

Lost in the Dark

‘Tu tuttu tu . . . Tu tuttu tu . . .’

An owlet was calling somewhere in the shadows ahead. Manohar recognized the soft, hooting cry, which sounded like an invisible clock ticking steadily in the fading twilight. Turning around, he retraced his steps up the path. Manohar knew that he had come the wrong way. Dr Mukherjee and his friends must have gone in the other direction.

‘Tu tuttu tu . . .’

The owlet seemed to be leading him on, flying ahead. The sky was darker now and Manohar carried no torch. He wanted to shout for his friends but he didn’t want to draw attention to himself. Of course, the animals wouldn’t hear him but he was more afraid of other creatures, bhoots and prets that were said to haunt the forest at night. Surely they would be able to see him.

‘Tu tuttu tu . . . Tu tuttu . . . tu!’

Maybe it wasn’t an owlet after all. Manohar remembered one of the ghost stories his grandmother had told him about an evil spirit called a lakarsungha that wandered along the path to their village carrying a crooked walking stick. When it beckoned, you couldn’t resist and it made you smell the stick, which put you in a trance. The lakarsungha caught hold of disobedient young boys, tying them up in a tree by their feet and lighting a fire underneath to drain the oil from their skulls.

‘Tu tuttu tu . . .’

Manohar kept walking as fast as his legs would carry him. He dared not look back, or to either side. Except for the owlet, the forest was silent. There wasn’t a breeze to rustle the pine needles or oak leaves. The air felt completely still, as if he’d been swallowed up inside a balloon.

During the day, Manohar had been able to control his fears and he had kept hoping that they might escape, somehow. With the others around he didn’t want to admit that he was afraid. But now that nightfall had come and he found himself alone, the idea of being trapped on Flag Hill was so terrifying, he desperately tried not to think about it. Yet, he couldn’t shut these thoughts out of his mind. Manohar wondered if he would ever see his family again.

‘Tu tuttu tu . . .’

The steady call sounded like someone tapping on a pane of glass, wanting to be let in . . . or let out.

‘Tu tuttu tu . . .’

. . . or water dripping into an empty bucket that would never be full.

‘Tu tuttu tu . . . Tu tuttu tu . . .’

The owl stuttered like someone trying to tell a story they couldn’t quite remember, a story without a beginning or an end.

When he was younger and safe at home, Manohar loved to listen to ghost stories. He would pester his grandmother to tell him more and more, but now that he was alone in the forest without the comforting warmth of a fire in the hearth and the familiar shadows of his parents on the walls, he tried to forget all of the tales he’d ever been told. But suddenly, each of the spirits from his grandmother’s stories seemed close at hand— the kichkinee who lured men away from their homes and sucked the life out of their veins. There were parris who lived in the jungle and only appeared if you played a flute. At first they danced and sang but later they whisked you away with their spells. And there were churails, the most dangerous of witches, whose feet were turned in the wrong direction, so that when you tried to escape, you actually ran into their arms.

Manohar remembered the blood trail they’d seen that morning and wondered if, maybe, it wasn’t a wounded animal, but something else . . .

‘Tu tuttu tu . . .’

The owlet sounded farther away as Manohar ran beneath the rhododendron trees where it was so dark, he couldn’t see the trail under his feet. He didn’t care if he fell or tripped. All he wanted to do was get away from whatever was chasing his thoughts. He wished he was home near a fire, with the door tightly shut and the familiar odour of woodsmoke and his mother’s cooking, comforting voices and dogs barking, cattle stirring in their stalls, chewing on straw. But here there was nothing, only the emptiness of the night and the persistent hooting.

‘Tu tuttu tu . . .’

The owlet was behind him now. Breathing heavily, Manohar stopped to listen, as if he expected the bird to tell him the way. He waited for almost a minute but the owlet was gone. Now, he heard another night sound, a soft chirring from a pine tree overhead, as if someone was grinding their teeth or maybe chewing on a knuckle bone.

All around him was darkness. Manohar couldn’t see his own hands when he held them in front of his face. But as he turned his head in the direction from which he’d come, then looked back towards where he thought he should go, he saw a faint light appear, a pale silvery glow that had no warmth but glimmered beyond the twisted shapes of trees.

The chirring continued, a gnawing rattle, high overhead, followed by a sudden whoosh. Manohar saw a strange creature with wings like a bat, silhouetted against the light. It swooped down from the pine tree and landed in the branches to his right. Manohar knew it was a flying squirrel but at that moment it could just as easily have been an evil spirit.

The moon was rising, not a bright full moon, but a lopsided disc of light that cast a silvery sheen on the path where the trees opened up. It climbed the sky, slipping above the dark ridgeline and watching him like a half-closed eye.

As the moon rose, Manohar heard a faint tapping sound. For a second, he thought it was the owlet again . . . tap . . . tattap . . . tap. But then he heard footsteps, somebody walking with a stick . . . tap . . . tattap . . . tap.

Illustrations by Prabha Mallya