

A CHILD'S ALLEY

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Some people search all their lives for a place they can call their own. I had only to open a door, step out, and I was in my place. Lonely children often seek security in odd places; my place was an alley.

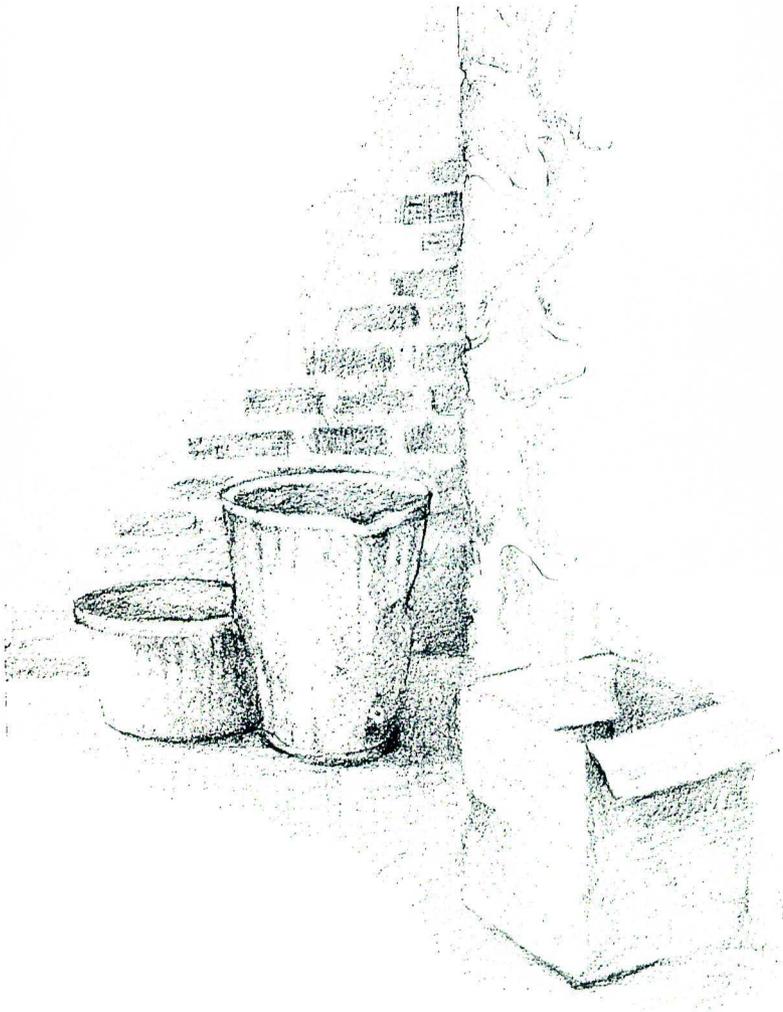
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This particular alley, my alley, ran beside the apartment building where I lived. At one end it opened into a small side street, at the other end into the busiest street in the city. It had been paved and repaved but its surface was still marred by irregular ruts and holes. The alley was a breeding place for flies, mosquitoes, weeds, and dirt. Cardboard boxes, tin cans, litter of every sort collected along its sides and spilled into the narrow passageway. The alley trapped the wind and forced it to swirl and whirl the papers and garbage, blowing dirt around my feet and into my eyes.

The view from the doorway was limited. Directly across the alley were several rusty oil drums used for holding garbage, and beyond them was a gas station with its jangles, screeches, and shouts. But the view upward was unobstructed and limitless. The sky seemed bluer and higher when compared with the filth of the alley below.

There wasn't much to do in the alley or many ways to occupy my time. Often I'd play a kind of handball against the wall of the apartment. Sometimes I'd catch the ball, but more often than not, it would careen off the wall and bounce down the alley, ricocheting from one rock to another, until it finally stopped in a clump of weeds or under a parked car. Naturally, this game was quite tiring, and I sought quieter ways of keeping busy. As most young children do, I invented imaginary playmates. The alley was transformed, to suit my mood, into a wild jungle, Sherwood Forest, or Captain Hook's pirate ship. The dirt turned to sand, the litter to tiny animals, and the ugliness to beauty.

On rainy days, the ruts filled with water and became my own private wading pools. Tiny rocks and bits of glass stuck to the bottom of my feet as I hopped from one puddle to the next. Oil formed greasy rainbows on the top of the water, rainbows that shimmered and caught the sun and changed back to oil when I tried to touch them. The rain cleansed the rocks and weeds, then left them to dry in



the dust-laden breeze.

The alley was a private world which existed to protect and comfort me alone. It was my buffer against the real world, the terrors and loneliness of childhood. I was master; my reign was interrupted only by a passing car or my mother's call.