

Lights

Jai grew up amongst shining lights. Icy chandeliers, low-hanging paper lanterns, lamps with coloured glass like candy embedded in them. In the daytime, the shop wasn't much to see—just a glass front with a sign that said *Chawla & Sons Lights*; but as the sky became heavy with colour, it glittered like a jewel on the dark necklace of the road.

All the lights were connected to a central switch, which Jai's father, Baba, used to turn the lights on in the evening and their individual switches, which Jai would use to turn them off and on again till Baba caught him and made him go upstairs to do his homework. Sometimes Jai would turn on all the lights in one aisle and stroll down, imagining a crown atop his head or an Oscar in his hand. Other times, Shankar would come over after school and they would chase each other. Touching a light meant losing ten points and breaking one meant a smack on the bottom from Baba.

Baba usually put an end to these games so that Jai wouldn't bother customers. But on Jai's birthday and on Diwali, he would read the evening paper at his desk as Jai swished down the rows of lights, looking up surreptitiously to confirm the unbroken state of his products.

Upstairs was as bright as the shop below. Three stained glass lanterns hung from the hallway ceiling. In Baba's room, there was a raindrop chandelier he had installed after signing a deal with a manufacturer in Mumbai. Jai's study desk held a transparent lamp. He'd chosen it on his tenth birthday because you could see the wires

and the bulb of the lamp inside.

At school, Shankar and Jai were a certified nuisance. They were a nuisance because they evaded all efforts to make them attend maths class, running along the drains that lined the perimeter of the school to look for wombats instead. Their nuisance-ness was certified because their teacher had written notes to their parents about it.

When Baba received these notes, he opened them carefully. He read them in full before saying, "Jai, without maths this shop would not be possible. I would not know how much money I have earnt, how much I owe or what is my profit." He would look at his son over his glasses until he was compelled to say, wringing his hands behind his back, that maths was more important than locating wombats.

One day at school, Natasha told everyone at the playground that her father's office was moving to a big glass building which had a coke dispenser and a candy machine which gave as many Skittles as she wanted. Remnants of the spicy fries she had been eating clung to her mouth as she spoke.

"My parent's company has a building of its own. It's taller than Megatron," Armaan said.

"My nana owns the biggest bowling alley in Asia," added Nitin.

The claims became taller than the fifth graders who made them. Jai's stomach rose and he felt his voice strain to join the others. "My father," he began, "owns a building with a thousand floors and the world's largest jungle gym."

"No, he doesn't," said Shankar. "He runs a light store on Moti Marg. I've been there."

A bubble of laughter burst around Jai.

"Jai's father is a shopkeeper," said Natasha. "I know because my mom went to his shop to choose lights for the new office."

The air around Jai changed. It was pressing into him from all sides. "Rohan's father sells water bottles," he said, unsure what effect he meant to have.

"He runs a bottle *company*," Rohan said quickly. He turned to Jai. "Do you even know what a company is?" Almost instantly, he added, "I do, because my father has one."

The bell rang, cutting across the humid playground air. Jai was the last to reach class.

When Jai got home, he went straight to Baba. “Baba, do you own a company?” he demanded. Baba was tallying accounts in a register. He looked up, pencil poised. “No, son, I own a store.” He resumed scanning the expenses column.

Jai went up to his room. He had to read *The Very Melancholy Man* for English, but he couldn’t bring himself to open his bag. He lay on his bed and looked at the ceiling lights.

The summer of eleventh grade, Jai’s classmates interned at their parents’ firms or their parents’ friends’ firms. Shankar offered Jai a spot at his father’s law firm but Jai declined. Baba was to teach him how to balance the books. Jai assiduously added all the columns on his calculator, sitting on Baba’s metal chair. He wrote the totals at the bottom in square handwriting. He hoped that none of his classmates needed new lights.

Jai printed Delhi University’s cut-offs and circled his top colleges. He spent late nights with his books. Baba never entered his room when he was studying but when Jai came home from school he found a tidied desk, a fresh bottle of water and sometimes a new pen. In the evenings, Jai and Baba maintained the accounts.

When Jai left for college in July, Baba gave him a bank account, a royal blue duffel bag and his transparent desk lamp, swathed in bubble wrap and newspaper. He drove Jai to campus in his Santro. Baba listened to the news channel on the radio. Jai itched to change the station from the dull voice that narrated the day’s rapes, thefts and politician’s quotes. Baba pursed his lips as he listened, his hands steady on the steering wheel.

The first thing Jai noticed about his rented room was that it had weak lighting. A single white light with a chipped globe hung uncertainly from the ceiling. He unwrapped his transparent lamp and set it on the desk.

English divided everyone into neat groups on the first day of college. People whose English flowed easily like a stream gelled together as did people whose English came out of their mouths like rough, uneven stones. There was no conscious attempt to create or maintain the divide—different clothes worn, movies watched and number of foreign trips taken did that.

Jai found himself on the side that used ‘inevitable’ in regular

conversation and pronounced development with soft syllables, though he nodded dumbly when his friends spoke of their favourite cafés in London.

One night Jai's friends took him to Hauz Khas Village. Jai wondered what liking his credit card-carrying friends could have for a village. It looked like the market near Jai's house—winding metal staircases that clung to the sides of buildings and liquorice-like wires hanging overhead. He remembered running through betel nut-stained alleys as Baba bought the evening paper at a corner stall. When they got home, Baba would test his tables. Correct answers yielded neon green sweets.

The outsides of the place may have resembled the market but the insides were dark cubes of pulsing lights and throbbing music. Jai and his friends drank and danced and smoked and he felt the beat in his bones all the while. They returned to campus by 1 a.m., Jai to his room by 2. Jai missed his classes the next day. He started going out every weekend.

During his First Year, Jai went home often. Baba always greeted him like he did dealers. Jai felt foolish shaking the hand of someone who had taught how to make cursive 'Z's and bought him strawberry ice cream after his first tooth extraction but Baba had an unrelenting grip.

The first time he went home, Jai took chocolate mousse from Theobroma, a bakery near campus. A girl from his statistics class had shown him the place and he knew from the first bite of macaroon where most of his money would be going for the next three years. He bought a jar of creamy chocolate packed in a pastel pink box for Baba. Baba thanked him with a smile but when Jai woke up at midnight to get a glass of water, he found the confectionery in the fridge, a single bite taken out of it. He brought Indian sweets next time.

During these visits, time seemed like a thick syrup filtering through a sieve. Baba woke at six every morning. He dusted every light in the store, humming a Kishore Kumar tune, standing on a plastic stool to reach the chandeliers. Then he had his morning tea, read the papers and waited for customers. He turned on all the lights at the first sign of dusk, tallied his accounts and had masala

tea with Marie biscuits after. Jai no longer helped Baba maintain the accounts. The sight of Baba sitting at his desk with a calculator in hand made Jai want to crush one of the paper lanterns that hung by the store window. He stayed in his room, working on assignments; the lights downstairs hurt his eyes.

As the years went by, Jai's workload increased and visits home decreased. Baba took to writing him emails. They always started the same—*Hello son*. Short updates similar in format to the news Baba listened to followed. *Received an order for 50 lights for the new school down the road. Bought gulab jamun to celebrate. Hope your studies are going well. Remember to drink water*. Alone at the bottom—*Your Baba*. Jai knew his father would be writing these emails from a cyber café, paying twenty rupees for ten minutes of internet usage. He set reminders on his phone to answer them.

The last time Jai visited, Baba laced his fingers and leant forward after dessert. Just when Jai was going to pretend that he had a worksheet that needed solving, Baba asked, "What's the plan?" His voice was like stones tumbling down a hill.

"The plan is to graduate," Jai said, hoping the laughter under his voice sounded natural.

Baba did not blink. "Your career plan, son."

Jai dropped the stretched smile he had been wearing. "I don't know. I thought I'd do an MBA."

"And manage the store?"

"Maybe."

Baba nodded once. He didn't tell Jai that he hadn't been able to unscrew the toothpaste cap on the first try this morning or that the debit column in his register ran longer than the credit one now. He got up, wished Jai good night and went to his room. Jai kept sitting at the dining table because his legs couldn't find the strength to get up. But eventually the staring wall clock and the photographs that looked down from the mantelpiece forced him out of his chair and into his room. He left at five the next morning, taking an auto to the metro station.

Neither of them mentioned the store again.

Final Year was a flurry of projects and papers. Jai sat at his desk, where he sipped more water than studied. Sometimes he found half

a sentence written on the page and had no memory of what he had been writing or why. One evening when he was supposed to revise production capacity, he pulled out his laptop and wrote an email to Baba instead. *Hello Baba*, he began. A moment later he deleted that and wrote,

Dear Baba,

I'm sorry about last time.

From Jai.

Jai checked his email as soon as he woke up for a week, but there was no reply. He checked the email address he had entered, then the content of the message and then his behaviour. He smothered the itching at the edges of his mind by filling it with information. He wasn't seen without a textbook till finals were over.

Jai graduated on a sultry June day in a scratchy red gown. When Jai reached the auditorium, his stomach felt like a mass of wriggling worms and it wasn't just because he was graduating. He stood on his toes to scan the crowd. Someone shoved past him, but he kept searching, until—Baba stood by the double doors in his faded plaid suit, his hair combed to the side with coconut oil. Jai felt warmth flood his chest.

When Jai reached him, Baba said, "Congratulations, Jai." He gave Jai a watch. His hands shook slightly when he handed Jai the box. Jai went up on stage. He saw Baba standing in the crowd, taller than everyone else. His eyes were shinier than Jai had ever seen them but Jai thought he looked regal.

After the ceremony, Baba asked Jai for 'One picture, please'; he retrieved his boxy Nokia from his pocket. Jai had to tell him how to find the camera app and smile at the same time, and Baba's finger pressed down twice before it found the right button but Jai's smile remained natural.

They drove home. Jai stared at the red cap in his hands and stroked its yellow tassels. He barely heard the radio. When Jai saw the crinkled plastic table cover, the folded cloth napkins, the slightly dented salt shaker in the centre, he was glad to be home. He sat across Baba and poured water for them both. Baba tried to unscrew the top of the casserole but the knob kept escaping his fingers. Jai gently took the cap from him. "You got biryani!" Jai said, grabbing

a serving spoon. Baba chuckled softly, said, "Yes, thought you would enjoy..."

After dinner, they went to the market for ice cream. Jai drove. Baba buckled himself into the passenger seat. His hands adjusted the strap, opened the glove compartment, smoothened his shirt and finally settled into his lap. Jai licked his red-velvet scoop and Baba cut pieces from his blackcurrant ice cream with a plastic spoon. They walked to the corner store where Baba bought the evening paper and Jai purchased a fistful of green raw mango sweets.

Walking back, Jai felt he could put it off no longer. "Baba," he tried. "I'm not sure what the plan is. MBA, job interviews, the store... I'm still figuring it out."

Baba nodded.

"We might have to sell the store. Not now; not for ten, fifteen years. But we might." Jai's nose and throat felt like they were full of cement.

Baba kept walking. He smiled. He said, "Whatever you need, Jai." This time there was no mistaking the tears in his eyes and Jai knew that the strongest man to live was not Hercules, not Arjuna, but this grey-haired, rounding man ambling down a side alley in Moti Nagar Market.

Baba reached the end of the lane and called over his shoulder, "C'mon, son, or we'll never get home." Jai dumped his melted cone in the nearest dumpster and followed. Baba was already sitting in the passenger seat, his seatbelt fastened. Baba looked straight ahead and as Jai started driving he reached across and turned on the radio. A government employee's droning voice filled the car but Jai didn't mind.

That night Jai didn't sleep. He stayed downstairs long after Baba had said goodnight and gone up. He turned on all the lights in their store, even the tiny fairy lights, and lay on his back on the carpeted floor. He let his eyes glaze over till the lights were overlapping orbs of brightness, shining, twinkling, fading.