

The Ghost who fell in Love

The ghost fell in love with Aminia the moment he saw her. She had come searching through the labyrinthine rooms huddled into one another in the dark, looking for the crooked staircase that led to the terrace. Her hair had been washed and hung down her back, all the way to her knees. Her light steps skipped from one dusty room to another while her tiny lips shaped the words of the latest song that was being sung raucously in the bazaars. The ghost followed her up the winding twisting stairs, flattening himself against the wall, each step wafting to his hungry nostrils the perfume that waved from her hair, issued from her breath as she sang her way to the terrace. Under a sky busy with kites she unrolled the little mat she was carrying, shooed away the pigeons and lay down to let her hair dry, spreading it around her narrow shoulders and her face, and closing her eyes. She hummed as she lay in the sun and the ghost hovered, watchful, fearful that the sun might lay a shadow on the skin that bloomed like a garden of jasmine. He crept close enough to breathe the thick odour of coconut and essence and amla that stirred sluggishly among her tresses, and was drowned in that black billowing sea for a thousand years. By the time Aminia dried her hair and returned to the main house, he was lost.

It was an ancient house that Aminia had been married to. None could tell how many rooms twisted and turned and burrowed under the uneven roofs. There were secret passages, and rooms opening into dead corridors, and corridors opening into more corridors, and staircases winding their way down from one uncertain level to the other. The ghost had lived there many years without being detected. He was perhaps the only one who knew

every room in the house. He knew which room had been given to newly weds for the last hundred years, and he hurried to it that night, after the men had risen from the single large thali they all ate from, and the women were getting ready to eat. He was waiting for Aminia when she came to the room where her husband lay on the bed, chewing his paan and humming the same bazaar song she had carried on her lips that morning.

'Why do I burn' he sang 'Why do I burn?
The fire runs in my veins. Deep in my veins it runs.'

The ghost crept to the edge of the bed and when Aminia and her husband had fallen asleep, it became bold enough to lie between them. It examined her lashes, the skin on her throat, the childlike way she had of sighing. Emboldened by the sleep that lay undulating against her eyelids, he touched her tender breasts, still tiny buds, ran his tongue in her pearl-like navel, caressed her long flanks with a fervent hand. When she did not stir, he sighed himself asleep on her breast and was wakened by the hand of her husband as it curved around one young haunch in the secret light of morning.

After that the ghost followed Aminia everywhere. He sat patient by her side as she polished the brass spittoon. Watched her for hours as her tiny hands stripped beans, shelled peas, ran searching through rice. Followed her to the well and watched her reflection in the water as she drew up the heavy bucket. Sat by the bedside as she painted her nails and preened in front of the mirror and darkened her eyes with kajal. He trailed a finger in the cold water as she bathed, splashing and singing and slippery as a wet puppy with all the soap.

He even forsook for the first time in centuries the shelter of the house and followed her onto the streets when she covered herself in her chaddar and went out to shop with

the other young women of the house. He followed the women, anonymous in their long black burkhas, but not to him. He knew her by her smell, by her way of arranging the folds of her clothes, by the habit she had of smoothening her hair over her ears, his eyes fixed on every movement under that cloaking black garment. The clamour of the market place washed over him unheeded. He was wrapped in the smells that pooled around the secret places of Aminia that he knew so well.

In the beginning, the ghost had to lurk fretfully at the edges of the bed until Aminia's husband grunted himself into fulfilment and into sleep. As the weeks passed, the husband grew less urgent, and the ghost could spend more nights without disturbance, curled against the soft skin, holding one young firm breast. Then the husband stopped coming into the room at all. He had returned to the perfumed houses that the city was famous for, where women with soft beckoning voices sang and danced on floors carpeted with jasmine and marigold and roses. It was their songs that now crooned through his pan stained lips, and Aminia sobbed herself to sleep in the empty night. The ghost tasted the salt of each tear, held the bitterness of weeping against his eager tongue. He pressed against her even more urgently now, keeping vigil the whole night through, drinking her tears, holding her as she stirred restlessly. She woke, aching and swollen eyed, and the other women of the house told her proudly that this was the way of the men of their house, and had been for many centuries. After all, they had been once kin to the nawabs. Aminia retreated more often to the terrace where she would lie for hours among the cooing chuckling pigeons, staring at a sky full of swooping shrieking kites. And the ghost grew more enamoured of her until it was impossible for him to breathe, move, be, unless he was beside her, one finger gently tracing the curve of her arm, one hand buried in her black hair.

This was the state of affairs when Aminia's blind aunt came to visit and saw the ghost.

The night before, Aminia had dressed with more than her usual care. She had measured four drops of attar carefully into her bath water, oiled her hair, and shampooed it with shikakai. The ghost sat watching her wistfully in the mirror as she combed it into an intricate plait. It breathed in the smell of roses that fumed from her soft skin and laid its lashes against one soft cheek. It ran a finger along the clinking jangling weight of bangles she wore on her slender wrist. The sound of her anklets drove it to distraction, and the pearl droplets she fixed in her ears brought tears to its eyes. Like a wide eyed dog it followed her as she broke jasmine from the bush that twined over one end of the courtyard, and held its breath when she wove it into her hair. Then Aminia waited for her husband to come home from the dancing girls.

He came late at night when Aminia's eyes had closed with the weight of sleep and tears. She was wakened as he sank onto the bed beside her, and she turned to light the lamp. He cursed her and blew out the match she held. 'Let me sleep woman' he said 'The whore tired me out tonight'.

In the morning he laughed at her desperate white face and told her she should be proud of him. The woman he had did not give her favours to just anybody. She had been his only because he came of a line that had once been royalty. He left and Aminia beat her fists against the bedposts. Her bangles flew in bright shards to the ground and the ghost put an agonised finger to the blood that oozed from the scratches.

That afternoon Aminia's aunt arrived in a tonga, attended by her youngest daughter who was a half wit and whose job it was to ferry her mother from house to house as she

visited all her relatives with a keen appetite and a nose for smelling out the slightest whiff of discord or unhappiness. She had dreamt of Aminia the previous night and the dream stank of sorrow. She woke the next morning and called querulously for her younger daughter and hastened to the house. The bustle and noise she made out of the business of alighting from the tonga brought the whole household running. Aminia was nowhere to be seen. She was on the terrace curled against one ancient sun warmed wall. By the time she came downstairs, the aunt had ensconced herself on a chair, like a smiling blind spider and was busy spinning little webs of intrigue and malice and deceit around the morsels of gossip that had most recently reached her busy ears. Her nose smelt Aminia long before she came down the corridor, head lowered, duppata over her head. The sour smell of sorrow preceded her and the aunt raised quivering nostrils and cried to her 'is that you Aminia? I dreamt of you girl. Come here'

Hesitantly Aminia stepped forward and was drawn against the aunts large bosom. As the aunts hands moved over her face she felt the tell tale puffy lids, the lashes still wet from weeping, the lips that were sore. 'Oh you poor child!' said the aunt, returning to touch the swollen lids while the women of the house giggled and whispered and rustled around them.

The ghost stayed pressed against one wall, unsure of the circle of women who crowded around Aminia and watched her with hungry eyes. Their secret language of eyes and gestures and touches buzzed around Aminia until the ghost grew afraid and crept towards the circle. He squeezed between the women and felt for the corner of Aminia's dupatta. The aunt raised her head and saw him.

'Aaaaiiee' cried the aunt ' Death! Destruction! Calamity' She pointed a shivering finger at the ghost. 'I can see you. Don't think I can't see you.'

The ghost pressed even closer to Aminia. 'Aaeia!' cried the aunt ' He is touching her. He is holding her hand. Take him away. Make him stop. She is ruined. Ruined!'

There was confusion as the women screamed and the men came running into the room and hunted in corners and the ghost clung sobbing to Aminia. The aunt shouted and pointed and the men hunted even more frantically, ripping down the curtains, shouldering the women aside, banging against the furniture. Aminia stood bewildered in the middle of the chaos.

Then Aminia shrieked. A single shriek that cut through the babble as she fainted. She was carried to her room while the aunt kept the ghost where he was with one imperious pointing finger.

The ghost eventually slipped away when the aunt sank down on the sofa exhausted and took her eyes off him for a minute. Aminia's husband had been fetched from his shop in the bazaar by then, and there was a conference in the room with all the men threatening vengeance and the women peeping out at them from behind the curtains. It took some time for everyone to understand that the man was a ghost. Then the hubbub resumed worse than before while the women trembled and prayed and the men shouted fantastic oaths of vengeance. It ended when Aminia's husband spat a red and bleeding line at the spittoon and missed. 'Leave it to me' he said 'He may be a ghost. She is my woman and I will see to her.' Then he went up the stairs with a heavy tread.

They heard him open the door, and the sound of his raised voice. Then his voice grew blurred and smudged

with anger. The women sat silent on the stairs. The men muttered among themselves. In a while they heard the sound of blows.

In the room under the roof Aminia pleaded with her husband.

'Tell me what I have done husband?' cried Aminia clinging to his hands, curling against the floor to avoid the heavy feet, the weight of his heels. 'Tell me what my fault is!'

He made no answer. With each blow that slapped into her face and her breasts something shocked and coursed through his veins.

'I have done nothing' cried Aminia whimpering, scrabbling away from him, blinded almost with the blood that ran from her forehead into her eyes.

He said nothing but wound her long plait around his fist and used it to wrench her from the corner she had burrowed her face and her body into. 'I do not know this thing that follows me. I never knew it followed me. I cannot see it. Hear it. Touch it. Tell me what I have done wrong?' she cried as he dragged her to where her dressing table was. The perfume bottles shattered on the ground, the powder spilt, and he searched until he found a pair of scissors.

'No' cried Aminia 'Not my hair. No! You yourself said it was beautiful. You yourself said you married me for my hair.'

He hissed through his teeth. Aminia scrabbled on all fours trying to get away, but he held her by her long plait. With the scissors he chopped at her hair, cutting and tearing as Aminia fell on her knees and shrieked. He hacked it in

chunks, cutting so close to the skull that the scissors snagged and tore bleeding bits out of her head.

'Please my husband - No' whispered Aminia, but he would not be stopped. He cut in a frenzy until his last hold was ripped from her head. Then he stopped, breathing hard and sweating.

Aminia knelt silent in the black and knotted wreckage that surrounded her. Something in the pliant line of her neck and bowed head enraged him anew. He grabbed her by the neck and forced her face into the hair, rubbing it into the tangled mess, making her nose bleed. Then he went to the door and slammed out. She heard the key in the lock.

Outside everyone was waiting for him. A crowd of faces leaned anxiously up at him in the darkness of the staircase. He held up a chunk of hair and there was an anxious agreeing buzz. It was the hair. Definitely the hair. No woman had the right to have such gorgeous temptation waving about her at every step. He came wearily down the stairs.

In the room there was silence and dusk began to darken down to shadow. Outside the last few kites skimmed and floated on the thickening light. Aminia moved her aching arms. She gathered up the hair that lay splashed like black clots around the room, and held it against her sore and bleeding skull. Then she went to the window and began to fling it out. Large chunks of hair went floating out on the wind, turning and splaying until the air was full of hair tumbling, dancing in every direction. Handful by handful she fed it through the bars of the window and watched it ripple out and away over the clustered crooked roof tops, into the deepening darkness. She searched the floor on her hands and knees for every last strand and

blew it onto the wind. Then she held her aching skull in her hands and cried.

That night her aunt came to see her. She puffed her way up the stairs, feeling every inch of the way cautiously, keeping an eye out for the ghost. The family had appealed to her to try and talk some sense into Aminia. And into the ghost if he was around. She unlocked the padlock on the door.

'There you are girl' said the Aunt ' And I hope you have learnt your lesson.'

Aminia did not turn from the window. 'What have I done?' she asked staring out into the dark sky where a few hours earlier the kites had dipped and sung on the evening breeze.

'Done?' said the aunt 'Well he follows you around. Touches you. You must have done something.'

'I can't see him' said Aminia without turning her head.

'As if that is any excuse' said the Aunt. 'You must stop at once'.

'Can you see him?' said Aminia turning her head.

The Aunt looked around hastily. 'He doesn't seem to be around at the moment.'

'Can you see me?' said Aminia

'Of course not' said the Aunt ' I'm blind. When he is around - dimly. In the light from him I can see you.' Aminia moved, making the aunt jump. She took her soft fat hand and placed it on her head. The Aunt felt her way across the barren stubble, flickering over the raw and

oozing patches, venturing hesitatingly onto the swollen and bruised forehead. Aminia stopped her hand when it touched her eyes. 'Teach me' she said 'Teach me to see him.'

'You must put this nonsense out of your head' said the Aunt firmly, snatching away her hand. 'Forget him. Your husband is a good man. He is willing to forgive you and start again.'

'Teach me to see him' said Aminia 'teach me. Is he here? Is he in this room?'

'No' said the Aunt backing away hastily from Aminia's insistent hands.

'Open the door' said Aminia 'Let him in.'

'Never!' said the Aunt.

'Open the door woman!' cried Aminia, and there was such a note in her voice that the Aunt fumbled with the door in her haste.

The ghost was waiting outside. He had been waiting a long time, crouched against the steps. Terrified to go to Aminia and longing to be next to her, smell her touch her again. When the door opened he turned to flee but Aminia's voice stopped him. 'Come in' she said 'come in Ghost. I want to see you.'

He went in and being next to her was happy again like a dog. Then she moved into the light and he saw her face and her head. The Aunt drew in a sharp breath

'What is he doing aunt?' said Aminia 'Tell me'

'He is touching your head. With one hand'

The ghost made little moaning noises, shook his head back and forward as one hand stroked her poor battered head.

'He is crying' said the Aunt then took a sharp breath and closed her lips firmly.

'Tell me what he is doing Aunt' said Aminia.

'Never' said the aunt

'Tell me!' cried Aminia

'He is touching his tongue to..to *there*. To where you are bleeding. He is licking the blood like a dog.' She shuddered and covered her eyes with her burkha

Aminia laughed. Then she held out her arms.

'What are you doing?' shrieked the aunt ' Have you lost all shame completely?'

The ghost wrapped himself fiercely around Aminia. Frantic with grief he tongued her hair, her face, her swollen forehead.

The Aunt held her hands over her eyes. 'There is no hope for you.' She said 'Your husband will never take you back.'

'I feel nothing' said Aminia ' I can see nothing. I could just be standing here with my arms held out. Are you lying to me aunt? Tell me he is really there.'

'He is there. He is holding you. What else does this shameless whore want to hear?'

'Go away' said Aminia 'you have said what you came to say. Leave me alone.'

'I will never leave you alone with him' said the Aunt 'It is my duty to your husband.'

'Go' said Aminia softly, advancing on the Aunt ' Go I said.'

'Never!' shrieked the Aunt ' Can't you understand he will never leave you? They never do. You must be exorcised, beaten-'

Aminia laughed. She shoved her out of the door and shut it. Then she turned around slowly 'come here Ghost' she said.

The aunt descended from the room to declare that the girl had gone mad. She would not leave the ghost. The women crossed their fingers. The men muttered uneasily. Aminia's husband spat tiredly.

Upstairs in the little room nestled under the roof, the ghost and Aminia lay in each others arms. She closed her eyes and fiercely tried to see him. He kissed her mouth wonderingly, tenderly touched her forehead and crooned the song he had heard her husband singing.

'Why do I burn' he sang 'Why do I burn
The fire runs deep in my veins. Deep in my veins it runs.'