

ON A BREEZY SEPTEMBER AFTERNOON, Ashwin Kapoor burst into an odorous, noisy, brightly lit world through the slippery channel of Leena, whose milky-tea complexion and sleepy eyes he bore. From Prem he took his melon-shaped head and wiry frame. He felt arms, legs, fingers, and toes growing, as a tree senses its roots burrowing into the earth. He heard the whoosh of more than a thousand enzymes racing through his cells. Power seemed to radiate from his pores, reaching out to all else that lived.

Leena and Prem appeared to him, even then, as disconnections of motion, noise, touch, and smell: the scratch of starched cotton, the whispery blur of silk, the pinch of incense. They sailed him around their small rooms in Toronto's Little India, pointing at shapes. "Ganesha," they said, pulling his fingers along the cold bronze trunk of the elephant-headed god. It sat on a table that was draped in red and gold. "Raj," they said, placing his tiny palm upon a warm, fidgety cat. Merging with the creature's consciousness, Ashwin saw himself through Raj's eyes. With all of its lumps and bumps, knobs and handles, his body was a comical sight.

Ashwin was convinced Leena and Prem were the source of all there was to see, hear, smell, touch, and taste in this new world. Every day, Leena carried him down clattering steps to the store underneath their rooms, harbouring bright lights and smells that made his eyes water. Cardboard cartons of fruits and vegetables cluttered the floor. Wooden shelves stood tall with colourful packages of legumes and spice. Prem would wipe his hands on a long, stained apron before carrying Ashwin down an aisle where he'd hold bags of spices up to the baby's nose. "*Methi, kalonji, dhania, cardamom,*" he'd say, laughing whenever Ashwin wrinkled his nose at a smell or sneezed.

One warm day Ashwin was able to hold Leena's hand and climb down the stairs himself. The sidewalks were crowded with bodies in saris and sandals, jeans and running shoes. Leena showed him peacock-coloured scarves hanging from a ceiling. She guided his hand over the rough coral and smooth turquoise beads of necklaces lying on a table. She bought him crispy, sticky, sweet *jalebi* and sugar cane juice. She let him finger the gnarled ginger and sniff the leafy coriander she'd selected for chutney. "Sheep," she said, pointing to a skinned head in a supermarket.

The day came when Leena and Prem no longer were content with Ashwin's everyday miracles: breathing, swallowing, laughing, crying, sitting, walking, and making choo-choo trains with the chickpea flour sticks Prem enjoyed with beer. ("Whoo, whoo, all aboard!" Prem would say.)

"Why doesn't he look at us?" Leena asked. "Why has he become so clumsy?"

"He doesn't seem interested in other children," Prem said.

Why wasn't he talking? In voices that choked Ashwin's ears, Leena and Prem said "Mummy, Daddy" over and over, smacking their lips and grinning. They pointed with new urgency to shapes, exhorting him to mimic sounds. Their arms around him felt like tight screams. He stiffened and pulled away. His throat did not want to say "Mummy, Daddy."

One day after breakfast, they drove him to a building where they held his thrashing body in a cold, crackly sheet while a man drew on his head. "Don't be afraid," Prem said, before a pain in Ashwin's arm put him to sleep. "They only want pictures of your brain."

Afterwards, a hover of doctors spoke to Leena and Prem in curry-paste tones. They spoke in front of Ashwin as though he could not understand. "It's not your fault, it's nothing you've done," said one.

"Symptoms often don't appear until now," said another. "We don't know why."

"Think of his brain as a computer in which a virus has corrupted the programs," said a third. "It's unequipped to respond to certain key strokes." Prem and Leena nodded and blinked and clutched each other's hands.

Ashwin forgot how to slip in and out of Raj. He lost the feel of his body except when hungry or wet. Had he only dreamed he was incarnate? At times, he felt cast into a lightless void, separated from his senses. He needed constant movement to prove he existed, so he would spin, arms flying in air, until he became dizzy and fell down. He forgot what he had been born to do. That he no longer knew himself made his arms and legs and throat burn with rage. He screamed and banged his head against the wall and pulled out clumps of his springy black hair.

When he went downstairs with Leena, the screech of streetcars made him cry. The smell of spicy barbecued corn made him vomit. He couldn't find enough air in Prem's shop to breathe. With eyes squeezed shut, he crouched on the sidewalk, holding his ears against sitar music whining its way through open shop doors. He was three when Leena stopped taking him outside.

"Our child has been stolen from us," Prem said one night, as Ashwin dropped dinner peas onto the floor. "We must find someone to take care of this stranger."

"Yes, yes," Leena said in her hurried, high voice, "many think the same, but I am not out of ideas." One day when Ashwin lay on the floor, kicking his legs and wailing, she wrapped him in a thickness of foam rubber and rocked the bundle, saying, over and over, "I believe in you, I believe in you." When he stopped screaming, she held him with one arm and picked up *Fox in Socks*. She read this book again and again until every part of Ashwin was still. She filled his head with the comforting sounds of chicks and bricks, puddles and paddles, and bands with brooms.

"Touch your tongue," she said one afternoon. He touched his nose. "Good try, wonderful!" She gripped his face with hands smelling of lime soap and said, "Look at me." He saw a braid hanging like a black rope over her shoulder and gold dangling from an ear. If she spoke more words, he did not hear. No longer could he make his ears work at the same time as his eyes. He could bring smell and touch and taste together but not sight and hearing. He imagined his eyes and ears in a battle for power and became terrified that one would defeat the other forever. He lived with this terror until the Rule of Choice rode to his rescue on a recollection of packages in Prem's shop. This rule said Ashwin could choose to see or hear like Leena could choose chickpeas or lentils for dinner. One or the other, not both. But choosing chickpeas one day did not mean you could not choose lentils the next. From then on, he told himself, "I choose to see," and he saw; "I choose to hear," and he heard. It was not enough for Leena.

"Let's play a game," she said one day, sitting down on the floor across from him, hiding something behind her back. "You give me a picture and I give you something you want. Look!" Ashwin switched off his ears and allowed light into his eyes. Leena showed him a photograph of his favourite toy—a tiny wooden whoo, whoo with engine, caboose, and two cars he would hook and unhook for hours. She put the photograph in his hand then took it back, reaching behind her to get the train and hold it out to him. When Ashwin could hand her the photo without prompting, she stuck it on the refrigerator where he could reach it. Ashwin liked the Rule of Exchange. He practised it with Leena for hours each day until the refrigerator was covered in photos he could exchange for food, clothes, books, and toys.

Sometimes he screamed when Leena made him do things like get dressed, brush his teeth, or sit down for a meal. He did not want to exchange what he was doing for a different activity. One day Leena took an instant photo of him eating his favourite breakfast of *dosa*. She tacked the photo to a corkboard in the kitchen next to an empty shoebox. "When you are done eating breakfast," she

said, "you may put the picture in the All Done Box." The next day, the photo was back on the corkboard. Before long, there were photos of Ashwin getting dressed, washing his hands, brushing his teeth, eating lunch and dinner, playing with toys, and getting into pyjamas. He liked filling the All Done Box. It was not enough for Leena.

One day when he was five, she sat him down at the table. "Time for more magic, my dear," she said. "Look! Letters!" She arranged shapes on a smooth white board. Shiny red, yellow, blue, and white letters that stayed on the board even when Ashwin jostled it. He yanked letter after letter off the board, feeling the difference in their shapes, jamming them in his mouth. Leena arranged some of the letters into designs. She cupped Ashwin's chin and turned his head toward her. Seeing her lips move, he prepared his ears.

"R-A-J, Raj," she said, putting his hand on Ashwin's friend. "M-U-M-M-Y, Mummy," she said, pointing to herself. Ashwin was confused. How could Raj and Mummy be letters? Day after day, Leena made designs on the board, urging Ashwin to do the same. But he did not understand the rule. When he grouped the letters by colour, Leena shook her finger no. When she used the same letters as those in *Fox in Socks* and pointed to them in the book, he began to grow an idea. He wore socks like the fox wore socks. He saw a bridge of light between the letters and his socks even though his socks were soft, warm and white while S-O-C-K-S on the board was hard, cool, and blue. He could exchange letters like photos, receiving a word instead of an object. Without warning, he was wrapped in Leena's vanilla-musk scent and his cheek felt the wet from her eyes. He did not pull away. For the first time in two years, she took him down to the street and into a shop with a door that jangled behind them. There, a man filled a betel leaf with syrup and paste, seeds and spice, nuts and dried fruit, then folded it into a triangle.

"It's *paan*," Leena said. "This you put in your mouth." As Ashwin bit down, a sweet, bitter, crunchy, soft melody played on his tongue and in his throat, carrying recollections of seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting at once. He would exchange all the letters for *Fox in Socks* words if it meant more *paan*.

Leena put paper words under the photos on the refrigerator. Now, Ashwin could exchange a photo or a word for an object. She brought him more letters and a bigger board. She brought him adventure books about the superhero Rama and Hanuman the monkey god. Ashwin exchanged letters for every word of every sentence of every page, placing the letters on the board, humming and rocking back and forth. When he got up from time to time to flap his arms and

spin around, Leena would lead him back to the chair and say, "Good sitting!" She stroked his neck and squeezed his lips together often in an effort to get him to speak the words he placed on the board. "Tell me a story," she said. "I believe in you." He could make noises so loud and shrill they hurt his ears, but he could not exchange those noises for words.

One evening, in a voice full of sighs, Prem said, "You look tired," as Leena spooned curried lentils and rice into wooden bowls and Ashwin banged his spoon on the table. "He sleeps so little at night. If he were in school during the day, you could rest."

"Yes, yes, that would be lovely, but he's not ready. Besides, what if this is my duty, my dharma? Some days, my dear, I am getting through."

"I hope your faith has not become arrogance," Prem said. A few days later, he put Ashwin in the car as Leena stood on the curb with an angry face, arms folded across her chest. Prem took Ashwin to a doctor who looked down his throat and put earphones on his head. "He doesn't communicate," Prem told the doctor, "except to bring us pictures when he wants something. What can we do?"

The doctor whistled low. "The eardrums and vocal cords appear normal, but his disorder is severe. Maybe a special school. Even then, how much can he learn? I wouldn't get my hopes up."

"There's no money for special school," Prem said.

The next day, Leena showed Ashwin how to hold a pencil and draw the letter A. He was six. She sat with him many weeks until he could print all twenty-six letters and combine them into words from books. Ashwin copied words from all the books in the apartment, then from the ones kind-hearted shop customers donated. When he found the same word in a book as one on the refrigerator, Leena gave him a smile that filled him with light. She put longer pieces of paper on the refrigerator and the corkboard. I AM HUNGRY said one under a photo of Ashwin eating. I LIKE JUICE said another. "Find a sentence that begins with I," she told Ashwin, handing him a book. He found one after the other, illuminated by her smiles. She had him find other sentences beginning with different words. He grew the idea that words were like the parts of his train. Some were engines and others cabooses, holding the cars in-between so things to think and do could climb on board.

"Write me a story," Leena said. "I believe in you." His mind created many stories in bursts of colourful moving pictures, but he didn't know how to exchange them for word trains.

One morning in Ashwin's eighth year, Leena was not in the kitchen frying *dosa* when he got up. Someone else was there, smelling as sharp as mustard seed. "You have worn Mummy out," Prem said in a voice that felt like a frown. "She went to hospital last night. Auntie will stay with you." Auntie squeezed and pumped his hands, making him scream. She spoke strange up and down words.

When Prem left for his shop that day, Ashwin kicked over the books stacked on the living room floor. With powerful yanks, he brought the drapes down. He flopped on the floor and screamed. Auntie sat on him. Outraged, he tried to kick, but Auntie's great bottom pinned his legs. It was hard to breathe, much less scream. When she let him up, he bit her ankle. Auntie did not stay. Prem took Ashwin to his shop, but when Prem was busy with customers, Ashwin slipped out the door and onto Gerrard Street, shutting his ears to honking horns. "What to do with you, what to do," Prem said, closing the shop.

Prem did not empty the All Done Box. He gave Ashwin paper and pencil but did not sit with him as Leena did. He did not keep him busy every minute. When Prem was on the phone or otherwise occupied, Ashwin filled the empty spaces with experiments: letting the bathroom taps run, clicking light switches on and off, emptying the refrigerator. At night, he cried for Leena until he fell into exhausted sleep. She visited his dreams in the form of a river he prayed would carry him away. He lost interest in sitting on the toilet, brushing his teeth, using a spoon, and holding a pencil.

People with briefcases and long pads of yellow paper came to look at him. "You have to get on with your life," one voice said to Prem. "If you want to institutionalize him, we will put him on the waiting list." The long, serious sound of "institutionalize" made Ashwin cry.

"I will leave that decision to Leena and her dharma," Prem said. After the briefcases and yellow pads left, Prem led Ashwin to the table with the red and gold cloth. "Ganesha is God of Obstacles," he said. "Pray to him for Mummy. Pray for us all."

Leena was gone for two weeks. Aunties came two at a time to stay with Ashwin when Prem visited the hospital. New hooks on doors confined Ashwin to a few rooms. The Aunties kept his mouth busy with pistachio cookies and chapatti. They left him alone when he sat quietly, sometimes listening to the rain or the ceiling fan. He spent more and more time in a dark silence of his own making. The day Leena came home, Ashwin did not see or hear her at first. Rocking back and forth on the floor in a corner of the living room with his face to the wall, he had shut off his ears and closed his eyes. Smelling vanilla, he thought he was dreaming. When Leena touched him on the shoulder, a feeling started radiating

within him and sending out vibrations so strong he feared they might overpower him. He opened his ears.

"Diwali begins today, Ashwin," she said. "We must follow it into truth and light." Together they watched Prem and the Aunties string brightly coloured lights around Ganesha's table. Too tired to plan Ashwin's day with photographs or sit with him while he wrote, Leena told the Aunties and Prem what to do. After dinner, she let Ashwin lie on her bed while she read to him. Night after night, he felt brighter and brighter until he seemed to fill every room with light. One night, Leena handed him paper and pencil.

"Write me a story," she said in a voice as frail as mist. Fear of never hearing her say that again formed mind pictures of himself growing taller and taller without Leena beside him. Choice rode to his rescue once more, this time on the image of an engine pulling a single car and a caboose. Whoo, whoo, all aboard! The light filling Ashwin created a bridge over which this tiny train could cross to his pencil. He picked up the pencil and, with slow, painful strokes, printed: B E L I E V E I N M E.

Leena called out and Prem and the Aunties came running. They stood by Leena's bed, but no more words arrived through Ashwin's pencil that day. Prem took the piece of paper and placed it on the table with the red and gold cloth.

Over the following days, weeks, months, and years, trainloads of stories first chugged, then sped, over the bridge to Ashwin's pencil. It was as though all the words he had ever heard and all the words he had ever copied were ready, finally, to exchange themselves for his moving pictures. He read many of the books he once copied and came to understand their meaning. He asked for books about the condition he was supposed to have. His many questions made Leena laugh and ask for the old Ashwin back, if only for a minute. "This new one is even more exhausting," she said.

"You have some imagination," Prem said one day after Ashwin had grown as tall as he and written a story about his birth and early years. Prem did not believe Ashwin had seen through Raj's eyes. Unable to remember his own birth or what had come before it, he doubted that Ashwin could remember, either. When Ashwin told him everything he wrote was true, Prem said, "You must face the facts about yourself."

"There are facts you are unable to see," Ashwin wrote in reply, causing Leena to scold him for being disrespectful to his father. She put her arms around him, then, and whispered in his ear, "You and I have learned how much is possible, my dear. We will have to be patient while others catch up."