

No Talking After Lights Out

The rules were unwritten, but generally obeyed. And one of them was that there was to be no talking after lights out. To be honest, there weren't too many of us who followed that one to the letter. There were the compulsive whispers who couldn't resist a murmur which was no more than the slightest suggestion. They justified themselves saying that where there was life, there was sound; and silence, after all, was only meant for the dead. Then there were others, (very rare, you understand, maybe once a year on Halloween and the like), who would clank and rattle about and stir up the dust in the most annoying fashion.

There was just one who was chronically dissatisfied. The grumble was in her bones, if you get my meaning. And worse luck – she slept next to me. We were at the furthest end where you could see casuarinas with their thieving roots reaching out for sources of clean, cool water, and the earth, moist as plum cake, meeting the mouldering mud wall with its whitewash as thick and uneven as clumsily applied glacé icing.

She'd been admitted after me. Her name was Aurora Ann. I thought it sounded a frilly, fussy sort of name and was prepared to be prejudiced against her. I had my reasons, and good ones too. On the very first night she whispered petulantly that it was damp and that her beautiful satin and lace coverings were sure to be ruined. Then she complained that something was tickling the sole of her foot and did I think there were worms in our beds? I stifled a laugh. I didn't want to get caught or give anyone a start. Newcomer, I thought, she'll get used to it. And by the time she gets to the state I'm in, she'll learn that every stage of life has its own little pleasures.

Our pleasures? Well, to begin with, the place was clean and meticulously neat. The beds were laid out properly like fresh white mint loaves arranged in straight rows and columns. It was pretty too. Nothing cold and sterile. In the compound, hedgerows

blossomed in season and flowerbeds were filled with mauve and white periwinkles. There were skinny-armed casuarinas – stark by day, picturesque by night – wearing their stoles of silver moonlight. We had cheerful feathered friends: vigorous little sparrows, raucous crows, and the occasional visiting pheasant.

Then, there wasn't much for us to do but amuse ourselves with a little friendly gossip. We were well taken care of. There were visitors and Sundays were cheerful and bustling. They brought us flowers and sometimes spoke to us. I liked it: it brought you up to date on news and views and make you feel you still belonged.

And you'd think anyone would be satisfied, wouldn't you? But not she. Aurora Ann complained as the day was long. The grumbling subsided to a low, resentful whining at night. If the casuarinas didn't make her feel creepy, the periwinkles were depressing. 'Dead men's flowers,' she declared witheringly. 'Oh, how I hate them! And frightfully common too!'

We'll ask the gardener to plant roses for you – in a lovely shade of grey, I thought to myself and giggled, sounding like a rusty bolt being worked futilely up and down. I dismissed her as the sole producer of 'background music' and tried to turn on my side and face the other way. But after all this time, even that was difficult.

It was a year to the day that Aurora Ann had joined us. A few days before, she had grown strangely quiet and I pictured her ruminating. She had once been pretty with fine lips and cream sneaking through the coffee of her skin. But that had changed: she was all caved in now.

'I'm lighting out of here!' Aurora Ann announced. 'I can't bear it any more. I have many years to go – many! I shan't rest in peace till I join him or he joins me. Fair is fair. If he wants me here, let him keep me company.'

‘What’s with her now? I wondered, ‘Of course, she’s younger than I am. Too young, perhaps, to be ‘put away’. But then, that’s life. Some have more and some, less. It all evens off – in the end.’

I waited with morbid curiosity (I guess you may call it that) to see what would happen on *the day*. He turned up all right, and he brought someone else with him like I half-expected he would. For once, I was almost sorry for Aurora. It must have been hard to know she’d been replaced. And so soon. The other woman was even younger, and it did not help either to see them holding hands, Worse still.... He had obviously picked a few of the hateful periwinkles on the way (a spur-of-the-moment thing). And the worst was that he’d given them to *her* to give Aurora. A floral rebuff.

I waited with a certain gloomy relish to hear Aurora say something to them. But she didn’t. Thick ominous silence. After five minutes of hanging about uncomfortably, they left.

It was getting onto the witching hour when I thought I heard a furtive little sound from Aurora Ann. Was she crying? I felt vaguely gratified. My sentiments were not quite as well defined as they once were – ghosts of their former selves.

On an impulse I turned towards her. I mean, I actually succeeded in *turning*. ‘Are you there, Aurora? It’s so frightfully dark that I can hardly see anything at all.’

Silence.

‘Aurora believe me, I’m sorry.’ (But, of course, I wasn’t.) I went on, ‘It must have hurt to be replaced in his affections...’

I hesitated with the word ‘replaced’. It still hurt – down to the bone. It surprised me that it did, after all these years.

A rusty, rasping whisper was the response, ‘Replaced? In his *affections*? Is that meant to be ironic? You’re like the rest of them – ignorant! Let me tell you what the

whole world should know. He couldn't wait to see the last of me. Couldn't wait to see me being put away for life – here.'

'Still he did come to see you this morning,' I interrupted.

'That was only for public consumption,' she snorted, 'or *what will the neighbours say?* I was a fool, once. Yes, a poor fool. I thought he loved me to death. We'd just celebrated our fifth wedding anniversary and everyone said, *How wonderful! Now that's romance – going up to the hill station where they spent their honeymoon.* We'd spent our honeymoon in Simla in an old colonial guest house. And it's there we returned on our anniversary – to the splendor of wild dahlias outdoors and carefully preserved refinement within. I remember, on the first night of our arrival, he cranked up an old gramophone and we danced on the terrace.'

'I know, I know', I said feelingly.

'You do?' Aurora Ann sounded wry.

'Er... I mean.... I can imagine... er... the romance of it all...' I replied lamely.

'Oh yes! Positively reeked of romance. Till I found *them*,' she said viciously.

'Found what?' I learned forward curiously.

'The letters from the other woman: the saucy trollop who was with him just now. In the breast pocket of his coat. He'd asked me to fetch his cigarette case. I did, and I found them too.'

'Terrible,' I remarked, 'but do you think he meant you to find them?'

She paused. 'Yes. That's why he'd put them where I couldn't possibly fail to see them.'

'Did you read them – the letters? I couldn't restrain myself.'

‘Oh yes. He’d met her on a business trip and they’d got friendly. She was happy enough to start with... the long distance affair and the occasional meeting. Then, it was obvious from the drift of the correspondence that she was tired of being an emotional standby, that she hated sleazy street-corner romances. She began to whine, plead and inevitably... threaten. That’s when he decided we’d go on a holiday to Simla. He called it, *Romance Revisited*.’

‘May I ask, was it his first marriage ever?’

A sharp clatter from Aurora Ann.

Silence.

‘Well, he said he’d been married before, but his wife had died in an accident. Brakes had failed... something like that. He admitted his marriage was coming unglued at the time. He did not want me pottering about the past. It was just too painful. And I didn’t. I guess I wanted to believe him.’

‘Hmm. Go on... what happened in Simla?’

‘It was a beautiful colonial style bungalow,’ Aurora Ann continued, apparently irrelevantly. ‘Old world charm – parquet flooring, wooden paneling, a ballroom with a real fire in the hearth, window seats and a lovely, long wooden stairway sweeping down into the hall. I remember, the second afternoon we were there; I slipped on the ballroom floor and twisted my ankle. He sent for Ramprakash, the bearer, *Get memsahib hot water for fomentation*. So the ground was laid well, you see (should I say, ‘floor’?) I remember laughing and remarking, *The parquet’s polished to a lethal lustre*. He looked thoughtful. Then the letters, with all the devastation of dynamite!’

‘Did you confront him?’

‘Didn’t I? He suggested that I might like a divorce. Of course, I refused. Said it would cost him a million or a noose around his neck to get rid of me, and did he think he

could play Henry VIII and get away with it? This was the *twentieth* century. I guess that set him thinking.’

Aurora Ann fiddled about in the dark. I could hear the dry rattle.

Then she said, ‘And come to think of it... the name of the guest house built during the Raj, terribly British, was *Hampton Place*.’

‘So?’ I hadn’t a clue.

‘My dear girl, Hampton Court was the place to which Henry VIII confined his fifth and youngest wife Catherine Howard, prior to her execution. And Cunnor Place was a Tudor manor that belonged to Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester who murdered his wife, Amy Robsart... *by pushing her down the stairs*.’

I listened intently. Aurora Ann carried on, ‘The next morning, I stormed out of our room on the first floor. Oh how convenient it was! We were the only guests. Ramprakash was witness to my earlier accident and bad ankle. The woodwork was polished to a fault. A little extra grease naturally went unnoticed. It surprised no one that I fell headlong down twenty fatal steps... and died.’

‘*Died?* I murmured, disbelievingly. ‘You mean, Aurora Ann – you’re dead?’

‘*Dead!*’ she wailed, ‘*And so are you! And so are all of them in this place!* As long as we’re here – that’s what we are – **dead**. I’m getting out!’

‘Where will you go?’

‘To fetch him!’

I smiled. Good idea, I thought. You were his *second* wife. What you don’t know, Aurora Ann, is that I was the *first*. The brakes failed on our way down from Darjeeling. It was our anniversary, too.

Aloud I said, but not too loud, you understand, ‘There’s insecticide in the garage... you can try it.’ I suggested helpfully, ‘Use the one with arsenic.’

There was a ripping of rotten linen and the snapping of rusty hinges and Aurora Ann was gone with a *whooooosh!*

They brought him to our place in a wooden overcoat... er, a coffin, and laid him out in the tomb next to mine. Aurora Ann had returned earlier, satisfied. Apparently she found that closed windows and a leaking gas pipe would be more plausible than arsenic-based insecticides. The saucy trollop was away. So she escaped. Anyway, neither Aurora Ann nor I fancied having her as a next-bed companion.

We’re good friends now, Aurora and I. Worse, luck for him. He’s in the same cell as one dead wife, and a bone’s throw from another.

The old caretaker of the churchyard wants to retire. Says he keeps hearing the most distressing sounds from the tomb next to mine and does the good padre abba think it advisable for a husband and wife to be buried in the same grave? He says that much as he loves his missus, when their time comes, he’d prefer a place of his own.

The Parish Priest thinks the old caretaker has lost his nerve. Possibly the place has got him down. After all, the whisper of grass and the silence of the tomb is not everyone’s idea of peace and quiet, is it?

The long-jawed sacristan who fancies himself the parish wit has suggested that they put up a sign board in the churchyard with a stern warning to its inhabitants: *No talking after lights out. Offenders will be fined.*
