

This Dance of Shadows

by Smita RK

“Here, in the garden at night, it is another world—strange, yet friendly and familiar. Never frightening.”

This was what he had said to her as she cowered in a corner, afraid of the demons she imagined outside her window on a full-moon night.

Asha was an orphan and heiress to a vast fortune, though her money meant nothing to her yet. She longed for love, and when it came, its colour or hidden agenda did not matter. She would not have recognised an agenda anyway.

Her parents had died when she was too young to understand the world through their eyes. Her uncle was the only family she had left. His solicitous care throughout her childhood—bringing her warm milk before bedtime and reading books to her—had made him dear to her.

Few people born into wealth understand its importance until it is taken away. For Asha, this was simply normal life: the grand house, the car, the domestic help, the privileges. She took them for granted because they were all she had ever known.

Asha had no idea that her kind uncle had been plotting to drive her insane—to render her incapable, have her committed to an asylum and, as her guardian, take control of her fortune when she turned eighteen.

One of the many ploys he had devised early in her life—to make her apparent decline seem gradual—was to cause the coconut palm outside her window to shake violently on perfectly still nights. The cocktail of sedatives and stimulants he added to her milk made her a restless sleeper, ensuring that she would awaken to witness the thrashing tree.

It always happened at midnight.

Her uncle was a late sleeper, and tying a strong length of twine to the tree so that he could tug at it was not difficult. Concealing the twine among the tree's irregular folds made the deception even easier.

Her dog was drugged too—with something far more potent. He died prematurely, breaking her heart.

In this fragile state, Asha met Kiran when she was sixteen. He was the local vet, and he was suspicious of the circumstances surrounding her dog's death. He also found Asha attractive. It helped that she was wealthy, but there was something vulnerable about her that a man like Kiran—someone who devoted his life to rescuing animals—found irresistible.

Seeing her distraught after her dog's death, he befriended her. They often walked together along the coast adjoining her beautiful home, passing a grove of palm trees along the way.

One evening, their walk went on longer than usual, and they found themselves still outside after sundown. When Asha saw the palm trees in the darkness, she became frightened.

Kiran was curious. His scientific mind began fitting the pieces of the puzzle together. A dog had died with an unnatural substance in his bloodstream. A young woman had become paranoid, almost pushing him away as she stood transfixed by palm trees at night.

He began taking a deeper interest in the mystery.

During a chance daytime visit to check on her, Kiran noticed the palm tree outside the house, clearly visible from Asha's bedroom window. He questioned her, saying that he could not help noticing her reaction to the palm trees that night.

Embarrassed, Asha confessed that the tree outside her window often moved violently, even on perfectly still nights. Her uncle had gently warned her that he might need to have her mental health examined.

Kiran became increasingly inquisitive. He asked her to save some of her nightly warm milk for him to inspect—but warned her not to tell her uncle.

This was difficult for Asha. However, she had grown fond of Kiran and wanted to please him, so she brought him the remnants of the previous night's milk.

After testing it, Kiran knew that it contained drugs.

He told Asha that she did not need the milk. She protested, explaining that it was a symbol of her uncle's love and care.

Kiran became more assertive. He was still too new in her life to be trusted completely, but he had love on his side. He was also young, and somehow that weighed in his favour.

He told her about her dog and what he had found in the animal's bloodstream.

Asha was terrified. For the first time, she feared her uncle. That night, she did not drink the milk. Instead, she poured it away after her uncle had left the room.

Within a few weeks, Asha began to recover. But she continued complaining to her uncle about the palm tree at night, lulling him into believing that his plan was still working.

Now, when Asha and Kiran walked together at night, the darkness held a different feeling. The shifting shadows no longer seemed so threatening.

Kiran sang softly to her:

“The dance of shadows at night may seem frightening, as though it will never end. But we must understand that even shadows need somewhere to play, far away from the sun. They are strange, yet friendly and familiar—never frightening.”

In memory of the old Marathi film Ha Khel Sawalyancha (This Game of Shadows).