

**SHANE NORWOOD**

## **LOOKING FOR MOWGLI**

### **Part 1. The House of No Shouting**

When the lights went down, it was almost the best part. Almost. The excitement. The anticipation. The people gone quiet all of a sudden. Waiting in the darkness, listening to his own heartbeat. Seeing only the red lights above the exits and the indistinct shapes of the people in front.

Ravi had his cushion on the floor at his feet. He didn't need it. He always brought it to sit on in case an adult sat in front of him and he couldn't see. His eyes shone as the screen lit up and the first sinuous notes sounded. He felt the goose bumps rise on his skin as the snake music slithered into his ears. He caught his breath and held it.

Ravi stood before the ever open door of his grandfather's house, and let the warm glow of expectation bring the same happy smile to his face that it always did. The smile that just came all by itself.

He always made himself wait before going in, holding onto the moment. To the pleasure. He looked at his bare toes in the dirt, and the dusty beams of sunlight falling though the dark

leaves of the mango tree. His shadow lay before him halfway through the doorway, impatient, as if urging him to hurry up and go in. His grandfather's old bicycle was propped against the wall. A cat slept curled up in the wicker basket attached to the handlebars.

Ravi closed his eyes. He listened to the pleasant gurgling of the stream, and the chattering of the birds in the tree, and faint in the distance the noise of the traffic on the main road.

His mother gave him bus fare, but he always spent it on imarti, his grandfather's favorite. He had three of them wrapped in a paper in his pocket. He knew his grandfather would pretend he had already eaten and he himself would eat them. It was a ritual, their own special conspiracy which they took great care to preserve.

Ravi opened his eyes and looked at the small white house, bright in the sun. He called it the house of no shouting. It was his refuge. A place where the way that things were was the way that they were supposed to be. He closed his eyes again. He wanted to keep the time in his pocket, the way he kept the sweets, as if having them was better than eating them.

Ravi loved his grandfather above all people. It was not that he did not love his mother. He did. But his mother was his mother, and it was hard to know who she was other than that she was his mother. He was not yet old enough to think of it in those terms, but yet he felt it. She was a frail and diaphanous woman, who spoke little, and seldom, if ever, of things that did not pertain to his welfare or her domestic responsibilities. Except for the fact that she was his mother, he did not really know her.

His father he feared. He was a severe and distant man, and there was a space between them that Ravi could not cross. It had always been so. The father could have reached out across it, if he had wanted to, but he never did. He was the headmaster of a small school, and Ravi sometimes thought that his father did not know how to think about children except as pupils, or how to speak to them except to lecture them. He could not have a conversation with him the way that he could with his grandfather. His father was always saying that this is this, and that is that, and there is there, and there could never be any other way except for this, and that, and there.

And his father never touched him. Never gave him a hug or a kiss, or a pat on the head. With his grandfather it was different. His grandfather was not afraid to hold him close, or to show him how he felt, and instead of just hearing him, he listened, as if Ravi's words had weight and value of their own, and that what he had to say was important. His grandfather

never made him feel that just because he was only a boy to whom the world was as yet a mystery, that what he had to say somehow didn't count.

Ravi knew that his grandfather was very old. It worried him, the thought that he would go away to the place where people go when they die, and leave him. Every time he asked the old man how old he was, really meaning how much time he had left, the old man would smile and give him a different answer, in a kind of riddle. It was another game that they played, and they both took care to respect its rules, although Ravi secretly wished that he could know the true answer.

When he could stand it no longer he opened his eyes again and called out.

“Babu. I am here.”

“I know it. Come in my son.”

Ravi stepped out of the heat and in to the cool bare hall. He walked into the living room, so different from his parent's apartment in the town. There, everything was arranged neatly, and put away, and polished, as if even the clothes and the furniture had to follow the rules. Framed pictures set at precise angles and distances from each other as though the frames were more important than the photographs, trinkets and souvenirs somehow without the joy that their memories were supposed to invoke. Cushions arrayed just so, proud and fluffed up, daring you to sit on them. Even the plants in the window box seemed sad, as if wishing they were somewhere else.

And overseeing all, the old loud intimidating clock, ticking, reproving, measuring your days and your hours, sitting in oppressive judgment over the room, somehow stifling and threatening, admonishing you to make haste and not let fall from your grasp the irretrievable grain of sand that slips through the glass.

His grandfather's house was but one large, slightly asymmetrical room with a small garden behind, and the things it contained were arranged according to some entropic non design as if someone had thrown them in through the window.

There was a reed sleeping mat on the floor under a mosquito net so ragged as to be useless unless to actually catch mosquitos. It was so equipped with tears and holes that the insects could easily find their way in, but could not get back out. In the high ceiling, an old rheumatic bamboo fan gasped and wheezed, managing only to rearrange the air instead of cooling it.

The pictures and photographs that adorned the walls seemed to have been hung there at random by different people, including at least one giant and a midget, the settee against the wall looked as if it had crawled in by itself to get out the rain, and the once splendid rugs on the floor were now of indeterminate color and appeared as little more than holes woven together. From behind the door a pair of ancient indestructible sandals stood guard over the road.

Against the longest wall was a heavy mahogany bookcase filled with everything except books. Plants, bottles, pans, tools, an old phonograph that, incredibly, still worked, and a magnificent old fashioned Victorian globe, so old that much of it was still colored empire red, and at least half of the names were wrong, and some of the countries didn't exist anymore. Apart from a low wooden table and a rickety raffia sided wardrobe there was little else.

Except for the invasion of books. On every surface and available piece of floor space an invincible disorder of books sufficient to defeat an army of diligent librarians and reduce them to despair. Pile upon unruly pile. Art, science, literature, history, philosophy. A great universal bazaar of the written word wherein could be unearthed the scribbled wisdom and folly of civilizations long turned to dust, of generations lost to war and time, of the quick and the living. A vaulted gallery of the mind where falsifiers and fools had set down the records of their deeds and of their days alongside the grand opus' of geniuses, and prattlers and pretenders had made substantial their imaginations and illusions among the prophetic teachings of visionaries. An indiscriminate and egalitarian library of extremes where dime novels kept company with learned tomes, and the meticulously crafted prose of a Nobel Laureate might find itself binding to binding with a volume of atrocious sentimental poetry, and the careful translation of an obscure philosophical text from antiquity might become neighbor to the scatological ravings of an imprisoned lunatic or the risqué recollections of an exile, and where epics and classics might sit as uneasy bedfellows to the divinations of an astronomer, and a book on comparative religion was liable to end up bunkmates with a comedy of errors.

And Ravi's grandfather knew every single one. Not only did he know every one, he also knew, if not exactly where it was, then more or less in what quarter it was likely to be found.

It was beyond the command of his patience to read one book at a time, and even at his advanced age his curiosity was like a small hungry animal rooting and ferreting for words, or a tiny dragon hoarding sentences and phrases like gold. Ravi's grandfather heard words the way other people heard music. He unwove them and picked them apart to reveal their true meanings, like a watchmaker dismantling an old clock to find out how it works. He followed their flow back in time to the first words, the first questions, the firelight tales of ancestors and the memories of ghosts.