

A devil woman with evil on her mind

By Chitra Gopalakrishnan

It was the strangest day in my life.

A day like any other, a month ago. Yet so off-beat in terms in terms of experience.

It is the day we see her amongst the tall eucalyptus trees as the last fragments of the day get stolen by twilight. In this failing light, when the trees melt into shadows and their leaves rustle furtively, she is a wisp of a presence.

A lithe, ethereal figure, luminous in a white sari, her long, open black tresses swaying in waves and the candle she holds throwing globes of light on the soft-grey gloom that is beginning to build around us.

It is our last evening at the resort in Manesar, on the edge of New Delhi, where our team of thirty have been staying for the last three days powering through our annual plans. The rooms have been luxurious, the food superb and the proceedings calm and contentious by turn.

As the evening shadows stretch out in the month of November, we are all gathered in camaraderie by the outer gardens of the resort, close to a grove of eucalyptus trees, listening to birdcalls and the chirring of insects and whiling away the evening snacking and swilling beer.

We are each relieved to have reached the end of the planning and glad that our past animosities lie forgotten as we see our boss, Anil Rana, smiling benevolently at each one of us.

It is not yet winter but the steely clouds and chill air with glass-like sharpness makes it seem like it has arrived. We enjoy the nip of the breeze as we do the crazy silhouettes the eucalyptus trees throw up.

This until three of us, me included, spot the ghost-woman through these shifting patterns of twilight at the same time. She walking with flowing hair and a candle within the grove at a stone throw distance.

We alert the others through our wild gestures and whispers, our hurried, hushed words tumbling over each other. Our lungs collectively inflate and deflate and we eye one another uneasily wondering whether if this vision can be seen by all or if it is a lunacy of a few minds.

As we inhale the minty, pine scent of the eucalyptus, I think to myself that the air has a tincture of a world before a storm. And before the actual fear sets in within me, I wonder, irrelevantly, if the grove will catch fire if the ghost-woman drops her candle. After all, the ground around the trees is littered with its bark and leaves, inches deep in places and eucalyptus trees are known to be flammable.

Then my mind wanders to the many kinds of deaths I have heard that ghosts can inflict. I am sure the minds of my other colleagues turn as paranoid,

Over the last three-days that we have been at the resort, we have repeatedly told by some of our team members of the forests on the rim of our resort on the edge of New Delhi, is home to female ghosts who speak for the voiceless. That they voice their unfulfilled desires, their lost hopes and their enduring fears through strange means.

Many of us have been derisive in our dismissals of such “tosh and nonsense”, as my colleague Mira Verma put it, our apprehensions hinged more on the effectiveness our presentations and pleasing our boss at our annual planning for the coming year. Our four-day retreat is meant to be all about work and certainly not about being part of the ever-expanding folklore the forests around the resort we are living in.

Yet now it seems we have all become part of a ghost story, a hauntology, if I can make up a word, where this lady ghost has emerged posthumously to assume the mantle of the guardian of this grove's innermost secrets and make us characters in her story.

We are no longer talk of "tosh and nonsense". Our ears have become sharper and a lot of us jump involuntarily with every snap of a twig. With each whiff of aroma, our brains jump to imagine fearsome things and our bodies are prepared for flight, fright or freeze. We are now envisioning the impermanence and instability of grass, tree, thicket and forest. Of people, things, body and mind.

Manav Shah, our colleague who has been warning us of ghosts all along, whispers that twilight is the perfect time for ghosts to enter human bodies and inhabit them for as long as they wish.

As he speaks, we watch the she-ghost she walk on, head thrown back. We hear what at first we believe to be the soft susurrations of the breeze. It expands into a whisper. Then into an eerie moaning and groaning.

While we remain transfixed with disbelief, it drives Shubendu Pal, our ebullient co-worker, into a frenzy. He whispers to us stories of all the ghosts who have haunted his ancestral home in West Bengal. Even the unbelieving listen to him.

He talks of *shankchunnis* and *petnis*, ghosts of women unlucky in love who wear saris and pounce on eligible young men. Of *brahmodoityas*, the ghosts of Brahmans, who might bless you or curse you, depending on their mood. Of *skondhokatas*, headless ghosts of people who have died in train accidents. Of *bagha bhoots* (ghosts of people killed by tigers) who roam the

Sunderbans. But he devotes the most attention to the very dangerous *nishi*, who call people by name in the dead of night and lead them away, never to be seen again.

He warns us the ghost we see is of the wayward *nishi*-kind and says she with a fresh lease of life will lure us into a deep abyss. He has sweated himself to panic as have the others hearing him.

Vibha Tiwari, another of our colleagues, babbles on about a breed of modern spirit communicators, extremely scientific and proof-oriented, who no longer need honey, gold coins or the sacrificial wild ox to suss out ghosts but whip out a nifty device known as the ghost meter.

Vikram Puri, another of team member, is neither convinced by Tiwari's "simple reasoning of de-ghosting methods" nor of Pal's "ghost categories". He says there are far more tragic reasons that keep ghosts in this world. "Upon death, the human spirit enters a white light, a place of joy where the soul is either be reborn or attains *moksha* (eternal salvation). To remain stuck, without a real body, in a world one is supposed to leave, is extremely painful for a spirit and it usually means something really horrible has happened to them, something they first need to seek closure from."

It is Rishabh Taneja, the complete non-believer in spirits, the rationalist, who decides that "immediate action must be taken against this bogeywoman, this fraud, desolate and mournful figure to put her out of her deceitful pain and us of ours."

He returns from the resort with a gun that the staff uses on rare occasions when a pack of wolves or jackals wander in. He is about to take aim at the ghost when our boss Anil Rana butts in.

“No, stop. This is a prank I pulled on all of you. Can’t you recognize Nisha Lal, your colleague? It says so little of your observation powers. None of you noticed that she is not around and has played ghost!”

If she is the ghost what about the sounds? “You did not suspect they were being played out through amplifiers?” Anil Rana asks incredulously. “I would have let this play on for much longer had the gun not appeared.”

It is true then that the boss is always right. That he always has the last laugh. And his co-conspirators are beyond identification, guilt and reproach.

We don’t know till date all our co-workers who played parts in his play.

As I say it is indeed the strangest day in my life. **THE END**

1326 words