



FICTION

# A First-Class Ghost

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We had just moved to Kolkata for our schooling. Not that we thought Kolkata schools were better than mofussil ones. Schools are the same everywhere—cast in the same mold. All schools force-feed lessons but sadly no one becomes educated; and even if they do, it is thanks to their own merit, not that of the curriculum or the teachers. Actually, we had come to save ourselves from malaria.

Three months or so after we arrived, Sarada-dada unexpectedly appeared as our house-guest. I don't know on what connection we used to address him as dada. He was neither our relative nor

Brahmin and a gentleman in speech and demeanor. So whatever he was—a brother, uncle or distant in-law, everyone was eager to have him as a guest. He would never ask anyone for money. He was supposed to have a widowed relative in Kashi, and he would get money from her whenever needed. Her name was Sukhoda. Sukhoda had abundant wealth but no children; being closely related to Sukhoda lent him a special status.

We, the boys, were delighted to see him although we'd had never seen him or heard his name before. We felt that finally here was someone we could talk to.

But that didn't deter us. Because though lies are not acceptable in court, they are always present in stories. Anyway, Sarada-dada mostly told us ghost stories. But we never revealed it to Mother. We had heard that the man who supplied father with hookah tobacco used to tell ghost stories to our elder brother. As a result, at night, he would get scared to go from one room to another. Then Father barred the tobacco-seller from entering our house. Lest mother turned Sarada-dada out, we never repeated these stories before her. Besides, there is no fear of ghosts in Kolkata. The streets have lamps and are lined with rows of houses—no jungle anywhere. Ghosts are afraid of light and hubbub. Whatever the brilliance of the light, the tumult is far greater. Ghosts never appear amidst such hullabaloo. Sarada-dada only told us stories of ghosts he had seen with his own eyes. One day I asked him, "You tell us stories of village-ghosts only. Haven't you ever met a sahib-ghost?"

Sarada-dada answered—"Where would I see them? Europeans don't die in this country. How will they become ghosts if they don't die? Huge train collisions occur here and thousands of natives die; but have you ever heard that a single sahib died?"

"Then who lie buried in those cemeteries?"

"All are Eurasians. Listen, I am not saying that no European dies here. But we don't come across those who have become ghosts."

"Why?"

"In this country, their ghosts don't live in trees or walk around. They travel first-class in trains and the Eurasian ones second-class. However, I did see a sahib ghost once, though it's very painful to relate the experience. Even now thinking about it brings tears to my eyes."

"We want to hear the story of the sahib-ghost."

Sarada-dada began after a long sigh, "Very well, but never repeat it to anyone."

"Why?"

"Who knows, I might have to face a defamation charge. Even a dead man can bring such a charge and one may be fined or jailed. I don't want to rot in

jail again."

Then Sarada-dada began—

Once I was going to Kashi from Kolkata. When I reached Howrah station, the train was about to leave. So I got into an empty first-class compartment, thinking that I would get off at the next station and switch to third-class. As soon as the train started moving, a sahib appeared from the bathroom. He was at least six feet six inches tall, ruddy-faced, with googly eyes. He smelt strongly of drink, and it was foreign liquor. Stepping into the compartment he said, "You Blackie, just get off." By then my nerves were shattered and I was trembling as I said, "Sir, how can I get off now? I will leave at the next station." He said, "Impossible! Your clothes are very dirty and you stink. Go to the bathroom, take off your clothes and wash yourself. And stay there. Come out when I get off. Do as I say, don't you know that I am the Burra Sahib of the Railway?" Fearing for my life, I did just as he said, that is—I went into the bathroom that wintry night, stripped myself and washed my whole body. Suddenly a gust of wind carried away all my clothes. I remained sitting in the bathroom, soaked and completely naked. Meanwhile, the Burra Sahib was stomping about the compartment, and occasionally hurling endearments at me—swine, ass, monkey etc. I quietly swallowed the abuse.

Nearly an hour went by. I was all wet and shivering and without a stitch on my body. And on the other side of the wall, the Burra Sahib was tipling away and prancing about.

The train stopped for about a minute. There was a click, the sound of the latch being opened. Then the train moved on. Not a sound on the other side of the wall; so I tried to enter the compartment. Good Lord! The Burra Sahib had put the latch on of the bathroom door. I remained trapped in the darkness. Half an hour later when the train reached Bardhaman, I stuck my head out of the bathroom window and without caring for consequences, started shouting, "Porter, porter!" Then a porter came, opened the latch of the door, turned on the light and fled on seeing me naked, as he thought

I was a ghost. Eventually, when the stationmaster came and declared—"Not a ghost, a thief," the porters pounced on me, thrashed me till I was half-dead and dragged me to the platform.

The stationmaster said, "Quick, give him something to wear. If a memsahib suddenly appears and faints at the sight of this naked fellow, I will lose my job." A passenger gave me a sari which I wrapped around my body. Then I told the stationmaster everything that had happened and he said that the Burra Sahib of the Railway was in Shimla. Besides, no sahib had got on the train or got off anywhere.

Now I realized that the creature at whose hand I had suffered such humiliation was not a sahib, but a sahib's ghost.

Then the stationmaster sent me off to the police station. There too I suffered a round of beating before the interrogation by the officer in charge. I repeated my story. He believed me, for he had once been harried by a female ghost.

The following day the OC took me to the court. My offense was supposed to be grievous and I should be prosecuted without any delay. The judge was a true gentleman and highly educated as well. He believed the story of being harassed by a ghost in the train, because he was an ardent theosophist. But it was pointless to invoke God and ghosts in the court of the British Raj. The existence of God and ghosts is not accepted there. He had no alternative but to sentence me to a month in jail. My offense was traveling first-class without a ticket in a naked state, while being high on ganja. As a final warning he said, "You can smoke ganja if you like; but when you do, don't get on a train without a ticket, especially in the guise of a naked sadhu; and particularly in first-class."

I said, "Your honour, I don't smoke ganja."

He said, "As a ganja-smoker you got off with a light sentence. Otherwise, I would have sent you to the Sessions Court."

Now you have heard the story of a first-class ghost. Compared with them, the rustic ghosts are much more well-mannered!



in-law; he was not even from our village. Wherever his ancestral village was, he didn't have a home there. He was a social drifter. During that time our part of the country was crammed with zamindars like the termites in a termite hill. And with each of them he had some sort of a connection; what exactly it was, nobody knew. He lived off the hospitality of these people and everybody welcomed and treated him warmly. He was a

In Kolkata, we had no relatives, not even friends—with whom we could talk and pass the time. We didn't enjoy talking to our schoolmates. Back then, conversation with Kolkata boys was as insipid as the milk sold in Kolkata—watered down.

Every evening Sarada-dada used to regale us with stories; the stories of the things he had experienced in life. Of course, Mother had warned us that whatever Sarada said was out and out false.

## Micro Fiction

RAHAD ABIR

### The Truth

And we two—a lovey-dovey couple, get married one day. Always be true to the truth, be honest to each other—we harmonized on that point. Years later, it is our fifth marriage anniversary evening. She dresses up gorgeously, stands before me and asks, "How do I look?" "Awful," I reply without thinking. Her heavily made-up face darkens as she says, "You don't love me anymore."

### He Sleeps

He sleeps there in solitude, forlorn and friendless. We all have got along, only mother weeps occasionally. His colorful shirts, suits await him in



the wardrobe. He was a social media geek. But now there's no Wi-Fi where he lives. Is he sad? It's been five years. One day it will be fifty years. His memory will lose the gravity inside our brains as we will all perish someday. And his grave will continue to be replaced by fresh bodies, fresh memories.



### The Crying

I wake up hearing a baby crying. My eyes search the bed. Next to me is my husband, asleep. I cock my ear to locate the direction of the whining. From the cries I can tell the baby is poor and miserable and in pain. I shake my husband, Can you hear? A baby's crying. Can you hear? He grunts. There's no crying, he says in his sleepy, distant voice. Go back to sleep, babe. I sigh. I keep thinking of the little being that left me untimely.

### Homecoming

He comes back. I thought I had killed him five years ago. He was an intelligent, unbeatable dog. In a hot summer, he went crazy—would kill roosters, terrorize every stranger entering the house. The day he chased a visitor into the pond, I got mad. I tied him to a tree with a rope and beat up until he collapsed. I dropped him by a river. But later I heard he survived. He never returned to me though. Now, years after—aged and impaired, he is back to his birthplace, in our house. My guilty hands try to feed my old friend. He has no appe-

tite. Next morning he is dead.

### Things She Wanted

She wanted love. A life. A family. And children—lots of children. Years pass, and she has had them all. Now old and tired, she wishes she had nothing at all. All she wants is peace—a peaceful sleep in the grave.

Rahad Abir is a writer finishing his debut novel.

