

Flash Nonfiction

# Flares

by Susmita Paul

I sat amidst a group of popular girls in my new school. I was telling them the story about my grandparents being in love despite family rivalry. My palms were sweating, my eyes were flashing. *One meaning of the Proto-Indo-European root bhel- is to flash, to swell, to shine.* For the first time in a year since I joined this school, I was feeling a sense of pride.

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The first time I had been to the tailor for my new school dress, I couldn't convince him to make the knee length skirt go below the knee. All my life I had worn either long skirts or *salwar kameez*. I had worn jeans for a year in my fifth grade and then, for some unspoken cause, I didn't wear them till I was in college again. In my new school, girls in short skirts, arched eyebrows and waxed arms and legs surrounded me. I looked at them in awe. Swayed by their air of self-confidence, I felt this might be the cornerstone of my own liberation.

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They were curious how my grandparents managed their life.

“They immigrated to the USA. My grandfather's friend got him a small job there. With his little savings both of them gradually built a life together.”

They looked at me in awe.

“That sounds almost like stuff for movies!” exclaimed one of them.

I smiled.

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I had been extremely excited to be a part of the Bengali recitation group — my first extracurricular activity since I had joined this school a year ago. I had chosen a fine saree, dressed up and had come to school that day. With an unfeminine voice and unshaped

eyebrows, I had felt beautiful and eager to share my talent at elocution. The teachers had appreciated my performance. I had been very happy.

We had gone back to school, where we had to change back to our school dresses.

I had walked along the corridor, passing laughing eyes, feeling uneasy. I had seen the girls idling away in the bathroom. The popular girl with the orange framed spectacles had smiled at me. I had smiled back awkwardly and had gone into a toilet cubicle. Before I could have locked my door, a loud click of a lock had sounded. I had turned the knob. The door had already been locked. They had erupted into loud laughter. I had a panoramic vision in my mind's eye.

I had been stuck in the cubicle, breathing heavily and almost able to hear my heart palpitate. The orange framed spectacles had been blurred with tears of hysterical laughter. A few of the new girls, washing their hands or standing there wiping their hands with paper towels, had been looking at my locked door.

After a while the laughter had subsided. With another click of the lock the door had opened. The girls had stood there, looking at me. I could hear my heartbeat and a swelling sense of ignominy rise to my eyes. I had washed my hands quietly as my eyes had blurred. Before a trace of a tear scratched through my face, I had precautionarily washed my face. I had walked out of the bathroom with a punitive aftertaste on my tongue. Like something was burning.

*Another meaning of bhel- is to burn.* In an otherwise loving family, I had remembered that my grandmother used to call me out for having a long neck like a crane. Memories of silent ruptures had torn through the hallways as I had been walking back to my classroom that day.

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“And then, what happened?”

“How did they return to India?”

“How are things in your family now?”

The orange framed spectacles looked at me with concern.

“Well,” I struggled —

*Rrrring!!!*

The lunch hour was over. I promised them I would complete the story another day. I closed my almost full steel tiffin box. No one noticed that my face had lost its colour. *Bhel- is also the root of 'bleach', German 'bleichen', cause to fade.* I watched as the girls left the room one by one. I could finally breathe.

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On nights like these, as I tucked myself to sleep with the small transistor radio playing Hindustani classical music, I pondered over what I lacked.

I had a great life.

I was born in a loving joint family with conservative ideals. I was encouraged to pursue dancing and painting. I was protected from swimming because you could see flesh while doing it and from cycling because it was too manly. I was chaperoned around wherever I went. I was given things often before I asked for them.

It was terrible.

I felt too fair, which made my black body hair stand out all the time. I felt that by being in a new school, I was again at the beginning of the track from where the race to popularity and eloquence began.

I shrugged and stopped my train of thought.

I needed to be prepared with a flamboyant episode from my fictional grandparents' lives for the next day's tiffin break. My eyes shone as I cajoled myself to sleep.

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