

Child of the Divide

BUTTAMEEZ and Pali are two boys caught up in the confusion following the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan. Buttameez is a Muslim and Pali is a Hindu by birth who has been brought up by a Muslim family in Pakistan. After several years, Pali's real father finds him again and wants to take him to India. Confused, Pali runs off to find his friend Buttameez – who lives in an old barn, as he does not have a home or family. In this scene, trying to give Pali advice, Buttameez tells him his own story.

BUTTAMEEZ: They'll be looking for you. They'll want to send you away. To your real family. At least you can get them back. You're lucky. This is my home. I sleep here. It can get very cold. Freezing in the winter. *(Shrugging his shoulders)* You can stay here if you want. I never told no one what happened to my family. Only the horses. The tonga-wallahs let me groom their horses for two annas. They give me food and let me stay here. I can speak to horses. You have to whisper to them and they answer you back. I trust them and they trust me. Can I trust you though? *(Hesitant as he tells his story)* All right then... First when the bullets started flying over our heads, it was pure fireworks... We'd play dodge-ball but it was like real bullets... People said the white goras had drawn a line on the map and now we had to go to a new country... Pakistan. I didn't wanna go, but there was no choice... Before we could leave, the mob came... I recognised our neighbour and Guddu's dad... Guddu was like my best friend, you know... We traded banter and swam in the river... My dad was brave... he could, like, actually mash someone if they even said something about his family... He just stood there... I saw them cut off his head and set fire to the house... I climbed to the roof and jumped into a pile of sugarcane chaff. They didn't see me... My legs. I didn't feel the pain. I just hid there, covered in

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sugarcane skins and licking them 'cos I was thirsty... and watched my family burn inside... They were screamin' and that... At night, I started walking straight... could hardly walk... kept asking people... "Where is Pakistan? Which way?" I crossed the border but I never saw no line. I'm no one's family. This old woman wanted me. She said her house was my house. I said I got no family, I don't need a house. And a schoolteacher said I could be his son but I didn't want to. I'm bad luck. Don't want to love anyone else. If you love people you lose them. (*Giving his quilt back to Pali*) Take it. I dried this for you.

by Sudha Bhuchar