

5 It was on moonlit nights that the deserted villa looked particularly fascinating. From the river-bank we looked at it in long silences. When the fitful breeze made waves of the tall yellow grass around it, the house looked like a phantom castle floating on an unreal sea. Though pale, desolate and eerie, I must repeat, it was as fascinating as a fairy-tale world.

10 Generally we didn't talk during the night. But the next morning one of us would confide to another and we would all know by evening that he had caught a glimpse of the girl, standing on the broken terrace gazing at the moon or looking down at the river shedding tears which fell like drops of gold.

It was nothing new, yet we were thrilled every time and would gather on the river-bank again the next evening.

15 Any of us village boys would have done anything to help her in some way. But we knew we could do nothing. She was so near, yet she belonged to a faraway world. Besides, we knew only too well that we ought not to be too enamoured of her. We had been repeatedly told about the gallant lad of a bygone generation who had fallen in love with her. There was a big banyan tree which stood in its mighty aloneness on the
20 point of the river-bank closest to the villa. The lad had often slipped away from his home and climbed the tree. Settling down on a branch, he would gaze for long hours into a crumbling room on the upper floor of the villa through its weather-beaten window.

25 Obviously, he could see her sitting inside the room lost in her melancholy. But did she ever look at him? Yes, occasionally. Why otherwise should the lad have fallen down from the tree, unconscious, not once but thrice? It is all right as long as you can steal glimpses of a ghost without the ghost looking at you. It is only when the ghost looks into your eyes that you faint.

30 Finally, one summer noon, throwing to the winds all the stern warnings of his well-wishers, the lad had crept into the villa, climbed the decrepit stairs and peeped into the room. Perhaps the girl was asleep, for it was said that she wept the whole night and slept most of the day, sobbing in her sleep.

He should have behaved more prudently. Even a generation later we boys censored his rashness and pitied him. To be in love was risky enough. And to be in love with a ghost was surely dangerous. How could he ignore this fact?

5 He had rushed up and kissed her before she could stop him. She had given out a shriek. Many had heard her sobbing and her mad babbling but that was the only time anyone had heard her shriek.

10 The shriek probably could not have been heard by you or me, but just then a popular mendicant known for his weird ways happened to pass by. He roamed about in the cemeteries of our area, coming into the village only once in two or three days, when he was hungry. He could understand the languages of crows and cows. Evidently, he could also hear what others could not. When the villagers discussed the missing lad he revealed that he had heard the unusual shriek from the haunted villa.

15 A dozen brave men of our village entered the villa the next morning. They had sprinkled on their heads the sacred Ganga water and hidden pieces of iron under their girdles to check the ghost from coming too close to them. But, I can swear, no one even thought of carrying sticks or weapons. They would not do anything to offend the girl.

20 They found the lad prostrate on the cotton mattress that had lain unchanged for a hundred years on the cot in the room upstairs – dead. That he had kissed the girl was conclusively proved not only by the girl's sudden shriek but also by the faint streak of blood on the lad's lips which had flowed down to his chin. That, of course, was the price one must pay for kissing a ghost.

25 It was indeed a grim warning. But our villagers' affection for the ghost did not decline. What could she do if people fell in love with her? She had never asked them to! She had not killed the unfortunate lover! She could not undo the fatal curse that separated her world from ours. During the hundred years she had dwelt in the villa, not even once had she tried to lure anybody towards her or to possess anyone.

30 It could have been even more than a hundred years. Those were the days when the feringhees cultivated indigo over large tracts. They were concentrated in Bengal, but some had spread to the neighbouring lands of our state, Orissa. Their experiment did not succeed on our soil and they soon packed off, leaving behind the elegant house they had built.

35 As the legend goes, three young feringhees had brought a girl with them. Kidnapped or bought in the Sundarbans, she was the illegitimate daughter of a Sahib by a tribal woman and she combined in her the ravishing freshness and wildness of her mother's race with the light complexion of her father.

Because of her strange origin she could not mix with our womenfolk. It was out of the question for our women to approach a girl with Feringhee blood.

5 From the very beginning the girl revolted against her masters. She was severely punished. After several attempts to escape had been foiled she pretended to have been tamed and let several months pass without a murmur.

One day her three masters had to proceed to their headquarters on business. There was an epidemic of small-pox in the villages and the feringhees, avoiding native contact, rowed themselves along the river. If the current was favourable it took only a day to reach the town.

10 They reached the town all right, though a little late, the next morning. A number of excited crows circled over the boat. The three young men and a crow lay stiff and cold around a carrier of half-eaten food.

The girl had prepared and packed their lunch. There was little doubt that she had prepared it with the choicest poison.

15 The girl had had an accomplice in her desperate bid for vengeance and liberty, the keeper of the villa, a sly little fellow who had been with the company for many years. The girl knew where her masters had hidden their gold and money. According to the pact, the girl and the keeper were to escape with the wealth and share it. But once the girl had uncovered the cache the rascal had stabbed her and fled.

20 Three days later some outraged feringhees, accompanied by a group of native sepoys, appeared on the scene. They forced the villagers at bayonet point to bury the girl's body and searched every house for the killer. Potfuls of Ganga water had to be secured on loan from the neighbouring villages to purify the houses thus defiled.

25 But all these incidents had faded into a painless memory. It was only casually that people now referred to them. Neither the fate of the feringhees nor that of the girl's murderer interested us. It was only the girl that mattered – I mean her ghost. We always thought of her as one of us, although we knew quite well how different she was. Apart from being a ghost she was of alien blood, blood from shores beyond the seven seas. We could not help being a little more respectful towards her on that
30 account, though we knew that blood had lost much of its relevance once she had become a ghost.

No feast in the village, be it due to a birth or marriage or death, passed without the girl's share being duly offered to her. The ceremony took place in the dead of night. Some young men would carry the food in earthen pots. The party would always be led
35 by a respectable elderly man, generally the head pundit of the primary school. We

juniors were allowed to survey their actions only from a distance. After the pots and an earthen lamp had been placed between the villa and the banyan tree, the head pundit would intone: Unhappy girl, here is your share of the feast which has been held by the benevolent so-and-so on such-and-such occasion. Be satisfied with this.

5 And, we ask you to guard the village from evil to the extent of your capacity. We have never tried to dislodge you or disturb you, have we? No. Why not? Because we look upon you as one of our unlucky daughters. God grant you peace!

The party would leave the place without looking back.

10 Nobody was supposed to look into the compound thereafter. Nevertheless, hiding from our elders, from our favourite spot on the river-bank, we did look. In the flickering flame of the earthen lamp and the dance of the fluctuating shadows, we felt we saw something mysterious. Our hair stood on end.

The lamp would suddenly go out. 'She does not relish our watching her,' one of us would say, and we would leave her alone.

15 'But she obeys the head pundit all right, doesn't she? The pundit knows how to speak to her,' the head pundit's pet pupil would observe as we joined the feasting crowd. 'Who on earth does not obey him!' his rival would quip.

I had, however, a feeling that when the head pundit implored her to guard the village against evil what he really meant was that she herself should not cause any harm to
20 our village. His words, I felt, even implied a threat. What else did he mean by reminding her that we had never tried to dislodge or disturb her?

I felt embarrassed. She was so innocent and so good. What business had the head pundit to be hypocritical in his speech?

25 A strong hot breeze blew during the summer noons for days on end. For an hour or two everything was quiet except for the noise made by the wind. Doors and windows of the villa had disappeared since long. As the wind violently explored every nook and corner of the building, it produced varieties of squeals and whistles.

30 The sounds fascinated me. My father wanted me to take a nap, but I would sit up in bed listening to them intently. Once in a while, I must confess, I felt the urge to steal into the villa, for no other reason than to give the girl a moment's silent company. But, I was afraid, she might not understand my purpose. That checked me.

One day, feeling bold and a little proud, I admitted to myself that this was almost falling in love and I blushed. Maybe, other boys of the village also felt like me. It

never occurred to us that the girl was at least a hundred years older than us. Some wise man had told us that once one had become a ghost one never grew in age.

5 It was when we were preparing for the middle school examination that the shocking news came. The government had decided to demolish the crumbling villa and use the land for some other purpose. No wonder that we forgot our studies and hid behind the school wall to listen to the elders discussing the issue in the evening.

‘Can’t we request the government to spare the villa?’

10 ‘No. Once the zamindar was declared bankrupt, the land has become the government’s property. The government does not provide for ghosts,’ the village headman said, and his statement was followed by a prolonged silence and intermittent coughs and yawns.

Then a lizard tick-ticked and two or three people muttered, ‘True, true!’

‘But what will happen to the girl? She has lived there all these years and has never harmed us. Rather, there are reasons to believe that she is a benevolent ghost.’

15 The lizard tick-ticked again and this time more people said, and more loudly, ‘True, true!’

20 The discussion continued for a long time. All agreed that something had to be done for the girl. But nobody had a surplus house to offer her. However good, a ghost was still a ghost and keeping her with one’s family was not a practical proposition. But if nothing was done for her, she would naturally settle in someone’s house!

It was perhaps midnight by the time they came to a decision. By then our mothers or uncles had found us out behind the wall and had driven us back to our beds.

25 At the request of the villagers the demolition work was delayed for a few days. A renowned priest, well-versed in necromancy, arrived on the appointed day. He was tall and hefty, with a round red mark on his forehead. He wore a garland of beads which we were told were carved out of the spine of a wilful witch. He never smiled.

30 It was a sad day for us all. Outwardly too the day was gloomy: it was cloudy and it drizzled from time to time. Almost every family had brought a little food – rice, bananas, coconuts, sweetmeats or cakes – to offer to the girl. Nobody was barred from witnessing the ceremony and so the villagers pressed near the villa. For many, particularly women and children, it was their very first entry into the haunted compound.

The presents were arranged in a semi-circle on the verandah. The priest placed a parcel at its centre and slowly removed the red linen covering it. It was a complete human skull. He also held a stick of bone. He recited hymns while drawing figures in the air with the bone and then, his face flushing, shouted menacingly, 'But where is she? I have already pronounced my command thrice. She should have appeared before me immediately. How dare she be so impudent?'

The headman said apologetically, 'Look, Baba, she must be asleep upstairs. She rarely sleeps at night, you know!'

'Very well, I will go up and drag her down by the ear. She must realize that I am not accustomed to going unheeded,' hollered the priest, and he climbed the stairs.

We looked at one another helplessly. I felt like crying. Should not somebody have told the priest that the girl was not to be treated rudely?

We could hear the priest's thudding footsteps upstairs. And then he roared something incomprehensible and the sound and its echo made beads of sweat break out on our faces even on that cool morning. He returned triumphantly and said in a commanding tone, "There. Eat to your heart's content and then leave the house!"

We had almost ceased to breathe. The priest looked at us with contempt and suddenly yelled at the top of his voice, 'What! You will not eat? Mind you, that will not soften me. Eat or not, you must leave the villa and the village now, instantly.'

The headman managed to say, 'Baba, you should perhaps wait a little. She had never disobeyed us. She will eat. Please tell her that it is our earnest request. Our womenfolk have brought these presents with so much love!'

But the priest did not seem to care. 'She is leaving. Make way!' he shouted at us. Immediately the crowd parted.

She did not eat. But when asked to leave, she did so without delay. We did not see her, true. But we knew how deeply wounded she must have felt. We felt extremely small.

'Halt! That's right. I will lead you,' the priest said, and slowly walked through the crowd showing the invisible spirit the way with the pointing bone in his right hand. With the left hand he gave some directions to his assistant, who stayed back and collected the magic skull and, I believe, the foodstuff.

All followed the priest. The village was left behind and we walked through the meadow for nearly a kilometre, braving the drizzle and the fear of a heavy rain.

‘There! Get into it!’ commanded the priest, standing under a tall palm tree. Then he uttered some strange incantations and beat the tree with the bone and circled it a number of times.

5 ‘So, from now on this will be your dwelling. Understand?’ the priest shouted, looking up to the top of the tree. He then grinned at us proudly and said in a pompous tone, ‘She can never leave the tree. I have tied her to it!’

He turned back and we did the same. We boys walked with the women while the menfolk, surrounding the priest, walked faster and ahead of us.

10 We walked in silence. But at one point someone sobbed. Then everyone was weeping, though as quietly as possible.

When we reached the village the workmen had already started pulling down the villa. The rain would make their work easy, the contractor informed the headman.

15 After three or four days of rain the sky became clear. The moon shone bright and as on other moonlit nights we, boys, gathered in the meadow to play ha-tu-tu. But there was no life in our play. Eventually someone said, ‘The ground here is swampy. Can’t we go farther up where it is dry?’

No sooner had he said this than we began to run. Soon we were near the palm tree and our hearts were back in the game. We played on till late in the night, happy to be near our lonely ghost.

20 And we returned there every evening till the last day of the summer vacation.

After the vacation I was led to the town for admission to a high school. I had never known a town before. Soon I became engrossed in several interesting activities. I forgot the ghost.

25 Three months later came the Puja vacation and I headed for home. From the bus-stop I had to walk five miles to reach my village. I was in high spirits. Suddenly, while crossing the meadow, my eyes fell on the palm tree and for a moment I felt numbed. The tree was dead, struck by lightning. Its charred branches were crumbling.

30 With a heavy heart I resumed walking. During the fortnight’s holiday none of the boys spoke of the girl. It being the rainy season there was no question of our going to play in the meadow.

Gradually I passed the age of playing ha-tu-tu and my visits to the village became rarer. And the new generation of village boys was so different, so ignorant. They were just afraid of ghosts.