

**Angel Speak** – *Lolita Chakrabarti*

Rohan Gupta was 6 years old and still growing. At least that's what his mum said but he wasn't sure he believed her. At school, Billy Jones and Toby Greene teased him for being so small and because he couldn't think of anything clever to say back to them, he decided it was best to be quiet. Rohan wasn't unpopular, he was just another kid in the class, but his gradual silence began to make him invisible and he spent much of his time at school alone. Mrs Parker, Rohan's form teacher, was becoming concerned and so called in his Mum to have a chat.

'I'm not sure what to do about it,' she said. 'I can't think why he won't speak. Is there anything wrong at home?'

Minnie Gupta was immediately defensive. 'What do you think because my husband had to return to Calcutta to deal with family business, I am being unable to cope alone?'

'No! Not at all,' exclaimed Mrs Parker. 'I'm just concerned about Rohan and wondered if we might solve this problem together.'

Minnie could see that Mrs Parker was just trying to help so she calmed down.

The family had moved to England three years ago and Minnie knew it was difficult making friends in a foreign land. Perhaps Rohan was having trouble too.

'I will talk to him,' she said. 'I will ask him to tell me what bothers him and we will all work it out together.' Minnie smiled an anxious smile, shook hands with Mrs Parker and left.

That evening, Minnie spoke to Rohan.

'Are you alright, sweetie?' she asked.

'Okay,' he replied, distracted by his toy trucks.

'Mrs Parker says you don't talk in class,' she said gently, knowing what a sensitive child Rohan was.

Rohan said nothing.

'Is there a reason for that?' Minnie asked.

'No,' said Rohan uncomfortable.

'Are you unhappy? Are you missing daddy?'

Rohan nodded.

'Well you can always talk to me, you know that don't you? And daddy will be back soon, I promise.'

Rohan nodded.

Not convinced that she'd found the heart of the problem, Minnie felt she'd at least broached the subject. So she told Rohan to 'go play' and he ran off to his room.

Rohan climbed into the red and blue tent in the corner of his room, the only place he was ensured absolute privacy. He closed his eyes tightly. He concentrated really hard, and whispered, 'Are you there? I really need to speak to you.'

Slowly, under the darkness of his eyelids, he began to detect that familiar shimmering light. He smiled, he knew she was coming. The light got bigger and bigger until he could see her. A young girl, dressed in a simple, light flowery dress but with silver wings growing out of her back. This was Clara, his angel.

'Hello Rohan! How's it going?' she asked with a warm smile in her voice.

'Not so good,' said Rohan. 'Mum's worried about me not talking at school.'

'Oh,' nodded Clara, sagely.

'But it's easier not to speak isn't it? Because then no one notices me and they stop making fun of me for being short,' concluded Rohan.

‘They just don’t know any better, Rohan,’ answered Clara. ‘Being small is a great virtue.’ She landed on its upturned palm and faced him straight on. ‘You can get into places they can’t, you can run faster, small people do great things. Look at me,’ she laughed. Rohan laughed too. Clara always knew the right thing to say.

‘So what do I do?’ asked Rohan.

‘I think you should tell your mum what has been bothering you, and then she can help,’ said Clara.

‘Okay,’ said Rohan reluctantly, and saying a quick goodbye to Clara he went to find his mum.

Minnie was making the evening meal, deep-frying something, chopping something else. Rohan stood by the door for a while, unsure of how to start.

‘What’s up doc?’ said Minnie.

‘Wow,’ thought Rohan. ‘Mum’s got eyes in the back of her head.’

‘You going to speak up, little man?’ Minnie asked.

‘Clara told me to tell you that I don’t speak much at school cos.....Billy and Toby tease me about being small and I thought it was best to say nothing back.’

Minnie, taken aback by all this information at once, wiped her hands on a tea towel, switched off the rings on the cooker and went over to her son. She knelt down on the floor next to him, and considered what to say,

‘You’re growing Rohan. All kids are small because they have to grow. And besides small people can do amazing things.’

‘That’s what Clara said!’ said Rohan, delighted that his Mum and Clara had so much in common.

‘And who’s Clara?’ asked Minnie, smiling. ‘Your invisible friend?’

‘Oh no, Clara’s not invisible. She’s an angel and sometimes when I ask her she appears. But she said that she’s next to me all the time and if I ever need her just to call.’

‘An angel?’ said Minnie, looking a bit worried. ‘I think you must be making this up, yes?’

‘No!’ said Rohan, resolute, disappointed by his Mum’s reaction.

‘Darling,’ said Minnie. ‘Angels are not real. Perhaps not talking at school has made you lonely and your imagination has been your friend. Maybe if you make some friends then you won’t need.....Clara.’

Rohan said nothing. His top lip was set in stubborn denial of all that his Mum had just said.

‘Go play now. I’m very glad you told me why you stopped talking at school. Will you try and talk from tomorrow?’

Rohan nodded and went back up to his room.

Once back in the safety of his tent he squeezed his eyes shut and called Clara to him.

‘Mum said she didn’t believe in you. That I’d made you up cos I don’t have any friends.’

He didn’t see Clara this time, just heard her voice as clear as crystal.

‘Mums are like that.’

Satisfied, Rohan continued to play till supertime and bed.

The next day at school, Rohan did what his Mum suggested. He started to speak and to his delight, the other kids talked back. Initially Billy and Toby did make fun of him, but the other kids told them to shut up and miraculously, they did.

Mrs Parker noticed a real difference in Rohan that day and was glad she’d spoken to Minnie.

After school, Rohan waited in the playground for his Mum. He said bye to the other kids as their parents picked them up. Minnie was late and soon Mrs Parker and Rohan were the only ones waiting in the playground.

‘She’s probably stuck in traffic,’ reassured Mrs Parker.

Rohan nodded but felt embarrassed being all on his own with the teacher. He walked off a little into the playground and suddenly without summoning her, Clara appeared.

‘Hello!’ said Rohan, delighted. ‘I didn’t call for you.’

‘I know,’ said Clara, looking bright but serious. ‘Now Rohan, you have to stay very calm and do something for me okay?’

Rohan nodded.

‘When I say ‘now’, I want you to run up to the gate just past Mrs Parker, stay on the pavement and shout ‘stop Mum!’ Is that clear?’

Rohan laughed. ‘That’s silly. My Mum isn’t here yet Clara, that’s why I’m waiting.’

Clara stood on Rohan’s upturned hand, her wings lightly fluttering, her hair loose round her little shoulders. ‘Do you trust me, Rohan?’

Rohan nodded without a second thought.

‘You must do this okay?’

Rohan could see that Clara meant business, so he nodded.

‘Good lad,’ she said. ‘Ready! Steady! Now!’

Rohan ran through the playground, towards Mrs Parker, ran past her and onto the pavement. Mrs Parker tried to grab him, but missed.

Rohan shouted at the top of his voice, ‘Stop Mum!’

As if in slow motion, he saw Minnie across the road just about to cross over. His warning made her stop and look up at him at which time, a motorbike screeched around the corner, almost toppled over but just managed to keep it’s balance to zoom off. In hot pursuit was a police car, lights on, sirens silent.

The street was empty again, Minnie was terrified.

Mrs Parker took hold of Rohan’s hand and called over to Minnie.

‘Are you okay?’

Minnie, nodded, shocked.

A few minutes later, back in the school, Mrs Parker handed Minnie a cup of tea.

‘I put lots of sugar in it. Good for shock.’

‘Thanks,’ said Minnie and took a sip.

‘I’ve just got to see the caretaker. I’ll be back in a mo,’ said Mrs Parker and left.

Rohan sat silently next to his Mum, holding her hand.

‘What made you say, ‘Stop Mum?’” she asked.

Rohan was weighing up how to tell her and then decided it was best to be honest.

‘Clara told me to trust her and do what she said,’ he looked a bit glum with his head hanging down. ‘I suppose you don’t believe me, do you?’

Minnie looked at her son, this little sweet boy who had saved her life.

‘I believe you completely,’ she said.

She lifted her cup of steaming tea and toasted the absent angel, ‘Thank you Clara, I owe you.’

Rohan’s eyes twinkled and he giggled and said, ‘Clara said, ‘My pleasure.’”