms and legs
- always be NUMBER ONE in Health + Fitness + Knowledge + Character.

I like headstands a lot more than the huff-puff exercises Baba Devanand does with his legs crossed in the lotus position. But right now, if I stay topsy-turvy any longer, I will break my neck, so I flump to the bed that smells of coriander powder and raw onions and Ma and bricks and cement and Papa.

‘Baba Jai has been proved to be a conman,’ Runu-Didi shouts like the newsreaders whose faces redden every night from the angry news they have to read out on TV. ‘Will our nation just stand and watch?’

I stick my fingers in my ears. Runu-Didi’s lips move but it’s as if she’s speaking the bubble language of fish in a glass tank. I can’t hear a word of her chik-chik. Had I lived in a big house, I would have taken my shut-ears and run up the stairs two at a time and squashed myself inside a cupboard. But our whole house is only one room.

Papa says this room has everything we need for our happiness to grow: our clothes hanging on nails; our textbook towers on plastic footstools; the TV on a shelf with steel plates and aluminium tins; god and goddess pictures sellotaped to the four green walls; the gas stove that's lower than my knees tucked into the corner where Ma cooks, sitting on the floor; and wooden boards that Ma has fixed at the right height so that her hands can easily reach the spice tins dotted yellow with turmeric or light brown with mango powder, and plastic baskets with onions peeling off their pinkish-purplish coats as if they're always too hot.

The smells of Ma's cooking make my belly ache. I lift my head up and look across the room to the kitchen corner where she's shaping rotis into perfect rounds with the same rolling pin that she uses to whack my bottom when I shout bad words behind Runu-Didi while she talks to Nana-Nani on Ma's mobile phone.

Ma's eyes are now on the television. Round, white letters on the TV screen say, **Dilli: Police Commissioner's Missing Cat Spotted**. Sometimes the Hindi news is written in letters that look like they're spurting blood, especially when the news-people ask tough questions we can't answer, like:

**Are You Drinking the Milk of Alien Cows?**

or

**Does a Real Devil Live in Sachin Tendulkar's Head?**

or

**Is a Bull this Varanasi Sari Shop's Best Customer?**

or

**Did a Rasgulla Break Up Actress Chandni's Marriage?**

Ma likes such stories because she and Papa can argue about them for hours. He will say, 'If the TV-wallahs claim someone found the half-man-half-lion god in Tihar Jail, then it must be true.' He's only pulling her leg.

I don't like the news much. My favourite shows are ones that Ma says I'm not old enough to watch, like *Police Patrol* and *Live Crime*. But she doesn't switch off the TV when they come on because she likes guessing who the evil people are and telling me how the policemen are sons-of-owls for never spotting criminals as fast as she can.

Runu-Didi has stopped talking and has opened her Science textbook. She's staring at a page, and brushing her chin with the end of her long braid. My fingers are going numb in my ears, so I pull them out and wipe them against my cargo pants that are already spattered with ink and mud and grease. All my clothes are dirty like these pants, even my school uniform.

I have been asking Ma to let me wear the new uniform that I got free from school this winter, but Ma has wrapped it up in a plastic bag

and kept it on top of a shelf where I can't reach it. She says only rich children throw clothes away when there's still life left in them. If I show her how my brown trousers end above my ankles, and how my grey shirt and sweater look as if rats tried to eat them and spat them out, Ma will say even film stars wear ill-fitting clothes because it's the latest fashion.

She's still saying things like that to trick me like she did when I was smaller than I'm now. She doesn't know that every morning, my friends Pari and Faiz laugh when they see me and tell me I look like a joss stick but one that smells of fart.

'Ma, listen, my uniform—' I start to say and then I stop because there's a scream from outside so loud I think it will squish the walls of our house. Runu-Didi jumps out of the bed, her textbook thud-thuds on the floor, and Ma's hand brushes against a hot pan by mistake and her face goes all sharp and jagged like bitter-gourd skin.

I think it's Papa trying to scare us, because he's always singing old Hindi songs in his hairy voice that rolls down the alleys of our basti like an empty LPG cylinder, waking up stray dogs and babies and making them bawl. But then the scream punches our walls again, and Ma switches off the stove and we run out of the house.

The cold slithers up my bare feet. Shadows and voices judder across the narrow alley. The fog combs my hair with fingers that are

smoky but also damp at the same time. People shout, 'What's happening? Has something happened? Who's screaming? Did someone scream?' Goats that their owners have dressed in old sweaters and shirts to keep off the cold hide under the charpais on both sides of the lane. The lights in the skyscrapers near our basti blink like fireflies and then start to disappear. The current goes off.

I don't know where Ma and Runu-Didi are. Women wearing clinking glass bangles hold up mobile phone torches and kerosene lanterns but their light is too wishy-washy in the fog.

Everyone around me is taller than I am, and their worried hips or elbows knock into my face as they ask each other about the screams. We can tell by now that they are coming from Drunkard Laloo's house.

'Something bad is going on over there,' a chacha who lives in our alley says. 'Laloo's wife was asking earlier if anyone had seen her son.'

'That Laloo too, na, all the time beating his wife, beating his children,' a woman says. 'Just you wait and see, one day his wife will also disappear. What will that useless fellow do for money then? From where will he get his hooch, haan?'

I wonder which one of Drunkard Laloo's sons is missing. The eldest, Bahadur, is a stutterer who is in my class.

The earth twitches as a metro train rumbles underground somewhere near us. It will worm out of a tunnel and go up a bridge to a

station near our basti before returning to the city because this is where the Purple Line ends. The metro station is new, and Papa was one of the people who built its sparkly walls. Now he's making a skyscraper so tall they have to put flashing red lights on top to warn pilots not to fly too low.

The screams have stopped. I'm cold and my teeth are talking among themselves. Then Runu-Didi's hand darts out of the darkness, snatches me and drags me forward.

'What are you doing?' I ask. 'I want to go home.'

'Didn't you hear what people were saying about Bahadur?'

'He ran away because his father hit him?' I ask.

'Must be. Don't you want to find out?'

Runu-Didi can't see my face in the fog but I nod. We follow a lantern swinging from someone's hands, but it's not bright enough to show us the puddles where washing-up water has collected and we keep stepping into them. The water is slippery and icky and I should turn around but I also want to know what happened to Bahadur because I don't like him much. Teachers don't ask him questions in class because of his stammer. Once or twice I tried going ka-ka-ka too, but that only got me a rap on the knuckles with a wooden ruler held sideways. Ruler beatings hurt much worse than canings.

I almost trip over Fatima's buffalo, who is lying in the middle of the alley, a giant black smudge that I can't tell apart from the fog. Ma says the buffalo is like a sage who has been meditating for hundreds and hundreds of years in the sun and the rain and the snow. Faiz and I once roared at Buffalo-Baba like lions, and then we pelted him with pebbles, but he didn't roll his big buffalo eyes or shake his backward-curving horns at us.

All the lanterns and phone-torches have stopped outside Bahadur's house. We can't see anything because of the crowd. I tell Runu-Didi to wait, and I jostle past trouser-clad, sari-clad, dhoti-clad legs, and hands that smell of kerosene and sweat and food and metal. Bahadur's mother is sitting on the doorstep, folded in half like a sheet of paper.

Ma has got here before I have and is smoothing Bahadur's mother's hair, rubbing her back, and saying things like, 'He's only a child, must be somewhere around here. Can't have gone that far.' Drunkard Laloo is squatting next to them, his head bobbling as his red-rivered eyes squint up at our faces.

Ma sees me in the crowd and asks, 'Jai, was Bahadur at school today?'

'No,' I say. Bahadur's Ma looks so sad that I wish I could remember when I last saw him. Because of his stammer, Bahadur

doesn't speak much, so no one notices if he's in the classroom or not. Then Pari sticks her head out of the sea of legs and says, 'He hasn't been coming to school. We saw him last Thursday.'

Today is Tuesday. Pari and Faiz mutter 'side-side-side' as if they are waiters carrying wire racks of steaming chai glasses, so that people will make way for them to pass. Then they come over and stand next to me. Both of them are still wearing our school uniform. Ma makes me change into home clothes as soon I enter the house so that my uniform won't get even more mucky. She's too strict.

'Where were you?' Pari asks. 'We looked for you everywhere.'

'Here only,' I say.

Pari has pinned back her fringe at such a height that it looks like one-half of a mosque's onion dome. Before I can ask why no one realised Bahadur was missing until today, Pari and Faiz start telling me why, because they are my friends and they can see the thoughts in my head.

'His mother, na, for a week or so she wasn't here,' Faiz whispers. 'And his father—'

'—is World-Best Bewda Number 1. If a bandicoot chews off his ears, he won't know because he's fultoo drunk all the time,' Pari says loudly as if she wants Drunkard Laloo to hear her. But everyone around

us is talking too, so he doesn't. 'The chachis next-door should have noticed Bahadur is missing, don't you think?' she asks.

I don't say anything. Pari is always quick to blame others because she thinks she's perfect; an angel, just like her name.

'The chachis have been taking care of Bahadur's brother and sister,' Faiz says. 'They thought Bahadur was staying with a friend. Imagine, he can't even say one word properly. How will he have any friends?'

'It's this man's fault,' Pari says. She points her onion-fringe towards Drunkard Laloo. Every day we see him stumbling around the basti, drool dripping from his mouth, doing nothing but eating air. He asks even children like us if we have coins to spare so that he can buy himself a glass of kadak chai. It is Bahadur's mother who makes money by working as a nanny and a maid for a family in one of the skyscrapers near our basti. Ma and lots of chachis in the basti also work for the hi-fi people who live up there.

I turn my head to look at the skyscrapers, which are close to our basti but seem far because there's a rubbish ground in between, and then a brick wall that Ma says is not high enough to keep out the stink from the garbage mounds. There are many grown-ups behind me but through the tiny gaps between their monkey-caps I can see that the skyscrapers have light now. It must be because they have diesel

generators. The basti is still dark because our bulbs run on current stolen from the mains.

Bahadur's Ma is wailing like somebody has died. 'Why did I go?' she howls. 'I should've never left them alone.'

'The rich family went to Neemrana, and they took Bahadur's mother with them. To take care of their babies,' Pari explains to me. 'That's why she wasn't here.'

'She went on a tour,' Faiz says. 'She was doing masti.'

'What's Neemrana?' I ask.

'It's a fort-palace in Rajasthan,' Pari says. 'On top of a hill.'

Drunkard Laloo tries to stand with one hand pressing the ground. A chacha helps him up and, swinging from side to side, he tells his wife, 'Bahadur ki Ma, don't cry. You leave all the worrying to me. I'm going to find him.' Then he hobbles towards us. 'Where is he?' he asks. 'You play with him, don't you?'

We step backwards, bumping into people. Drunkard Laloo kneels down in front of us, nearly toppling over, but he manages to level his old-man eyes with mine. Then he catches me by my shoulders and shakes me back and forth as if I'm a soda bottle and he wants to make me fizz. I try to wriggle out of his grip. Instead of saving me, Pari and Faiz scoot off into the darkness. Drunkard Laloo's smelly breath rushes into my face. Tears run down his hollow cheeks.

‘You know where my son is, don’t you?’ he says. ‘Tell me where he is. Why won’t you tell me?’

‘Leave that boy alone,’ someone shouts.

I don’t think Drunkard Laloo will listen, but he ruffles my hair and mutters, ‘All right, all right.’ Then he lets go of me.

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Papa always leaves for work early, when I’m still sleeping, but the next morning I wake up to the smell of turpentine on his shirt, and his rough hands grazing my cheeks.

‘Be careful. You walk with Runu to school and back, you hear me?’ Papa speaks as if I’m two. ‘After class, come straight home. No wandering around Bhoot Bazaar by yourself.’ He has never seen me there but somehow knows it’s my favourite place. Then he scolds Runu-Didi for sleeping late but he also tells me it’s not time for me to get up. Before leaving, he kisses me on the forehead, and says again, ‘You’ll be careful?’

I wonder what he imagines has happened to Bahadur. Does he think a djinn snatched him? But djinns aren’t real. Papa himself has told me that a thousand times.

Ma doesn’t care for what Papa says because she tears the blanket from me and slaps my legs and tells me to *hurry-hurry-hurry*. She’s never on time for work because she first has to go to a tank that’s

to the north of our basti where tubewell water is pumped up each morning. Ma says the minute the pipe makes sputtering noises, people start pushing and shoving each other and, sometimes in the scuffle, she can't even get anywhere near the tank.

Inside the house Ma is like Durga Mata, hankering to let off a torrent of arrows, but outside, she's no good. Her face is always fog-dark when she gets home from the tank, with or without the water. She snaps at us to eat fast so that she can leave for work. The hi-fi Madam whose flat she cleans is a mean lady who has already put two strikes against Ma's name for being late. One night when I was pretending to sleep, Ma told Papa that the Madam threatened to chop her into tiny-tiny pieces and chuck slices of her over the balcony for the hawks circling the building to catch.

The skyscrapers near our basti are clustered in the east, so the morning sun can't get past them to warm our roofs. This means that: (first of all) our home is ice-cold when I wake up in winter; (second of all) there are hundreds of jobs in the hundreds of flats in each skyscraper; and (third of all), Ma can easily find another job. But (fourth of all), Ma likes the Madam's babies, or she likes that the Madam gives her leftovers in plastic bags, bhindi masala or tinda fry, and sometimes even mutton curry or butter chicken. She doesn't want to lose this job.

With Runu-Didi carrying a bucket of water, and an empty ghee can for a mug, I head to the toilet complex that NGO-people have built near the rubbish ground, far away from the water tank. The black fog is still sulking above us and it pricks my eyes and splashes tears onto my cheeks.

Runu-Didi teases me by saying that I must be missing Bahadur. 'You're crying for your dost?' she asks, and I would tell her to shut up, but there's a long queue for the toilets though it costs two rupees to go and I have to focus on shifting my weight from one leg to another so that I won't pee into my chaddi like babies do.

Some of the people waiting in the queue are talking about Bahadur. A chacha says, 'That boy must be hiding somewhere, waiting for his mother to kick his father out.' Everyone murmurs in agreement. They decide Bahadur will come home once he tires of brawling with stray dogs for an old roti in a pile of garbage.

They talk about how loudly Bahadur's Ma screamed the previous night, loud enough to scare the ghosts that live in Bhoot Bazaar, and then they joke with each other about how long it will take them to spot that one of their own children is missing. Hours-days-weeks-months?

One chacha says that even if he notices he won't bring it up. 'I have eight children. What difference will one less or one more make?'

he says, and everyone laughs. The fog is worrying their eyes too, so they are also crying at the same time.

I get to the front of the queue but all the toilets are stinking and filled with flies and dried crap and I have to step on the flat rocks someone has placed around the complex to find my way through the mess. I pinch my nostrils with my fingers and imagine I'm living in a skyscraper flat that has a bathroom scented like jasmine, with tiles so polished I can see my face in them. This is the only way I can do my business quickly. I wonder if Bahadur ran away so that he could find somewhere better than our basti. Maybe he's not as stupid as I think he is.

Afterwards, back at home, Ma gives us chai and rusk for breakfast. The rusk is hard and tastes of nothing, but I obediently chew it up because Ma won't stand for my whining now. Then it's time to change into our uniform and go to school.

Though Papa told me not to, I decide I will give Runu-Didi the slip as soon as we are out of Ma's sight. But there is a swarm of people around Buffalo-Baba, some standing on plastic chairs and charpais and craning their necks to see whatever is going on, and they are blocking our way.

I hear a voice I recognise from last night. It's Drunkard Laloo, crying, 'Find my son, Baba, find my son for me. I won't move from here

until my Bahadur is found.' Then I hear a woman's voice: 'Achha, now you can't live without our son? You didn't think of that when you were hitting him?' It is Bahadur's ma.

'We're going to be so late,' Runu-Didi says. She holds her schoolbag in front of her and uses it to slam into people so that they will move, and I do the same. By the time we are out of the crowd, our hair is messy and our uniforms creased.

Runu-Didi straightens her mussed-up skirt, and I spit on my left hand and slick my hair back. Then, before Didi can stop me, I jump over a gutter, and sprint past cows and hens and dogs and goats wearing better sweaters than I am, past a woman washing vessels, and a white-haired grandmother stringing beans, and a cobbler arranging brushes and tins of shoe polish on a torn sack. I knock into an old man sitting on a plastic chair with one leg shorter than the others, the difference in height made up with bricks. The chair topples over and the man lands on the ground with his backside in the mud. I rub my left knee, which hurts a bit, and then I run off again and the man's curses chase me all the way to another alley that smells of chhole-bhature.

Here Pari and Faiz are waiting for me, outside a store that sells Tau-Jee and Chulbule and other salty, masala-coated snacks. The bright reds and greens and blues of the wrappers look dreary in the fog today, and the husband and wife who run the shop are sitting behind

the counter with mufflers wrapped over their faces. The fog doesn't bother me as much, probably because I'm strong.

'This Faiz, na,' Pari says as soon as I join them, 'is an idiot.' Her minaret fringe looks like it will collapse any second, and a bit of snot has crusted under her nose.

'You're the idiot,' Faiz says.

'You saw?' I ask, waving my right hand in the direction of our basti. 'Drunkard Laloo is praying to Buffalo-Baba but his wife is shouting at him.'

'She was screaming she'll go to the police,' Pari says.

'She's mad,' Faiz says.

'The police will kick us out,' I say. 'We're illegals.'

'The basti is illegal,' Pari says. 'Not us. The police won't do anything to us as long as we pay them their hafta on time.'

'Papa says we should never go to them because they'll only ask for more money,' I say. There's rusk stuck between my teeth and I pry it out with my tongue.

'Bahadur's Ma won't make a police complaint,' Pari says. 'She's talking nonsense because she's sad. My ma told me so.'

'I hope Bahadur comes back so that I can give him one tight slap,' I say.

'Faiz thinks Bahadur is dead,' Pari says.

‘Bahadur is our age.’ I hook my thumb under the strap of my schoolbag that’s pressing down on my shoulder. ‘We aren’t old enough to die.’

‘I didn’t say he died,’ Faiz protests, and then he starts coughing. He hawks up spit, wipes his mouth with his hands, and says, ‘Bahadur had asthma. We all heard it. Remember how he got once when we were in Class Two?’ He looks at Pari. ‘You started crying because you were scared.’

‘Anything only you’ll say now?’ Pari says. ‘I don’t cry ever.’

‘But what if his asthma went bad because of the fog’—Faiz’s hands jab the ashy air around us—‘and then Bahadur couldn’t breathe and then he fell into a manhole but no one saw him?’

‘Have you gone blind?’ Pari asks. ‘You can’t see the number of people here? Okay, you do one thing, why don’t you jump into a gutter? Dekh lena, a hundred hands will pull you out.’

I eye the people walking past us, to establish if they seem like the helpful type. But their faces are half-hidden by handkerchiefs to keep the fog from getting inside their ears and noses and mouths. Some of them are barking into their mobile phones through their masks. There’s a chhole-bhature vendor on the roadside, and though his face isn’t covered by a scarf, it’s enveloped in a cloud of smoke rising from a vat of sizzling hot oil in which he’s frying bhaturas. His customers are

labourers on their way to construction sites, and security guards at malls returning home after a nightshift. The men scoop up the chhole with steel spoons and munch, their kerchiefs pulled down to their chins. Their eyes are fixed on their plates of hot food. If a mad elephant were stomping towards them, they wouldn't know.

'Jump into a gutter, I dare you,' Pari tells Faiz, and rubs her nose against the right sleeve of her sweater.

Faiz furrows his forehead, and the groove of the white scar that runs across his left temple, just missing his eye, deepens as if something is tugging at his skin from the inside.

'Bahadur ran away because he had enough of his father,' I say.

'That's what I said,' Pari says as if I have stolen her words.

'We'll miss the assembly,' I say. Watching Pari and Faiz fight is the most boring thing in the world.

Faiz fast-walks, even when we get to the lanes of Bhoot Bazaar, which are crammed with too many people and dogs and cows and cycle-rickshaws and autorickshaws and e-rickshaws. To keep pace with him, I can't do any of the things I usually do at the bazaar, like count the bloodied goat hooves on sale at Afsal-Chacha's shop or climb over the jumble of yellow police barricades that rickshaw drivers kick out of the way when the thullas are not looking.

No one will believe me but I'm one hundred percent pakka that my nose grows longer when I'm in the bazaar because of its smells, of tea and raw meat and buns and kebabs and rotis. I can feel my ears get bigger too, because of the sounds, ladles scraping against pans, butcher knives thwacking against chopping boards, rickshaws and scooters honking, and music blaring from sari centres and kids-wear showrooms. Not today though. Today my nose and ears stay the same size because my friends are sulking and the fog is making everything blurry.

In front of us, sparks fall on the ground from a bird's nest of electric wires hanging over the bazaar.

'That's a sign,' Faiz says. 'Allah is telling us to be careful.'

Pari looks at me, her eyebrows climbing up her forehead. Whatever mosquito bit Papa has bit Faiz too, because he's being crazy. But just in case he's right, I keep an eye on the ditches for the rest of our walk to school. All I spot are empty wrappers and holey plastic bags and eggshells and dead rats and dead cats and chicken and mutton bones sucked clean by hungry mouths.

## **Bahadur**

From a distance, the boy watched three men swathed in blankets huddle by a fire. Ash-tipped flames rose from a large metal bowl that must once have been used to carry cement at a construction site. The men let their hands hover above the fire as if performing a solemn ritual. Yellow sparks leapt higher than their faces but their hands didn't return to the folds of their blankets.

There was a silent companionship between these men that made Bahadur wish he were older, so that he too could sit with them. But he was only a boy hiding under a pushcart that smelled of guavas, a faint sweet note that trickled down to him through the charred winter air.

The cart's owner was sleeping on the footpath nearby, his body turned towards a shop's padlocked shutter, and covered like a corpse from head to toe with a sheet that wasn't thick enough to muffle his snores. He must have been exhausted from the day's work. Bahadur had searched, carefully, under the folded tarpaulin sheets and sacks on the cart for guavas, and found none. The cart owner must have walked long and far that day to sell his fruit.

Bahadur wasn't sure for how long he had been watching these men. It was well past midnight and he knew he should sleep but below

the cart it was cold and he wanted to walk first to warm the blood in his veins. He crawled out and turned to look at the men. They were now drinking from a bottle that they shared, each man wiping its lip against their sweater sleeves once they had taken a sip. He knew in another hour they would be drowsing by the fire, using bricks for pillows, legs half-covered by blankets splayed across the lane.

The alleys of Bhoot Bazaar stretched wide around him like the gaping mouths of demons. He wasn't scared. He used to be, when he started sleeping outside three years ago, on those nights his mother stayed back at the flat where she worked, to care for Madam's feverish child, or to serve guests at a party that Madam was hosting. Until then Bahadur had seen the bazaar only in the day, when it heaved with people and animals and vehicles and the gods invoked in the prayers drifting out of loudspeakers from a temple, a gurudwara, and a mosque. All these scents and sounds so thick that they seeped into him as if he were made of gauze.

So at age six, when he snuck away from home and walked to the bazaar late at night, its stillness had spooked him at first. The sky roiled blackish-blue above tangled cables and dusty streetlamps. The market was mostly empty but for the crumpled forms of sleeping men. Then his ears grew accustomed to the distant, steady thrum of the highway. His nose learnt to catch the weakest of smells from hours before—marigold

garlands, slices of papayas and melons served with a pinch of chaat powder on top, puris fried in oil—to guide his steps to the right or left in dark corners. His eyes could tell the stray dogs in the alleys apart by the curves of their tails or the shapes of the white patches on their brown or black coats. He had nodded to them as if they were his acquaintances.

Now he was almost ten, old enough to be on his own though he would never say that to his mother. She didn't know that he came here. No one did. The world had long ago receded from his father's hooch-stained eyes.

On the nights his mother was away, his siblings cajoled the neighbourhood aunties into taking them in and thought somebody must be doing the same for him. But he didn't want to be with these aunties who clucked their tongues and asked the gods to lift the curse they had put on him, or their children who sneered at the way letters stayed glued to his tongue no matter how much he tried to spit them loose. To them he was always That Idiot or Duffer or Ka-Ka-Ka-Ka or He-He-He-Ro-Ro. There was none of that nonsense in the bazaar. He didn't have to talk to anyone. If he wanted, he could even pretend that he was a Mughal prince patrolling his kingdom disguised as a street child.

Around him, the downed shutters of shops crinkled like waves. The cold caught up with him, no matter how fast he walked. He might as well stop to give his legs a rest. Near him was a cycle rickshaw

driver, asleep under a blanket on the passenger seat of his vehicle. Hanging from the handlebar was a white plastic bag that the man had used to pack his lunch or dinner, with something dark and thick pooled at the bottom. Bahadur untied the bag as quietly as he could and ran ahead and inspected its contents. Only a few scoops of black dal that he guzzled with his neck tilted towards the sky.

His best chance for a proper meal would be when his mother returned home on Tuesday, but this was only Saturday night and the hours stretched ahead of him. He chucked the bag in his hand into the gutter, then kneeled down and sifted through a pile of trash heaped by the stalls where in the day vendors sold papdi chaat and aloo tikkis glazed with curd and tamarind chutney. But the animals of the bazaar had got to the food before him. They always did. He wiped his hands against the bottom of a discarded aluminium foil bowl and stood up.

A heaviness settled in his chest. The air was sharp with smoke and soon the tickle in his nostrils would turn into a cough that would leave him gasping for breath. He knew that it would pass, in a few minutes perhaps. Only once when he was smaller had the feeling of breathlessness, of drowning on land, lasted a few hours. It seemed unfair to him that he struggled with the things that came naturally to everyone else, things like talking and breathing. But he was done with cursing gods, done with trying to get them on his side with prayers.

He walked a little ahead to Hakim's Electronics and Electrical Repair Shop, which was his favourite place in the bazaar. Hakim Chacha never expected him to talk and instead taught him about blown capacitors and loose cables. Bahadur's mother had once hired two boys to bring home a clattering refrigerator and a TV that Madam had tossed into the garbage ground near their basti. Bahadur had fixed them in no time and made them as good as new. Chacha liked to say that Bahadur had a gift. That when he grew up he would be an engineer and live in a flat like Madam, not a jhopdi like where he lived now.

Bahadur wished a man like Chacha had been his father. The past two days, each time he visited the electronics shop, Chacha had bought him newspaper cones filled with warm peanuts roasted in salt. And he had done so without knowing Bahadur was hungry. Bahadur had stored a few peanuts in the pockets of his jeans for later though they were all gone now. He checked again, without hope, pushing his hands deep into his pockets. When he brought them out, the papery skin of peanuts was stuck to the tips of his fingers. He licked them, tasting the salt, remembering too late that it would make him thirsty.

A fog was beginning to swirl against the streetlights. He swallowed the air in big gulps and curled up on the raised platform outside the repair shop, his hands around himself, his knees drawn towards his chest. He was still cold. He got up and found two red crates

caked with dirt stacked by the shop next door, and balanced them on top of his legs but they were uncomfortable and didn't lessen the chill. He pushed them aside and lay down again.

The fog smothered the streetlights and made the darkness darker. Every winter until now the fog had been white, like a cloud that had lost its way and plunged down to earth. In its new grey-black form, it appeared to be the devil's own breath. To calm himself Bahadur thought of all the things he liked to do: eating rasgullas steeped in sugar syrup, swinging on rubber tyres tied to the branches of toothbrush trees, and holding a warm brick swaddled in rags that his mother used to give him on moon-cold nights. He imagined her rubbing his chest with Vicks Vaporub though he had only seen this on TV and they didn't even have a tub of Vicks in their house. But it soothed him, and he decided to hold onto that picture until he fell asleep.

Then: a movement in the alley that he sensed in the concrete pressed against the back of his head. He cocked his ears for footsteps, but there was nothing.

Memories that he didn't care to remember rustled in his head. On a summer night two years ago, a man who smelled of cigarettes, with a moustache as thick as a squirrel's tail, had pinioned him against a wall with one hand and, with the other, loosened the knot of his own salwar. Bahadur shook a little, still feeling the pressure of the man's palm. That

night, two labourers returning home had seen what was happening and chased the man, giving Bahadur enough time to run away. He had stopped wandering in the bazaar for months afterwards until his fears dulled and his father's temper bubbled again.

Bahadur wondered if he should have picked another spot to sleep. Outside the repair shop the alley was too quiet, too empty. Any other night it would have been fine but who knew what beast lurked in this fog, waiting to clamp its jaws on his legs. Where had this fog come from anyway? He had never seen anything like it. Above him, on the roof overhang, pigeons grunted and shuffled. Then, as if nervous, they took off into the air.

He sat up and peered into the darkness, his palms fixed to the floor, small stones stabbing his skin. A cat mewled and a dog barked as if to hush it. He thought of the ghosts after whom Bhoot Bazaar had been named. They were the friendly spirits of the people who had lived in these parts hundreds of years ago when the Mughals had been kings. Hakim Chacha had sworn this was true with his fingers pinching the skin at his throat. 'Allah ki kasam,' he had said once, 'I'm not lying. They'll never hurt us.'

If a ghost from the bazaar was in fact approaching Bahadur, maybe it wanted to help him breathe or tell him it was foolish to sleep outside on a night like this. But if he showed the ghost his face, the

imprint of his father's hand on his skin, perhaps the ghost would let him stay.

Hakim Chacha never asked Bahadur about his injuries or the Band-Aids his mother plastered over them when she returned. But the day before, Bahadur had glimpsed his own reflection in the screen of an unplugged TV at the repair shop and the bruise around his eye had looked shiny and black like the river that divided his city in two.

Bahadur told himself he was being silly. There were no ghosts or monsters. They lived only in the stories people told each other. But the air pulsed with dread, palpable like static. He thought he could see the shapes of hands and legs in the dark, phantom limbs outlined in white, mouths without lips drawn towards him by the clamour of his breathing.

Maybe he should get up and run home. The cold snagged his bones, which felt so brittle that he thought they would snap. He wished the blackness would part, the moon would shine, and the men he had seen by the fire would saunter down this alley. The fog tightened around his neck like a coil of coarse rope.

Now he could hear it: the pitter-patter of bandicoots hunting in packs for crumbs, a horse neighing somewhere, the clang of a metal bucket being overturned by a cat or a dog, and then, the slow, heavy footsteps of something or someone that he was certain was coming towards him. He opened his mouth to scream, but couldn't. The sound

of it stayed pinned to the back of his throat like all the other words he had never been able to say.