

Beyond the Pale

Still groggy with sleep, I stumbled to the wash basins with Zoya after the 5:30 am wake-up bell clanged. A dim light filtered into the room from the bathroom stalls.

“What kind of a life is this, man? So d-d-d-dark! Ice-cold water for brushing teeth...”

Zoya grumbled, yanking her short straight hair into a pony tail.

“But it’s the last day of term,” I reminded her.

Over the noise of groaning and hissing pipes, and the sound of water flushing in the toilets, we heard Matron’s voice telling us we had to meet for a special “last day” morning assembly.

About fifty boarders thundered down the staircase to the hall on the second floor. From the balcony along the assembly hall, I saw a police van outside BB’s bungalow. In the early morning light, four policemen fanned through the school building opposite where we had our classes. Their dark figures wandered through the netball court and the tennis courts surrounded on one side by a chain-link fence covered with creepers. From the windows of our top-floor dormitory, two girls had seen a knot of policemen outside the infirmary, beyond which the school grounds narrowed and ended at a locked gate leading to the back alley.

The principal, Miss Bhagavantam (Bugs Bunny, or BB, as she was known to the girls because of her buckteeth and big ears) walked in to the assembly hall. Matron counted heads.

One girl missing, Matron signaled to BB. Zoya was trying to catch my eye. I looked away. I shifted my weight as I remembered Leela, who had been sent to the infirmary the previous day.

Leela and I became friends from the first day I started at St. Margaret's. I had been struggling to put a comb through my hair. She took the comb out of my hands saying, "Come let me help you with it. I used to braid my mother's long hair." Leela's own hair fell in soft ringlets about her shoulders and she had a long, skinny neck like a giraffe. Taller than all the girls in the bathroom that day, she walked awkwardly.

I didn't like to look in the mirror. I wore braces and my hair looked like Medusa's snakes. My hair had grown thick and unruly after the typhoid three months earlier. The reflection in the back mirror showed a braid that had been tamed to look like a fat, black yam; still, Leela's handiwork was better than what I could have done myself.

That day, Leela walked with me into the dining hall on the ground floor for *Chota Hazri* and sat at my table. I learned that *Chota Hazri* was just a fancy name for watery tea and plain bread. It was "the small breakfast" before the real breakfast. Leela sat at my table through real breakfast when I swallowed lumpy porridge and tea and a banana spotted like a leopard. I wished I could be back at my old school, the convent, where I had been a day girl. Two months previously, my father had been transferred to a backwater place with no good schools, and that's how I became a boarder at St. Margaret's.

Afterward when we lined up in the hallway while Matron, Miss Misquita, popularly referred to as The Mosquito, inspected our uniforms, hair, socks, shoes, and nails, Leela squeezed my hand. My leather lace-up shoes were still new and hurt the backs of my heels but at least I did not have to polish them.

"Did you sleep well?" Mosquito asked. I nodded, although I had slept little the previous night in my new bed. Also, after lights out, the sounds of sniffing from a few beds kept me awake.

Then Mosquito pursed her thin red lips. "I heard Leela did your hair, Priyadarshini! Learn to be more self-reliant." She turned me around. "Rats!" she cried, holding up strands of long black hair that had escaped from my braid. Through this ordeal, I wondered how I would manage in this school where they were so strict, but Leela and I had become fast friends.

On my second day at school, a girl named Zoya stood next to me during morning assembly. She had a pretty heart-shaped face with a mole on her left cheek. BB made announcements. Then we sang the hymn "Abide with Me." BB told us that it had been Mahatma Gandhi's favorite. Miss Ghasvala sat at the grand piano, back ramrod straight, bony fingers striking chords, mesmerized by the piano music like a snake by its charmer. A large, gold-framed oil painting of the founder of the school, Miss Freny Framjee, graced the wall next to the piano. Even in the daylight, the oil portrait looked ghostly as though it was alive. The eyes followed you and the mouth appeared to grimace in disapproval.

"New girl?" Zoya asked. I nodded. "You can share my tuck."

Tuck! My heart leapt up, I recognized the word from the English boarding school mysteries that I adored. I imagined that tuck consisted of all manner of scrumptious cakes oozing with cream and heavenly meat pies made with flaky pastry dough.

"After school, I will show you around," Zoya said. And that's how we became friends.

"On Sunday mornings, parents and relatives arrive with tuck, parking their cars in the compound," Zoya was saying.

A smell of corn on the cob roasting on coals wafted over the school gates from the street. Zoya slipped out and bought two cobs seasoned with lime and salt. We munched in concentrated silence.

“As I was saying, on Sunday mornings we meet our visitors in the verandah of BB’s bungalow,” Zoya continued. We passed BB’s bungalow. “You should see BB on Sundays, grinning and nodding at parents, looking like a squirrel with its cheeks full.”

My heart sank. I would not be seeing my family till the end of term. I would turn twelve that month and for the first time in my life, I would not be with my family on my birthday.

We passed the infirmary, this was a small structure almost hidden away from the rest of the school. As we walked around the infirmary and looked into a window, Zoya said, “Tonight, I will tell you everything.” Eyes glittering fiercely, she said, “I know everything about this school because I have been a boarder since the age of seven.”

Zoya said her father was a Rajah (a minor ruler, actually). She was quiet for a while. Then in a small voice she said, “He died on my birthday.”

“You and Leela are friends, aren’t you?” Zoya asked.

I nodded.

“Her parents are divorced.” Zoya’s lips were set in a thin line of disapproval. “Her mother was a singer. She ran away to London with another man!”

I knew that Leela’s father owned a sugar factory out in the boonies. Later in the term, I heard Miss Ginwala, the math teacher, refer to Leela’s mother as a “scandalous woman.” “It is such a shame” she said, “to see poor Mr. Damle driving all night to see his daughter.”

“You know, Fatty,” Zoya said, “you can be my best friend, if you like, but not Leela. I don’t think my mother would like her to be my friend.”

Before I had been in the school for thirty-six hours, I had acquired a nickname. The girls called me Fatty which was actually flattering after Tub-of-Lard, or Mots (short for Moti, fat)--my names at my last school. I did not mind the name as long as there were no boys around. I didn’t

see myself as being fat, but my nickname almost seemed like a term of endearment. It meant that I had been accepted.

I was almost happy now. That morning in the science lab, Mr. Joshi, the elderly science teacher who also gave private lessons in violin, asked me to introduce myself to the class.

“Do you play any instrument?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No. Like Mahatma Gandhi, I believe in non-violins.”

The girls howled.

It was a comfort to know that I could make my classmates laugh and that two boarders wanted to be my best friends.

That evening all three of us, Zoya, Leela, and I, stood in line along with the rest of the boarders to attend prayers in the chapel, on one side of the passage across from the assembly hall. We had PE and morning assembly there, but it was filled with murky darkness now. The only light came from the dim lamp in the chapel. As we filed in, I made sure that I avoided Miss Freny Framjee’s stare. Even in the darkness, I could feel her eyes boring into me forcing me to look at her. The hymn we sang that evening was "Oh God Our Help in Ages Past." Miss Ghaswala stood on tip toe in the front and flourished a ruler like a conductor's baton, completely out of sync with our singing.

“Miss Ghaswala is doing *bharata natyam*,” I whispered. I had been put through my paces in learning this classical style of dance, but had shown a singular lack of promise.

Zoya and Leela giggled.

“No shame? No shame?” Miss Ghaswala shouted in her hoarse voice, shaking her ruler,

“Giggling like monkeys in the house of the Lord.” Her eyes flashed. “Wicked, shameless girls!”

Leela turned pale and bent her head.

On the way out of the chapel, I made sure not to look in the direction of the storage room at the end of the passage. It had a games cupboard crammed with badminton rackets, shuttlecocks, and hockey sticks.

On our tour, Zoya told me what happened one day when she went to get hockey sticks from the games cupboard. She heard banging from inside and a voice crying, "Let me out! Let me out!" When she turned the key in the lock, the doors sprang open. Something clammy and weightless brushed past her. Even though our dormitory was on the floor above, I knew that nothing would ever make me visit the second floor at night.

One night, after lights out, Zoya told me the story of the infirmary.

"If you are ever sick and sent to the infirmary, you will hear a knocking on the window in the middle of the night. A girl presses her face against the glass. There are holes where her eyes should be. 'Let me in, let me in,' she cries." Zoya watched my face. "Then the knob turns, slowly, the door opens by itself. Soundlessly, a white shadow enters."

"Must be the matron," I said. "Isn't there an infirmary matron in the adjoining room?"

Wrapped up in her own story Zoya continued, "Now she is a bent old woman. Her feet go backwards. Like this." Zoya walked with her feet splayed on either side. "A *chudail*. She sits on your bed." Zoya leapt onto my bed. "And afterwards, no one will ever see you again."

"Ouch, get off my bed," I said.

"Cut it out..." A voice blurted.

Leela stifled a sob. I knew Leela was unhappy a lot of the time, though I didn't know why. There were days when she just had a wall around her. Sometimes she sobbed all night.

"Are you all right?" I whispered.

"Yes," Leela replied, blowing her nose, but I knew something was wrong.

"Is that the picture of your mother?" I asked her once, studying the framed photograph on the night table of a smiling woman with long, flowing hair. "She is very beautiful," I said.

Immediately, Leela turned the picture frame around.

I wondered why her mother did not come and take her with her to England or wherever she was.

Leela's father came to visit her every week. He always brought her a lot of tuck, which she shared with Zoya and me. With his beetling white eyebrows, Leela's father seemed to me like a fierce man. I didn't like him much, especially because when he saw me, he said with a laugh, "They feed you well at this school."

What a thing to say! Did he know what we got for *Chota Hazri*?

One morning, I lay in bed wondering how I should behave if I wanted to claim I was sick. I looked wanly around the dormitory and groaned.

Zoya was pulling her hair into a ponytail. "Still sleeping?" She stopped and scowled. "Maybe I shouldn't tell you this."

"What?" I asked, trying to sound as if I had a cold.

"I really think I shouldn't tell you," Zoya said.

"Tell me what?" I was irritated.

"The curtains lift even though there is no breeze. The light switches on. In broad daylight! They go off and on their own by themselves. That's what happens if you are alone in the dormitory after all the girls are in class."

I looked at the light switches.

"How do you know?" I asked my voice no longer gruff.

“From the girls when they have their ‘chum’. They lie in bed all day. They’ve seen things happen.” Zoya nodded mysteriously.

“What is a ‘chum’?” I asked.

“Oh, you’re such a baby!” Zoya said importantly. “Blood will come out of you, all the blood in your body. And if you kiss a boy you will get a child.”

I turned to Leela to see if she could confirm what Zoya was telling me about “the chum,” but Leela was wiping tears, as she got ready to leave for class. I resolved to stay back and test things for myself. But when the dormitory had emptied of the girls, it seemed like a very sad place. I sprang to my feet, threw my clothes on and followed Leela down the staircase.

When Zoya discovered that the bunch of keys that opened the games cupboard included one that opened the padlocked door to the tower and a room on the top, the three of us planned a midnight feast. Sometimes it seemed that we lived in one of those Enid Blyton mysteries that we devoured. We saved the samosas, bars of Cadbury’s chocolate, and Monaco biscuits that Leela’s father had brought her for tuck that morning and crept out of bed and climbed up to the roof terrace. The moon slid from behind a cloud and moonlight fell over the classroom building across the way and the creepers around the tennis courts.

At times like this, I felt I was all alone and missed my mother, but I pretended that I was having a big adventure in a boarding school, like those in the books I read.

Zoya took control as usual and launched into a story.

“Our palace stands on a rock and when my great grandfather built it he had a dancing girl walled alive to protect it.”

I gasped. Zoya nodded pleased with the effect.

“Whenever there is danger to the royal family, the palace watchman sees a shadow running behind the stained glass windows of the palace hall and a woman in white springs down from the palace walls light as a feather. Then you can see her running up along the ramparts waving her arms, wordlessly mouthing something. She is warning us of some danger. I will show you the wall. That is, if I invite you to visit.” She munched on a handful of Monaco biscuits as she continued her story, “In the back of the palace...”

Zoya knew of every kind of spirit. She talked about Hindu spirits and Muslim spirits: *chudail*, *hadal*, and *djinn*. She knew about spirits that followed passersby who had stopped to rest under the shade of a tree and spirits that frequented deserted wells and *djinns* who lurked in sand dunes. But I was sure that she had not heard of the *Alvasinh*. In the pause that followed, as she popped two more Monaco biscuits into her mouth, I grasped the opportunity.

“Wait, let me tell you my story,” I interrupted. “In my grandmother's house, in Ankola...” I began.

“Huh?”

“South of here. Near the sea,” I explained. “There are huge, dark homes. The homes are dark because all around there are tall coconut palms. There are *Alvasinhs* there...”

“What’s an *Alvasinh*?” Zoya asked angry at my interruption.

“I’m going to tell you.” I said, glancing at Zoya in exasperation for not giving me a chance to explain. “An *Alvasinh* is a woman who died in childbirth,” I added. “She misses her child so much that she comes looking for it. She appears at the well on Sundays, at noon. If you have your hair down and look in the well at noon, you can see her face in the water. Like this.”

I stretched my arms to mimic the *Alvasinh*’s hair, looking around to see if my words and gestures had any effect.

Zoya pretended to look bored, but Leela's face had become rigid.

"I have to go to the bathroom." Leela said. "Come with me, please!"

"Go by yourself." Zoya glared at her.

"No, come with me, I'm scared."

"Our party has just begun, men!" I said, "It's only down the stairs."

"I must go..." Leela cried, hopping on one foot. "I'm going to burst."

Zoya's mouth had opened. "Listen to my story first. In the back of my palace, there is a lamp. The flame..."

We heard Leela scream from down the stairs. I nearly choked on my slab of chocolate. Zoya and I flew as fast as our feet could run through the dark dormitory and hurled ourselves into our beds. Settled in my bed, I pretended nothing had happened, even though I was breathing hard and there was melted chocolate on my fingers. Apparently, Mosquito had seen Leela returning from the loo and put her hand on her arm. Mosquito had talons anyway, and Leela screamed. By this time everyone was up. Mosquito marched around the dorm shining a torch, counting bodies. She shone the light on Zoya's face.

"Crumbs! Crumbs!" Mosquito sniffed.

Zoya pretended to snore, murmuring, "These mosquitoes are always bothering me."

There was a giggle, which took off, and soon the whole dorm was giggling.

That was the end of our midnight feasts. Early the next morning, we heard a cry that seemed to come from some innermost depths. Leela was calling from somewhere deep in her sleep.

"Mummy! Mummy!" Her hand was bent and limp. "Mummy! Mummy!"

Zoya and I stared at each other. "Bad dream?" I asked stroking Leela's arm.

“Did you see your Mummy?” Zoya asked when Leela woke up, “sometimes I see my father in my dreams.”

Leela shook her head.

The months dragged on. All the boarders walked to the racecourse on Saturday evenings. A long crocodile of fifty girls sauntered, two by two, all the way around the circumference of the racecourse to the grandstand. The line of girls was quite long and those at the back had enough time to slip away and buy guavas with paper packets of chili powder and salt, or *jamuns* and *ber*, from the roadside vendor near the bus stop, even though Mosquito had warned us many times that eating roadside fruit was sure to give us cholera or typhoid. By the time we returned from the walk, the lampposts had come on, anticipating dusk.

On Sundays, for those of us who had no family visiting, we were to write letters to them. "Write!" Mosquito would command, giving me a broad wink. "Write long, entertaining letters." We were to place them in an unsealed box. I knew that Mosquito read our letters.

One day, my father wrote to say that we would soon be moving to Bombay, there were many good schools there, and I would no longer have to stay in a boarding school. I was overjoyed. Leela too, had an international aerogram with a stamp of the Queen of England in her hand. "Have you heard from your mother?" I asked. There was a light in her face, but surprisingly, she was secretive.

On Sunday evenings, there were no walks, games or prep. We cooled our heels on a stone bench in the yard at the rear of the school, our backs against the wall, waiting for suppertime. These evenings seemed interminable. I pretended I was in the Russian steppes or eating potted meat sandwiches in England, although I had no idea what potted meat tasted like.

Zoya had not spoken to me ever since she learned I would not be returning to St. Margaret's, one Sunday evening Zoya laid a hand on my shoulder, saying, "Come, enough reading." She took away my copy of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. "Let's look in the infirmary." We could barely make out the outlines of a bed, a wooden cupboard, and a nightstand.

"That's the stain," Zoya said.

Leela and I stood transfixed.

"Where?" I whispered, seeing only darkness.

"There, silly!" Zoya said to me. "See that drop of blood oozing from the floor. It gets bigger and bigger and makes glugging noises."

Leela and I squeezed behind the Queen of the Night bush against the wall and peered through the small paned window to get a better view. There was a stain there but we couldn't make out what it was. I felt Leela's hot breath on my shoulder.

"Miss Freny Framjee died on that bed?" I asked.

"That very bed." Zoya's voice came from behind. "And if you sleep on it, you will hear it creaking, creaking. And then you will be flung to the floor."

The sickbed reminded me of the time I had the typhoid when I was sure I was going to die.

Anklets tinkled behind me and I almost died of shock. A young woman, a little older than us stood there grinning.

"Who are you?" we asked.

"I. Gulab. Matron cousin sister. Matron have to go village. Mummy very sick. I Infirmary Matron till Matron come back."

Though she wore the infirmary matron's uniform of a white sari and blouse, she looked more like a village belle who'd start bouncing and twirling with abandon the moment she heard drumming.

By this time it was dark all around us and you could see fireflies. The dinner bell rang. It was reassuring to see the bright lights of the dining hall and to hear the clatter of plates, the clink of flatware and girl's voices.

One afternoon, during PE when the rest of the class was playing netball, Leela and I slipped away to the assembly hall to play badminton. I avoided looking at the portrait of Miss Freny Framjee. Even in daylight, she looked disapproving.

Then the piano began to play all by itself. The cover was down and I listened, every hair on my head standing up in shock. My heart was thumping. The piano played again.

With a shout, I raced down the stairs. The racquet fell clattering to the floor. Leela ran after me. Both of us collapsed on top of each other in a heap on the half-landing between the floors. In my haste to get up I ripped Leela's uniform. We burst into the school grounds, where the PE teacher stood under the tamarind tree, a whistle in her mouth. I was shaking.

"There is a ghost in the gym," we cried.

"Nonsense! What ghost?" she shouted.

"We heard the piano playing itself. We did! We really did!"

"A mouse goes over the keys and you come running, Ghost! Ghost!"

She inspected me sharply.

"And look what you have done to her uniform..."

Leela's pinafore had been ripped from shoulder to knee.

A crowd of girls gathered around us, and I described to them what had happened. For the remainder of the term my classmates teased me about the ghost. They called it “Fatty’s ghost.”

With the end of term nearing, I learned time was relative as I watched the hands on the giant Smith wall clock above the classroom door inch five minutes. In class, Leela stared out of the window as if she was expecting someone. Though, the only visitor was a bumblebee. The hot weather season was upon us and it had been nearly four months since I had seen my family.

Even with all the teasing it was hard not to be jumpy in certain isolated areas of the school. One day I had to drop my homework in the Hindi teacher’s office, at the very edge of the school near the school boundary wall, before the noon deadline or risk getting a detention. I pushed the door open; the room was dim after the brightness of the noonday sun outside. The office was empty. A breeze from the open door stirred the pages of the notebooks on the table. I heard a soft murmur and through the open door saw a pale, beautiful woman leaning on the other side of the boundary wall. In the afternoon glare, it was difficult to see her features clearly, but her hair hung loose over her shoulders and she was watching me intently. My heart started to hammer. I flung the Hindi notebook on the table. It missed and fell on the floor. Shrieking, I tumbled out of the room and did not stop until I reached the shouts and yells of the netball court. Behind me, I heard peals of soft laughter coming from the woman. I wish I had not skedaddled in that ungainly manner. She must have been a flesh and blood woman after all and not the ghost I imagined. I didn’t tell Zoya and Leela about the incident.

Last Sunday, during our walk to the racecourse, when I got a chance, I slipped out and returned with a paper bag full of hard green guavas and packets of salt and chili powder to share with my friends.

I feel responsible for what happened next. Leela threw up in the dormitory yesterday afternoon. Mosquito felt her forehead and put a thermometer in her armpit. It was finals week, but Leela somehow completed the last exam. I was making my bed, when I saw Mosquito taking Leela to the infirmary to be seen by Dr. Cholera (Dr. Kalra, actually). That was the last time I saw Leela.

After assembly, Zoya and I, being Leela's friends, were summoned to the office in BB's bungalow and questioned by the police: Had we noticed anything unusual? Had Leela been seeing anyone?

I hoped she had gone home to visit her father, but I heard his raised, angry voice talking to the police.

Gulab was in the verandah of BB's bungalow protesting, "I swear to God, someone put something in my food! I saw white shadow walking into the infirmary!"

BB's was telling Gulab not to swear so much and to stop talking nonsense.

"I swear to God! I don't know if I dreaming or real," Gulab continued. "I shouted but no sound came. My bed completely wet. I perspire so much!"

What was relevant was that when Gulab entered the infirmary that morning, woozy and confused as she was, she saw that the bed was empty. That was when she set up a hue and cry.

Groups of older day-girls stood huddled in the compound talking in whispers. Word had spread that Leela's father, Mr. Damle, was convinced it was an inside affair, that BB was in cahoots with his ex-wife, and he would make sure that BB was fired. In the dormitory, girls were whispering and hugging each other. I couldn't stop crying. Zoya didn't cry but then I had never ever seen her cry.

I had been folding bloomers and putting them into the open hold-all on my bed. I had already packed and unpacked the hold-all five times, trying to fit everything in. Zoya stood watching me. *I should have helped Leela when she was so sad.*

“Fatty?” Zoya said, “Fatty!”

I looked up.

"Do you think Leela saw the *chudail* at the window?" Spittle hit my cheek as she talked.

"Stop it! Just stop it! Okay?" I burst out. "Grow up." I said. "What happened to Leela is serious. She could be dead. Murdered! How can you believe in nonsense about ghosts and *chudail*?" Even though I addressed Zoya, I was actually trying to convince myself.

Zoya looked at her feet. "So, you will not be returning to this correctional center? Will you at least write to me?" she asked. Her voice sounded uncertain. "You know, Fatty, during the holidays, you can spend some time in my home if you like."

I continued folding my clothes. Throughout the term I had longed for this last day of school with summer stretching ahead—no school, no rules, at home with my family. Instead, what I felt was sadness—a forlorn feeling one gets in the dormitory when all the girls are in class: the two rows of iron cots, each with a rolled-up mosquito net and a night table next to it, lined against the walls and the transparent curtains fluttering in the breeze coming through the open windows.

I stared at Leela's empty bed. The picture of her mother was still on the night table. The rest of the locker doors were ajar, but Leela's locker was shut. Her sad, gentle presence lingered in the dormitory.

It took a real catastrophe for me to realize that there really were no ghosts, but maybe there was something much worse. The real ghosts were the girls' homesickness, loneliness, and

feelings of being abandoned and insecure. Now that I was going home, I felt I was emerging into the clear light of day.

What happened to Leela is a question that will not leave me alone. Did her mother come for her in the night? It is this “not knowing” that is hard to endure, and it will haunt me forever.

THE END