

FLASH NONFICTION

Flares

by Susmita Paul



"Like Pages of a Book..." by Namita 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.

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.

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.

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.

“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.

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.