Mr. Moonlight

Amogh Havanur

For a long time I had waking nightmares. Each time the same apparition, the same spectral presence, would come to torture my shadow. This was in Bangalore, where I have lived all my life. I was six.

My parents knew nothing about it, or perhaps had some idea but never fully gathered what was happening. At any rate I never told them. My father hung on the cusp of promotion at his engineering company, and my mother was then in the yearlong process of mediating, over the phone, some bitter, deeply-felt quarrel that had sprung up between three of her cousins. Meanwhile their younger son, my brother, had just begun to talk, and deciphering his garbled speech took up much of their free time.

"It's like reading a letter when half the ink has smeared," my father told me.

In those days the side of my bed was pushed against the windowsill, so the moonlight that fell through the curtains would cover the room with a luminous blue tint and draw out all manner of shadows. The door along the side wall. The pleated yellow lampshade. The plastic Pandava and Kaurava figurines staring each other down from opposite sides of my dresser, specks of dust hanging illuminated between them. I played a game where I would focus on a particular object for a few seconds and then, with my eyes closed, try to work out exactly where its shadow ought to be. Then I would turn to that spot in the room and verify my guesswork before starting again. In this way I lulled myself to sleep.

One night the shadow of the door swung open, flattening into the side wall, and a silhouette of a man with a toothpick in his mouth entered my room. The door itself never moved. Only the shadow of the door, which this toothpicked outline soon closed behind it. Then it moved to the far wall on my right and watched me.

It was a hard smooth silhouette with sharp lined edges, dressed in what seemed to be a long coat and a peaked hat. The thin black line protruding out of his mouth rose, then wavered and fell, surrounded by translucent blue moonlight. I knew the moment had passed to scream for help.

I couldn't see his eyes or face, both of which were pitch black. But I could

feel his vision on me. He didn't need eyes to see. I raked the covers up to my chin. My mouth went dry as sand. There was no other sound, not even the faint buzz that passes for silence in Bangalore. The silhouette stood there making his observations, and the curtains that hung on either side of my bed framed him in shadow as he stood across the room, motionless except for the awful oscillating bob of that toothpick.

Then with a casual movement he eased out of his spot and by traveling flat along the walls came to the wall at my bedside. My shadow was shaking now. Or possibly it was me.

He gripped his toothpick between two fingers and traced it along my shadow's jawline, from one earlobe to the other. Then he tipped his hat to me and left the room.

My own hands were perfectly still when I held them up. I'm sure of this. But my shadow's, I saw, were trembling.

"Amma," I asked the next morning, over breakfast. "Where do shadows come from?"

My mother said, "It all started because Brother Sun and Uncle Moon love you so much! 'Hmm!' said Brother Sun. 'We must have two of Amogh, he's such a good boy! But how can we do that?' 'Well,' said Uncle Moon. 'I know! You remember that black p—'"

"Oh stop it, Gouri," my father said. "No need to insult the boy."

"You tell him then." She held a spoonful of hot paisa to my brother's lips and moved it in slow, small circles until he opened his mouth. "Amoghu, ask your Appa where shadows come from."

"Appa, where do shadows come from?"

"Spoon," my brother said. My mother smiled and tapped his nose.

"When light hits a solid object," my father explained, "It gets absorbed. So other light goes around you, but there's always an outline where there's no light. That's a shadow."

"They're not alive?"

"Hmm? No," he said. "If they were alive, they could do whatever they wanted. And who would want to follow me around the whole day? Your Amma married me, and even she can't be around me more than eight hours at a time."

"Eight hours?" my mother said. "You flatter yourself, mister. Thirty minutes."

My father laughed.

Two nights later Mr. Moonlight walked in, and this time he went straight for my shadow. With a swift kick he sent it flying off the bed and onto the floor, where it clawed weakly for the shadow of my bedsheet. I screamed but something kept my mouth from opening. All that came out was a low wheezing sound. Mr. Moonlight turned halfway around, and then slammed

the small of my shadow's back with both fists. It lay twitching in a corner. Help! I couldn't scream. I'm going to die. He's going to kill me. He's going to kill me with a knife or a gun or a cigarette. It only comes down to time. Somebody please listen to me!

But I told nobody, and so nobody listened to me.

Mr. Moonlight came back every two or three nights. Each visit brought something new, something more grotesque than the previous one. Nothing I tried—closing the curtains, refusing to sleep, hiding in my covers—made any difference. He lit a shadow of a cigarette and eased the black flame into my shadow's nostrils until intangible black dots of his blood stained the floor. He took out his toothpick and ran it through my shadow's eye sockets as if puncturing an egg yolk in a frying pan.

For weeks I watched this happen, pinned to my bed and incapable of anything but soaking the sheets with my sweat. Paralyzed as I was, I grit my teeth as my shadow was dragged away from me and flung onto the floor. I sat motionless while it mouthed the same words endlessly at Mr. Moonlight's waist.

At first it annoyed me, this sign of weakness on my shadow's part. Why bother to pray, to ask this thing for a reprieve? But I think now that he was begging to be killed, if such a thing is possible for shadows. In fact I have no doubt.

In the days I went to school and in the evenings my family would take us walking through Vijaynagar. This was a longstanding custom my mother called "family time." And on these walks my parents, who trusted me enough not to scrutinize my every move, must nevertheless have noticed my fatigue and timidity and newfound skittishness. They must have seen how I walked in sharp zigzag movements, never in a straight line, and seen as well the vigilant watch I kept over my shadow as we passed under streetlights and past the flickering lamps of roadside stands. I suppose I was afraid of bruising it.

"What's the matter, raju?" my mother asked me one night. She was sitting on the side of my bed. My father was in the other room rocking my brother to sleep.

"I'm fine," I said. "Nothing's the matter."

"Is it school? Are you sleeping enough?" She pressed her hand to my forehead, and then ran her fingers quietly through my hair. "Me and Appa are worried about you, you know. You always look so tired."

"School is fine," I said. I closed my eyes.

We fell silent for a time. I felt her fingers comb my hair, fingers that radiated body heat, unconsciously smoothing out the parts that the rest of the day had mussed up. Each stroke sent a fresh warm throb of electricity purring down my spine.

"My poor baby," she said.

Sometimes my shadow would go limp on the floor, but Mr. Moonlight was always ready to revive him for fresh torment. Then he would tip his hat and leave, and in the morning I would wake up and my shadow would be laid flat out alongside me, with no traces of the previous night. But after my mother tucked me in and left the room I saw it rock back and forth in terror, or fall at its feet the moment the shape of the door's shadow change.

Once he ran a match across a knife until black steam floated from the tip. Then he raised the knife to my shadow's lips and moved it in slow, small circles until he separated them from the surrounding skin. My shadow arched back and opened its lipless mouth, the ridges of the teeth clearly visible. There was no sound, but it was screaming, and in my mind I could hear the screams, these senseless howls that welled up inside me.

At that moment I gave in.

Whenever I remember this I visualize an isolated table, with one half lit but with the other side shrouded in darkness. Camphor permeates the room. I sit down and begin to plead. I don't know who I plead to, or if I speak to anyone at all, or how long I do speak. Please, I say, to whatever, real or not, is in that room. Please, I don't want this anymore and I don't understand any of it and I don't want to. I don't know what I have to say here. Just do it to someone else. Anyone else, I don't care about being good any more. Let them suffer. Anyone but me.

When I came to it was almost dawn. My shadow was slumped over and did not move. Mr. Moonlight stood by him, on the far wall where he had observed me that first night. He ran his fingers slowly, delicately, through my shadow's hair. Then he tipped his hat to me and left the room.

I never saw him again. Each night I would lie cowering in my bed with my gaze fixed on the shadow of the door, expecting the worst, but he never came back. In the mornings I woke up safe, and drop by drop my guilt and shame receded. The worst was over.

But then one night a few months later my brother roused everybody in the house with his crying. My mother took him to the main corridor where the four of us had assembled.

He had very curly hair when he was young. As my mother bounced him against her side the curls shook and blurred. "What is it, baby, bulloo, thuskie," my mother cooed. "My raja, devaru, my santhosha? Really, what's gotten into him?" she asked my father.

"Amoghu hug kodu!" he cried. Over and over. Amogh hug give. To this day I can remember his voice breaking as he howled this. We all looked at each other.

"Go on, Amogh, hug him," my mother said, holding him out.

When I think of what I did then, I think of two things.

There's that imaginary room, one half too bright and the other too dark,

where I begged for myself back with all the capital at my disposal.

And then there is my brother as he was at that moment, wretched and pitiful and ruined by what I'd done, screaming for me to protect him or save him or console him. And it strikes me that whatever passed in that room needn't be thought of in terms of right and wrong, that I have lived a good life outside this one black act, that it is a good thing to provide comfort to anybody, but especially to the condemned. This is what I tell myself. That I acted as kindly as I could and I should never think about any of this again.

Because what else could I do? I hugged him and put him back to bed.