

## The House of Nails

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*What we remember from childhood  
we remember forever –permanent  
ghosts, stamped, inked, imprinted,  
eternally seen. ~ Cynthia Ozick*

It was in the house that my father christened House of Nails that I first fell in love with ghosts. Initially, my love affair with them was restricted to the afternoons, the time of the day my mother and I claimed for ourselves when I returned home from school to find the house smelling of detergent, freshly scrubbed floors, fish curry, and rice. Sometimes, Ma would have stepped out of the shower just a few minutes before, and the air would carry the breath of her wet hair, the water steadily seeping into the talcum powder she wore to cool herself from New Delhi's dry heat.

Between mouthfuls of fish and rice, I would update her, in detail, about that day's homework and what friends and teachers had said or done. Our conversations would often carry on for too long, and we would sit with our rapidly-drying plates, the remains of the foods transforming into unrecognizable crusts.

Post lunch, it would be time for the afternoon nap that is rooted to the very lifestyle of every warm country. But before drifting into her siesta, Ma would read out a story. Although by this time of my life, I could read on my own, nothing compared to listening to Ma's voice as it skipped, emoted and dealt with the words on the page. She made the characters burst into life, and so when some Indian prince set out on yet another quest, I went with him; when an honest woman taught a trickster a lesson, I felt vindicated; and when witches forced unfair deals on Rapunzel, or Hansel and Gretel, I felt their pain.

The stories were in English, Bengali or Hindi, and while most of them were about kings and queens, princes and princesses, and cute woodsy animals, quite a few of them were about ghosts. I was most vested in those. Princesses were not that interesting. No matter what their color, clothing or nationality, they all seemed the same and needed rescuing, but haunted houses, trees with secrets and women without feet were stunning in their charm.

I was fascinated by female ghosts and how they all appeared to be restless, as if constantly in search of something. I was absorbed by the fact that they could be most easily identified through the way they moved. They either floated in air because they had no need to walk and so their feet appeared to be missing, or those that actually did have feet were cursed to walk backwards. Interestingly, in spite of the obvious fear that these witches and ghosts were supposed to instill, folk belief also reiterated that deep down if you were unafraid or at least could pretend to be unafraid, their power got reduced, making it impossible for them to harm even an inch of your body.

I was enchanted by one story in particular. I no longer remember the name of the story, nor do I remember the book that it was in. I remember the plot though, and that it had been written in Bengali. Perhaps it was a folk tale, part of one of those collections

where the writers behind the creations are always nameless and faceless, having been lost to some turn of history.

It was essentially the story of a young girl who is married off, against her wishes, to a man much older than she is. The new home, it turns out, is situated in a dry, desolate landscape where there is no habitation for miles around. There is no one to talk to, no one to visit, and because the story takes place in an earlier era, there is no means of communication except the one rare letter from some forgotten name in her past. In this solitude, the new wife develops a relationship with the only indication of life she sees around her: an ancient earthen well—the source of all the water in her new home—and a droopy banyan tree next to it. Throughout the day, birds of various colors and songs flock to this little oasis in the midst of the parched terrain, and the wife begins to spend hours at this well. She feels connected to it somehow, as if there is companionship there that's missing everywhere else in her life.

Months later, news reaches the girl's village that her husband has died. Apparently, one night while fetching water from the well, he lost his balance and fell into it. Two of her family members go to get her, cursing their fates and the sense of obligation they feel towards their relative, all the while convinced that she would want to leave her husband's home and immediately return with them to her ancestral village.

The girl refuses and her relatives decide to leave without her. When one of them turns around to see the house and her for one last time, he thinks he sees two women sitting side by side on the edge of the well. He rubs his eyes and ruefully blames his failing sight for the dual image. But the reader knows some things that he doesn't: that the girl had been the man's second wife, that the husband had been abusive and foul-tempered so much so that once after an argument, he had tried to drown his first wife in that well, and that after enduring months of torture, the first wife had finally hanged herself from the banyan tree. In the end, it had been a simple matter of the two wives bonding and there developing a sort of sisterhood between them with a little bit of justice and retribution as well. As much as I loved the story, I think it also made me pensive, and somewhere inside me, I longed for a companion just like that.

While Ma read, I would lie in bed with her and avidly watch her face, which changed expression to convey transformation of scene, mood, and dialogue. Through the windows located behind the headboard, sunlight would filter in and make her features glow. Strands of Ma's hair made quivering, dancing shadows on her face. They gave the illusion of lines and furrows where there were none. The stories themselves transported me to realms where unusual things happened and I made strange friends. Probably at some subconscious level, it was my yearning for a sibling, for a sister, in particular that made the young woman and her ghostly companion so enchanting to me.

We had moved to the House of Nails one hot day in May of 1985. Only recently, we—the five-year-old me and my parents—had arrived in New Delhi from Calcutta. My father had gotten a new job and so the three of us had relocated. Although all of us were still homesick for Calcutta where we had left behind members of our extended family, we also realized that New Delhi, a vast arid city and the capital of the country, was home now in spite of the newness it inflicted through the unfamiliar language Hindi, different fruits and vegetables, and a harsher climate compared to the sub-tropical one we had left behind.



In those initial days, the house could not have meant much to me. I could not have known that this would be home for the next five years, and that my childhood would come to mean memories that would be impossible to separate from this house. Instead, all that my eyes would have registered must have been the three-storied, gray building and a neighborhood spilling with children my age. Their unified gregariousness and easy knowledge of each others' names, houses, schools, and game preferences must have frightened me.

Within days of our arrival, my father christened our new home the House of Nails. It was apparent that the earlier tenants had been obsessive about all manners of wall hangings. I imagined their inexhaustible collection of photographs, paintings, memorabilia, academic certificates, calendars, clocks, perhaps even tapestries. I made this assumption based on the signs they left of themselves throughout, so that we found nails buried into the very depths of every cuticle of the house, even in such impossible spaces as the lowest shelf of the bathroom or the farthest corner of the kitchen. We wondered, we dug out the nails, while their white and powdery dust spilled out of the pockmarks that had been hammered into the plaster.

For my mother, however, it was the House of Stains. The previous tenants had not properly cleaned the kitchen and the bathroom, her two temples. Years later, I could still hear her raised voice and see her interlaced eyebrows complain to my father about the multiple, dirt-encrusted layers that she had peeled back one after the other, "to make a home for you and your children."

Although both my parents named the house in their own way, it was my father's choice of words that stuck with me. Undoubtedly, to my five-year-old mind, nails promised more mystery and intrigue than stains did. Also, the stains didn't stay for long. Because of my mother's stubborn scrubbing, they faded away. But the nails, in spite of their removal, bore an element of permanence. They were a dusty presence, a ruined reminder of other lives that had lived and breathed in the rooms we now occupied.

If you stood on the street and stared at our house, you would have thought that it was fastened to its counterpart on the left, which in turn looked as if it was getting squished onto itself by the two houses that flanked it. On the right side of our house lay a narrow road and beyond it, a park. Across from us, at a distance of twenty or so yards, stood a long line of similar looking homes.

The house itself was surrounded by a thorny thicket of purple and pink bougainvillea bushes. I hated them, in spite of their vibrant colors. Their paper-like leaves seemed phony and dishonest to touch, and their ominous, black thorns oozed sticky juices.

Our main gate was built of thin, white rails, and the latch's open and close mechanism was different from that of the other houses in the neighborhood. That somehow made me feel special, as if we were separate from others in some important, although obscure, way.

One of the most fascinating things about the House of Nails was its staircase. It was winding but as if in fits and starts, and gray like the rest of the house. It was partnered in its rise and fall by a black railing. The steps were cold stone. My memory tells me they were mosaic, in all probability black, white, and gray chips colliding with each other in senseless, seamless patterns. The steps were very high and steep, or at least that's how they seemed to my five-year-old feet.



On the first floor of our gray house lived our landlord and his family—an overweight wife, her lips stained a permanent red because of the betel leaves she chewed continuously; a pretentious son, who believed himself to be a gift to this world of fools; and their friendly but temperamental, mixed-breed dog.

We lived on the second floor. The ceilings were white and low, and the floor mosaic just like the staircase. If you liked going barefoot, the floor was wonderfully cool during summer but remarkably unbearable in winter. The doors were wooden with a coat of plain white paint on them, and the windows were big and glass paneled with white grills.

My favorite window was in the living room. It offered a view of the main road, and therefore access to more people than any other part of the house. You could watch without being watched yourself. It was also a good spot for keeping an eye out for the stray cats in the neighborhood, and then possibly, if you aimed right, for drenching them with the thing they hated the most in the world—water.

Our apartment had three main rooms: the first one my father had converted into his study, the second was our living room, and the third, the bedroom. The bathroom was decent but we had a doll's house-sized kitchen. Its blue walls could comfortably accommodate only one person at a time.

Yet my mother entertained lavishly, not so much in terms of expense, but through investments of hospitality, time, and energy. For in the New Delhi in which I grew up, friends, neighbors, and relatives dropped in all the time, and almost always unannounced. Only a few of the people we knew had phones, and I am not sure why we never felt any need for one, in spite of so many of our family members living more than a thousand kilometers away. Internet was still a decade in the future, and so communication with out-of-towners occurred only through letters.

Most of the people who frequented our house those days are lost to me now. A few of them are too old to travel, some have died, yet others have moved away to other cities, but many have just disappeared without saying a parting word or showing a farewell sign. Undoubtedly, they were meant to be in my life only temporarily, mere figures in the revolving cast of characters that I met, connected with for a time being, and drifted away from forever. But I feel them lingering on in my memory, and sometimes, when I am least expecting them, they reach out like a phantom presence and tap me lightly with some buried, forgotten detail.

As with Ma, my favorite ritual with my father involved books. Every evening, just before Baba returned from his office, I finished my homework under my mother's supervision. Baba would come home, finish his evening cup of tea, and then he and I would go to the local bazaar, which was only ten minutes from our house.

On most days, we followed the same route and performed the same evening ceremony without variation. Baba would deposit me at a bookstore en route to the fish market. The bookstore was not big; in fact, it was barely the size of an average kitchen, but its arrangement was such that to my mind it felt as if I was entering a sacred corridor lined with treasures. On the left were two tables placed next to each other, each of them stacked with magazines and journals—in English, Hindi, and Bengali. There were magazines that catered to adults, as well as children.

I neither looked at nor cared about nor understood what was in the adult section, but I can recall images from the children's section very clearly. The books were arranged



first by language, and then within the language they were organized alphabetically. Some were just comics, others detailed magazines that were filled cover to cover with stories, games, and puzzles. On the right side of the store, from a wire suspended high above anyone's, or, at least my reach, hung promotional materials for new and upcoming authors and titles, so that your appetite for the next week's special edition could be whetted just a little bit.

While Baba bought fish, vegetables, and sundry other details of daily life, I read at the bookstore, my goal being to try to finish one story at least. The owner did not mind, for I think my parents alone gave him enough business every month for him to treat me with affection when I showed up every evening with a fervor that could best be described as "religious."

For the years we stayed in the House of Nails, that bookstore was my favorite place in the whole world. It was also possibly the only place after my own home where I felt safe. At school I had ghosts of my own creation, perhaps because I myself was painfully shy and awkward. These ghosts crept up on me and hovered around the whole day. They prevented me from raising my hand in class to answer the teacher's questions and they held me back when it came to approaching kids my age to become friends with them. Later, as a teenager, when I acquired enough distance to be able to look back at my early years in school, the character of these ghosts was immediately transparent. They owed their existence to the fact that everyone else at school spoke Hindi, the language of New Delhi, or maybe a little bit of English, whereas I was fluent only in Bengali, the language of Calcutta, and the one my parents spoke with me at our home.

Years later, when I revisited the bookstore, I noted the number of transformations that all familiar landscapes must necessarily undergo. The bookseller recognized me but his temples and eyes showed more gray than I remembered. The store seemed small, the collections limited, and the overhead wires were within my reach. He enquired about my father, and after our brief chat, I ended up buying five magazines, none of which I actually needed.

The bazaar too had changed. The vendors, familiar faces all, had aged, and their voices—that had once carried across the entire length and breadth of the bazaar in order to entice prospective buyers—had lost their former energy and pitch. And then, there was all the newness: there were unfamiliar and younger people manning the stores. The shops themselves had moved around. No longer were they arranged by the owner's sheer convenience or logistics of space. There was something thematic about them now, and everything was more structured, more polished, more disciplined. Now only the fish shops smelled of fish; their ever-pervasive odor had faded and no longer cloaked the whole complex in one thick blanket. I felt cheated, as though something had been snatched away from me while I slept, unawares.

On most days, the neighborhood park was a dusty copper in color. On trees and bushes, the leaves hung tired; they looked almost gray in their weariness. Except when it rained, and the dust settled with the mud, grass, and moisture to become dark brown and tropical green. Then the park exhaled the most heavenly of smells—a perfect marriage between wet earth and fresh skies.

In the summer, some of the trees yielded long, willowy strands of yellow flowers. On days when there was no school, I left home early in the mornings to gather these flowers and bring them home to put in clear plastic cups around the house.



From one of these trees, someone had suspended a rubber tire, which served as the neighborhood swing. We, the younger ones, queued a little distance away from it, while the older children supervised how much time each of us would be granted. It always scared me a little to pass my legs through the tire and balance myself on something so uncomfortable, with no supporting sides. It was also disturbing to be observed this closely by so many pairs of eyes, some eager to get me off to claim their share of oscillation, while the others were there to ensure that I did not exceed my allotted time. They formed a circle around me and watched my every move. Every single time that I was on the tire, I would jump off a few minutes before I was supposed to, with an emotion that bordered on relief and a refusal to remain under public scrutiny. And so the rubber tire never felt mine, and it never became something that I needed to claim and defend as a matter of honor.

To some extent, I think, I had a real fear of the tree. It seemed too powerful to be just an ordinary tree. It seemed magical, not in a good way but in the evil witch way, because boys and girls queued to climb onto its rubber tire even when the rain made it wet and slippery, or when summer storms brought forth brown grains of dust and spread it over the tire from where the particles settled into clothes, wove into every single strand of hair, and buried itself under fingernails. But the tire was never cleaned out nor was any other tree picked for this purpose, although there were others like it in the immediate vicinity.

But then again, those trees served other purposes. They flanked us when we played badminton and shaded us when we held long winded discussions before, during, and after games. One of the most memorable discussions revolved around a plot we hatched to get back the Kohinoor diamond from the Queen of England. Once the world's largest diamond, the Kohinoor had been taken out from India in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and surrendered to the British Monarchy as a spoil-of-war. Since then, the Kohinoor had become a part of the royal crown jewels. Four of my friends—three boys and one girl—and I, were particularly indignant. We were determined to get back what was rightfully ours. So we decided we would approach the British government in a polite and decent manner and ask them to return the Kohinoor to the Indian government. But given Britain's history in our country, we were also practical enough to realize that perhaps we were being overambitious. So we drew a back-up plan. We decided we would steal the Kohinoor if Britain refused to cooperate, and there were plenty of chances. In order to make this plan really watertight, we even made a list of countries that would fight with India and against her in case this dispute led to an international crisis.

My favorite tree of all, however, stood not in the park but in the corner of our own house. It was a local berry tree that gave the impression of being rough and gnarled in the long summer months. But it came to life during New Delhi's short yet severe winter that usually lasts from November to February. During those months, the tree's branches bristled with little berries that matured quickly from spring-bud green to reddish-orange, and jostled for space with serious, pointy-looking leaves.

But the best part about the tree was its inability to stand straight. Although every summer, its branches were pruned, by winter they would grow so long, that unable to support themselves, they would bend over and sweep across our terrace. At that point, grabbing on to those branches and picking them clean of berries would become the most coveted chore in my daily life.



The fruits themselves were hard and sour, some were so sour in fact that they left my tongue scratchy, and if I ate too many, my throat felt scratchy too. But those were minor issues; their tanginess combined with the sheer thrill of picking live fruits, made them too good to give up. Do not imagine though that the entire process was easy, because the pursuit and capture of these berries, especially the ripe ones, was the subject of annual wars between me and the neighborhood birds. Our individual goal was the same: who would get to the spoils first? For some unexplainable reason, our landlady seemed to resent my easy access and love for the berries, and therefore, to evade her as well as the birds, it became all the more important to stock up in the middle of the night. My only companion that time was New Delhi's winter fog that threatened to swamp out every sound including the dull whirring hums that emanated from room heaters which all our neighbors seemed to rely upon.

In addition to the berry tree, the House of Nails had two gardens, one in the front, and the other at the back. Although neither of them was the best tended patch, they both supported several kinds of shrubs and flowering plants. One day, in the second year of our stay in the House of Nails, that is the year I turned six, I was eating oranges when my hands lost their grip and a few seeds fell on the ground below. In school we had just been taught about the conditions that trees required in order to bear fruit. I remembered their being well-watered as an important criterion. Incidentally, it had rained the night before and the garden was moist. I was immensely disturbed to realize that because of my carelessness, by next morning, a full-fledged orange tree would be poking out from our front yard. Personally, it seemed like a good idea to me, but I was sure our landlady was not going to approve. Worse, she might even throw us out.

I went in search of my parents to prepare them for this tragedy. My mother was probably in the bathroom taking a shower, and so I sought my father's guidance on this urgent matter. He made a series of mournful expressions and explained that indeed at least one, if not many, orange trees would sprout from the earth by next morning and that we should be prepared for every eventuality.

That night I lay sleepless in the knowledge that within a few hours, my entire family was going to be evicted because of me. I don't remember the specific details of what happened the next day. Maybe I forgot all about the orange trees, maybe I went in search of them and was relieved to find that they were not there. Today, I wonder, if in my companionship with the berry tree I had tried to replicate in some way the relationship that the young woman of my favorite ghost story had had with the banyan tree that stood by the old well. She had been lonely. Could that have been my excuse as well?

But the same memory also makes me realize that had I been in my father's place, I would have said the very same thing to just as gullible an audience. I didn't know it then, but one such audience was on its way.

My brother was born on a fairly ordinary September day in 1987. When I left for school that morning, my pregnant mother packed my lunch box, or what we called tiffin box, waved me goodbye, and then my father put her and himself into a taxi and went to the hospital. A new member was about to join our family but we behaved as if it was the most typical, everyday affair.



Even though it has been years since that day, I remember the details of the lunch. That day my tiffin box had contained an egg sandwich prepared just the way I liked, with a well-made omelet stacked between two slices of white bread, and a laddoo, a yellow sweet in the shape and size of a tennis ball that is loved by almost every Delhiite.

When I came back from school, where I may or may not have told my friends that my mother was about to deliver *something*, the landlady announced that I had a brother. That was the first disappointment because until then I had prayed for a sister. The second disappointment occurred later that same day, when at the hospital, my father picked up that very same brother and cradled him in his arms. From where I watched, it looked as if Baba was cooing to an oversized kidney bean that had been wrapped in multiple layers of white fabric.

He had shiny black hair and droopy fat cheeks, and my parents named him Aritro. Literally, it meant the “rudder of a boat,” by implication, “an individual who will never be directionless in his life.” It’s been our standing joke that my brother couldn’t have been named anything farther from the actual truth.

Sometime that year, the American Barbie was introduced in New Delhi. Overnight, she became a sensation, and at school, owning a Barbie became the new yardstick of uber cool. My mother, struggling to raise two children, decided to pacify me by saying, “Barbie is not such fun after all. She cannot make sounds, she doesn’t laugh, she doesn’t move around. You have a real toy now, remember?” I accepted her words as Vedic truth, and although she eventually bought me a Barbie, her initial logic has always informed my relationship with my brother.

When Aritro was a child, I fed him coffee powder disguised as chocolate. I hid the love of his life—his toy cars—just to provoke a reaction. I woke him from sleep the moment my eyes sprang open simply because I needed to be entertained. I blackmailed him into being my alibi every time I lied to my parents to sneak out to meet boys. I forced him to listen to stories no matter what time of the day I invented them and what they were about. In fact, to this day he insists he is afraid of water because of a story I had once made up about the waves of the Pacific Ocean reaching the sky and pouring down on us.

Was it my brother who actually made me realize the power of the story, the impact of the written word, and the craft involved in story-telling? Granted that I wrote my first piece at the age of five, and on hindsight, I can see how sincerely it attempted to blend the key elements of *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, yet it must have been the instant reaction that Aritro’s face exhibited every time a main character did something outrageous that conveyed to me the force of a story well-told, or at least well-imagined.

At present, my parents are living in their seventh house. It’s a little ways distant from the main city I grew up in, and so there are more trees and less traffic with its accompanying noise and pollution. It’s the roomiest apartment they have ever had. It’s on the eighth floor of a beige skyscraper trimmed with a gray border. In addition to several rooms, the apartment has four balconies. Two of these offer widescreen views of startling sunrises, and the other two, of solemn sunsets. The walls and nooks and crannies of this house are pristine and almost virginal in their cleanliness because they have known no supervision other than my mother’s. It’s a brand new apartment, so there are no ghosts from the past lingering on, no memories nor whispers from long ago reaching out to claim their share of the present.



But the number of casual visitors is also less. These days, when friends or relatives visit, they call first—either on the cellphone or the landline—to make sure that neither my mother nor my father will be inconvenienced. The conversations too have changed; they are now far more in-depth and less distracted, for there are no running feet or errant fingers to watch out for either, because all the children have grown up. Some of them have gotten jobs in other cities, yet others have married and moved away, and a few of us are in America, Australia, or England for academic pursuits. We undoubtedly dominate our parents' conversations, yet in reality, it is only our memories that amble around the room. That, and the promise that we shall be there, perhaps soon, perhaps at the time of the next annual vacation.

I now live far away from where I was born and where I was raised, and other memories have accumulated and arranged themselves on top of the ones created and collected in the House of Nails. I feel my love affair with ghosts has crystallized, and it is no longer restricted to afternoon story sessions with my mother. In a way, the very fact that I chose to devote several years of my life to study history seems to be the ultimate tribute to them. What is history if not an obsession with those who are long gone, with ideas that may be dead, but only seemingly, for in reality we all live and relive the same lives, sieve through the same lies and mistakes, but foolishly call them by different names in different times and places.

But I know that the House of Nails has stayed just the same. It still stands exactly where it did twenty-three years ago, and I imagine everything to be just as busy as when we lived there: the pitter-patter of young and old feet across the cold, mosaic floors; the monsoon breeze on the terrace; and the rooms breathing with life when the kitchen simmers something warm and peppery. I imagine that in the winter the berry tree still swoops down on the terrace to entice hungry hands. Like always, I suppose the house still forgives the rain when it tries to wash away the dust.

