

Small talk

A moonless night on the road to Shimla. We are driving to Mashobra to visit my grandmother who I must say is not expecting us. Father always does things spontaneously.

I roll down my windows and feel the cold gusts of wind against my face. We are the only ones on the road.

This is the perfect time for a good scary story I thought. Father says he needs a tea break from all my chit chatting. We stop at a small roadside tea stall. A man in a scruffy white kurta is sitting on a chair outside a tea stall; he is chatting with a woman.

We stop and my father asks the man if we can have tea. "Of course," says the man, "we are open till midnight." He instructs the woman to go inside and quickly make some hot tea.

I guess they are a newly-married couple -- the woman is dressed in a blingy red sari, with red glass bangles; her face concealed behind a *ghoonghat*. She shuffles inside the

room and has a distinct limp. The jingling of her payal seem very out of place this night. I can *feel* her looking intently at me.

My father starts the small talk. My mother and I roll our eyes as he *always* does this just when we are in a hurry to leave. And as so often happens at nights in the hills, the talk turns to ghosts and spirits. I listen in rapt attention. My father asks the man if he's encountered spirits in these hills.

The man settles into a haunch and draws his shawl close. "It was cold that night, and I was on my way home after delivering vegetables at the mandi in Dhalli," says the man. "It was a very foggy night and I was driving slow. I took a turn and came to a screeching halt because a woman was standing in the middle of the road. Her skin was pale as snow and her nails were painted deep red. Long coal-black hair covered her face, but it was her feet that frightened me. They were facing backwards." I notice the still silence from the kitchen. "Something in the back of my head told me not to stop, and I jammed down hard on the accelerator and sped away," the

man said. When I arrived, I got out of my truck, went into my house and locked all doors and windows.”

I look at my parents to see their reaction. My mother like me was certainly taken in by the story but my father’s expression remains deadpan.

There’s a cough from the kitchen, and the man goes inside to fetch the chai. There’s a cup for me too and I relish the hot tea as it is freezing outside by now. We get back on the road to Mashobra.

“Do you really thing that man’s story is true?”

“Of course not! It was the alcohol speaking, not him,” says father. My mother and I laugh at this. It’s getting foggier and it’s hard to see beyond a few feet on the road. I am lulled into sleep.

I feel the car come to a screeching halt. A woman stands in front of us. Her skin is pale as snow. Her nails are painted a deep red. A ghoghat covers her face, but I can make

out the sharp outline of her face lit by the lights of the car.

She lurches towards the car. We freeze. I notice the distinct limp and see that her feet are faced backwards. *Chan. Chan. Chan,* her payal ring in the still, black night.

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604 words