

The Touch by Shobha Diwakar

The Touch — a story

Rinnie snuggled herself closely by my side. It was a cold dusty evening and the barking dogs outside pretended to be busy chasing butterflies. As the wind settled to repose on the calm resting leaves of the trees greeting the eve, the silvery moon silently crept out of its perch behind the purple mountains to reign over the blue heavens. The otherwise dark night was suddenly flushed with grandeur as the shimmering stars merrily twinkled down casting shadows upon the gently flowing waters.

Rinnie hopped, skipped and jumped as soon as she opened her eyes wide and ran to hold the shadows as if... running after a wee ball she loved to play with. Just then, a sharp sound boomeranged and Rinnie swung back, hop scotched, and trembling with fear snuggled cozily back to her cherished position by my side. "Why what's the matter you little devil?" I fondly asked gently stroking her head to comfort her. She coyly raised one droopy eyelid as if to answer my query and rolled back, stretched daintily and once again drowned herself in slumber. So with Rinnie asleep, I was left to wishful thinking.

I must have barely had a wink of sleep when a cool summer breeze tenderly brushed my drowsy hair like a soft feather and escaped through the window. I gave a lazy yawn, slyly opened one eye and petting Rinnie who was still lolling by my side, once again fell asleep. But soft, was that another feathery touch that gently woke me up again? I opened my eyes wider this time to see whether the swaying breeze was waking me up for a purpose. "Why me alone?" I pondered.

Just then, there was a loud clash. The windows rattled, the curtains swayed, and a door left carelessly half-opened, banged. "Wow," I exclaimed to myself, "Surely, it's going to rain" and even as I thought of overcoming my laziness to get up and securely close the door, a blast of cold wind shuddered me. I staggered back and

fell across the couch wondering what the matter was. Whether it was some configuration of my sleepy mind or whether it was reality. Even as these weird suppositions crossed my mind there was a loud roar of rain and thunder accompanied with silver lightning that reeled me back once again.

The heavy mantle of rain pattered so densely that I shivered with cold. Was this God's argosy against the rowdy manner in which man was committing the Seven Deadly Sins? Or was it again my fancy that was meandering into the depths of some forbidden valleys of the past? I turned around to inspect the overhanging misty curtain still swaying and casting wolfish shadows upon the silent walls of the room.

Then that clashing roar jerked me out of my skin. "Was it thunder or lightning or perhaps something that crashed?" Even as these disturbing thoughts crawled into my head, Rinnie opened her eyes wide, gave a lazy yawn and sprang up. Yes, Rinnie my pet cat did things unexpectedly and most excitingly. She was a little play thing and often entranced me with her jugglery. Surely, she too must be in a hazy twist of mind wondering what on earth was the almighty up to. Both of us spied each other from the corner of our wide opened eyes when lo! The burr... the garr, and the purr disappeared.

The night rolled on while Rinnie and I were still wide- awake. Since there was peace now, I realized I was mentally fagged out but before I could say Jack Robinson, Rinnie was already snoozing. I petted her and relaxing by her side, I too fell asleep. I must have barely taken a wink when lo! A clash and a thud made me jump upright like a jack-in- the-box. Whatever it was the noise was wrecking my peace. Muttering up all my courage, I decided what I must do. Therefore, I got up and walking on my toes so as not to make a noise, I stealthily walked across the room and tiptoed towards a slightly open window. What I beheld staggered me and my eyes almost popped out of their sockets.

My house stood on a smart green hillock. Around it were tall eucalyptus trees almost shimmering their long beautiful leaves now drenched with rain. Beside the huge water tank stood an exotic statue of a mermaid that reminded one of the beautiful fairy tales of yore, which transported the young curious minds into regions unknown; mystifying and intriguing your sensibilities to explore these unknown weird territories that lay beyond one's imagination. As my mind strayed beyond my present predicament, I was suddenly struck for a second by a passing shadow that seemed to cross the threshold.

The shadow disappeared just as swiftly as lightning and I stood rooted. What was that, a ghost? A shiver ran down my spine. Were the stories I heard really true? The suburban town it was said, was built long ago on an aged crumbling plantation that lay deserted. The stories went around that the owner of this plantation was killed by a wild animal while he was strolling around. Since he was the lone survivor and inheritor of the land and lived alone on the premises, no one came to his rescue or check his whereabouts. However, some grocer who came off and on to deliver some items raised a hue and cry when no one answered the door bell. Later they found him dead among the trees. As villagers are considered superstitious, the story soon spread around that some ghost was seen walking on the premises and had killed the owner. Obviously, no one wished to buy the place (no one knew to whom it belonged), and since then it lay deserted.

I had read the story in the city edition and rummaging through some old papers that I had retrieved from an ancient looking trunk, had found to my dismay and astonishment that this unknown gentleman was a very distant relative of my mother, who had miraculously disappeared after a family dispute. Finally, he had settled in this lonesome town away from the humdrum of life and had just as mysteriously died; no one knew how.

Even as these fumbling thoughts crowded my mental frame, a harsh sound of a bark rang shrill across the silent night. I swung around just in time to perceive a shrouded figure or so it seemed to me, crawl beside the shredded pile of grass. Just

then, a low whelping cry and a hideous howl rent the air. I shivered and shook like a leaf. Ah, so it was true that this plantation was haunted and walked around by a ghost or some wild animal. This is how my so-called distant uncle had died an unnatural death! However, something still bothered me. I was not superstitious and decided would look the place carefully before I too was killed by this unknown adversary; be it a ghost or some wild animal. So mustering up my courage I tiptoed back to my room.

Rinnie was still fast asleep and I silently slipped into my bed and pronto, was soon in dreamland. The sun was shining bright as I stretched, yawned and crept out of the bed. Rinnie had snuggled by my side I do not know when, and now looked up hopefully for her bowl of milk for breakfast. "Oh yes, I haven't forgotten," I muttered and off I went into the kitchen. While Rinnie lapped up her milk, I sat pondering over the night's adventure. She gave a meaningful nod as though she understood the previous night's expedition into Alice's Wonderland and a second later, she was yawning again.

As soon as I could, I slipped into my sneakers caught hold of an umbrella and slipped out of the house. The previous night's shadows were sliding before my eyes and I realized that until I dug out the truth about this haunted place I would not be at peace. So surrounded with the weird happenings I walked across lines of trees rising high above. A soft breeze hummed a merry tune whistling through the wavering leaves as though a hazy mist lifted the curtained view. I had hardly walked a furlong when I tread on something hard that almost knocked me off. I gathered my wits and peered down to find to my utter surprise and dismay an iron ring (you may call it a handle), that was simply rusted and looked worn out. "Why, what could this be?" I wondered and bending down tried to pull and tug at it. After what seemed a lifetime the ring swung off and a slab of stone beneath moved aside. My breathing became heavy and I could distinctly hear my heartbeats thumping up and down. "Why," I exclaimed to myself this is a secret trap-door

that I had discovered by chance. I am sure even my uncle had not known about it or... perhaps he did?

Fortunately, I had carried a flashlight with me although it was bright and sunny yet you never know how the weather can change, and catch you unawares, especially up the mountain region, so I slid my hands into my pocket and drawing it out flashed it down the muddy hole. "Why, I exclaimed to myself here was a perfect hideout for anybody to hide without anyone being the wiser." The stairs were ruddy brown and went down it seemed, to nowhere. Mustering up my courage, I dared to step on them one at a time until I finally found a basement all closeted with the barest necessities of life. Whoever habituated this wild place must be somewhere around or just made an appearance off and on when no one was attentive. Whosoever it was or is, I decided I had to find out. After all, it was a question of my safety.

Of course, I was an intruder and had no business to pry around but in fact this unknown offender was also an intruder upon my very own plantation. I decided I had every right to find out the truth even though it might prove fatal for me. I rummaged through the ill kept stuff splattered around, a dirty sheet on the bed, some broken cups and saucers chapped and stained; a much- burnt kettle and a bottle of water beside a rotten stove. Whoever it was this was very much apparent that he was a poor recluse and wondered whether I should bring this to the notice of the authorities for my own safety. Caught in this dilemma I felt my venture was enough for the day and so retraced my footsteps. Even as I was on the verge of climbing up the last step, I once again felt that feathery touch brush against my hair and a cold shiver ran down my spine.

I swung around like the karate kid (I had long back learnt the art and had a black belt), took my position. It was touch and go. I swirled around but there was no one to be seen. Who could have touched me so tenderly and then just vanished. Surely, no one could climb up and down the hill and vanish like a ghost in the air? My mind rattled fast and just then I spied a crouching figure in white disappear amongst the

bushes. Forgetting my fright, forgetting everything else I sprang ahead and scraping through the rummage of dead creaking leaves and heavily swaying branches ringing a ghostly tune into my ears, I narrowly missed a glimpse of whoever it was.

Frightened, yet daring I took position and hid myself behind a thorny bush in the hope that no one would even dream of getting poked with those crude, cruel, agonizing thorns that waited eagerly to dig into a victim's skin. I must have hidden there for quite a while but there was "no stir in the air, no stir in the... breeze?" Everything was calm and quiet. Looking carefully around me I skipped out from my hiding and boldly stepped into the open. Why, I consoled myself was I being so foolish and stupid as to be frightened of nothing in particular but my own dreamy thoughts?

With these musings I started strolling with more poise, confidence and "I don't care attitude." The misty breeze was once again blowing daintily across caressing my face; gently blowing my hair and whispering to the trees even as the tidy, beautiful leaves gracefully swung back and forth with rhythmic movements. I surrendered myself to the mood of the day and, just then, a faint whisper echoed into my ears, and the same feathery touch tickled my conscience. The next moment it had disappeared.

I now crouched down low to observe the intruder. A slight panic made me shrug but I soon realized I had to muster up my courage to face a direct assault. Slowly and steadily, I crept forward when lo! Something harsh and solid struck my shoulder. A scream rang out as I mustered up my courage to open my eyes to catch a glimpse of the unruly creature perched so adamantly on my shoulder....

What do you think it could be; why, my very own Rinnie. She had climbed up a tree to catch a mouse. She had quietly followed me about which I was completely unawares. This curious animal had given me the shivers. It was she, who kept scampering up and down the trees brushing me daintily with her flashy white tail

and all the while, it seemed as though some ghost in white was crouching low to frighten the life out of me. Another thud and a bounce, rubbing my eyes I got up to find Rinnie fanning me with her precious white tail. Rinnie my Persian cat was snowy white with black twinkling eyes and a mischievous grin spread across her face, as though grinning all the time, so the musings were all over; I had fallen fast asleep and travelled into the world of Alice in Wonderland! And ventured down the rabbit hole. Probably the Mad- Hatter and the Queen were all ready to chop off my head if my dear, dear Rinnie had not saved me from their clutches!



Dr. Mrs. Shobha Diwakar, was Head, English, C.P. Mahila Mahavidhyalaya, Jabalpur, M.P is retired now. She was appointed in the guest faculty, Dept of PG Studies & Research in English, Rani Durgavati Vishvavidhyalaya, and supervised M Phil theses. She was also Honorary Prof. of English, St. Aloysius' College [A] Jab.

She has published many research papers, stories, poems and essays in national, international and online journals. She contributes regularly to writerslifeline.ca and Indian Periodical.

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