

This and that side of the fence
Gyanranjan (b. 1931)

trans. Rupert Snell

Mukherjee doesn't live in our neighborhood any more; he's been transferred. The new people who've come next door maintain no connection with us. They seem like Punjabis, but maybe they're not Punjabis at all. I just don't get them. Ever since they came I've felt a strange compulsion to know about them. Somehow it's impossible for me to remain detached: even on train journeys I can't help connecting with the other passengers. Perhaps it's just the way I am. But in our house, *no-one* is detached from these people next door. We're a respectable family, and one has to be fully aware of things when there are daughters and daughters-in-law to take into consideration. So we always take things into consideration; attentive and eager, we constantly mold our impressions of goings-on at the neighbors' house. I would like to invite them round to our place, an invitation for the whole family, but they don't seem even remotely aware of the possibility of me having such feelings...who knows. Their lifestyle isn't the regular kind. They spend a large part of the day lounging in chairs scattered on the area of hard earth in front of their verandah. The chairs always stay out there — even at night. They are quite careless people, but their chairs have never been stolen.

On one side of our house there is a government office and a high brick wall; behind, there's the back of a two-story block of flats, and in front there's the main road. So our family does not currently

enjoy the sustained proximity of any other family. Our new neighbors seem to have the kind of character and psychology of people that one finds these days living in big cities, having no connection with each other and living entirely internally, within themselves. Our city, and our neighborhood within it, are quiet places. People come and go at a leisured pace, strolling about in a relatively casual manner, because there is no urgency in life. That's why our neighbors seem strange to us.

I step outside. They, the neighbors, are taking their morning tea. It is nine o'clock. In addition to the man and his wife there is a girl, doubtless their daughter. It's just these three who are to be seen; there is no fourth member. The daughter is not exactly beautiful, but she seems a well-mannered girl; perhaps with a little judicious make-up she might look quite attractive. I notice that she laughs, frequently and excessively. Her parents also laugh. They all appear to enjoy a simple happiness. What is it with them: what makes them laugh all the time? Are their lives filled with such quantities of joyful circumstances they they should constantly laugh like this? Are they unacquainted with the harsh and real circumstances of existence? I am astonished. I begin to make comparisons between this neighbor family and my own.

Just a moment ago those people burst into gales of laughter, startling me. I was focused on the rose-beds; the trowel fell still in my hand. Their laughter seemed out of control; the girl stood up from her chair, handing her teacup to her mother for fear of spilling it. She was not standing straight, but going along bent over. It must have been something like a funny story — perhaps literally a funny story — that could produce this explosion of laughter. The girl was quite beside herself with laughter; and she was unaware

that her shawl had slid from one shoulder, leaving the other uncovered. A free movement was unmindfully visible in her breasts. This was too much: her mother should rebuke her for this lack of awareness. What kind of person can she be, not to mind? But perhaps mine were the only eyes focused on that moment.

This inner compulsion grows a little with each passing day: an involuntary magnetism towards my neighbors that seems to be getting stronger and stronger. And it's not just me: my sister Pappi is just as curious, forever praising the pattern of that girl's kurta, and in the kitchen Bhabhi, too, is constantly glancing across at their house. Our Dadi even knows when they have bought water-chestnut or lauki gourds, and when the hearth has been kindled. And in spite of all this, they don't take the slightest bit of interest in us.

The neighbor girl never glances over this way; and neither, for that matter, do her parents. What is more, their not-looking doesn't even seem to be deliberate. The prospect of conversation is remote and unimaginable. Perhaps they have no need for us in their world. It's possible that they even regard us as beneath them; or our proximity disturbs them, makes them apprehensive or afraid in some way. It's hard to know if there's any truth in this...but that girl's parents seem less concerned for their daughter at the sight of a boy close by next door than my parents are for Pappi when they see my friends.

The radio never plays at their place, but in our house it's on loudly most of the time. In front of their house is bare earth: not a blade of grass to be seen. In front of ours there is a lawn, with a vegetable garden to one side, and beds of sweet-scented flowers. Why doesn't that girl befriend my sister and sister-in-law? Why

don't her parents mix with mine? Why don't they see us drinking tea from cups so much prettier than their own? What they should do is add us to their list of acquaintances; they should connect with us in everything. Up against the fence, on our side, we have a tall and bushy tamarind tree with beautiful six-inch-long pods hanging from it. Girls go crazy for tamarind, but the girl next door never craves these pods. She has never made me happy by picking one from our tree.

I bide my time.

Our neighbors have never run into the kind of difficulty that could make them feel the need for our help. Perhaps they just don't encounter the various private little problems that occur in our family and other families. This in itself is a matter of some surprise. I never find any one of the three of them stressed or anxious. The girl's father may have the occasional frown on his face, perhaps her mother loses her temper from time to time, but we never get to see or hear anything of this. It's possible that the girl has some entirely private corner in her mind...some embroilment or emotional agitation. She may, or perhaps not at all. It's hard to say.

At night it's usually their middle room that's lit, where Mukherjee and his whole family sleep. They must sit together and talk inside the house just as they do in the garden. They must have an endless supply of exotic tales and perpetually satisfying topics of conversation. A sigh wells up from deep inside me. In our house, conversation is dominated by the weather, marriageable girls in our extended family, hearth and home, and those divine personages from the golden past who utterly trounce our modern times.

The "fence" between their house and ours is a barrier in name only; it's nothing but a foot-high mound of earth, like a field

boundary, with bitter corinda plants and a long stretch of wild cactus, parched and twisted; then a few bushes of unknown name, their roots permanently infested with ants. The bushes have dark green leaves. Gaps have been made here and there, making pathways for the fruit seller and the vegetable seller to come through — and the sweeper too, and the newspaper boy. These routes have also been favored by the postman and the milkman for years. Even after enduring the fearless commuting of cats and dogs, and the incursions of livestock grazing indiscriminately on grass, flowers and plants, the fence remains much as it always was. Until quite recently, Mr. Mukherjee's daughter Shaila would use its thoroughfares to come over and borrow a book from me — a *boi*, as she would call it in Bengali. So convenient and easygoing is this fence that it allows the joyful riding of bicycles in and out of the gaps without getting off; we used to do this a lot; but no more, because our neighbors interpret the fence as an untransgressible border.

It's been three months since they arrived.

I am in the habit of taking my desk out into the garden to study; the breeze these days is so very pleasant, like iced water in the thirsty heat of summer. But studying outside has become all but impossible. My eyes stray across the fence, my mind haunts the neighbors' house. That young unattached girl; her easygoing and fearless parents. If only I'd been born in their family! That's the way my thoughts go.

Occasionally the neighbor girl sits out alone, doing some work or doing nothing at all. She wanders over to the boundary wall at the far side of their garden, stands with her elbows propped on the wall, and watches the road. Then back again. Random no-good boys

from other neighborhoods often come into ours, which is hardly short of them either for that matter; but she is always innocent and free. She walks blithely in short steps without a care in the world. In our family, to make a direct comparison, Bhabhi always takes Pappi along when she goes out for puja flowers. Outside and in the house, she's constantly fearful; she is deliberately kept in a state of fear. Pappi too is under close watch. One day, the neighbor-girl's father put his hand on his wife's shoulder and said something, and immediately Pappi was called inside on some pretext or other. The scene produced quite an uproar in our house. How shameless! Gradually my family began to regard the neighbors as being distinctly dangerous.

Well, the days pass. Interest in the neighbors has now begun to turn into aversion, while for them our existence or non-existence is all the same. [?] Gradually the neighbors have been made into the epitome of all the evils in the world. Our eyes cross the fence thousands of times, this having become a set routine among all the urgent and non-urgent tasks of daily life. A new state of perplexity has begun to take its place in our minds alongside all the other tensions and worries. I myself waste a whole lot of my time like this. But there's not so much as a glance from that side.

Somewhere nearby, a diesel engine is screeching as it waits impatiently for its green signal. The novelty of the sound is startling. We'll all be talking about the diesel engine for a while now.

The neighbors haven't been at home since the afternoon today. A few people are staying at their place: guests, presumably. There's no fuss or hubbub: the usual quiet mood prevails. I got up and went inside. Bhabhi is drying her hair. Out of the blue and for no reason,

she made a furtive joke linking me to the neighbor girl. I came back out laughing to myself. Just at that moment the girl and her mother were arriving home, perhaps from the market, with some packed things they'd bought. The father must have stayed behind.

In the evening, and next morning, people kept coming and going next door. Not what you'd call a great number: it looked as though some kind of routine festival were being observed — nothing special. So we were very surprised to hear from the doodhwala that the girl had got married the night before. To some fellow here, from near the parade ground, apparently. It had been an Arya Samaj wedding. Bhabhi looked at me with feigned regret, making me laugh; I laughed long and loud, thinking what dreamers we all are.

A few people turned up at their house every now and then. They go inside, then a short while later come out and go away again. They seem mostly serious, law-abiding types. From time to time a few children get together and race around chirruping loudly, but that's about it: no other high jinks. Everything seems to be taking place in a very easy and orderly manner. But what exactly, and how? It has been a day of great unease in our house. Hours later the girl emerged. She was probably wearing a sari for the first time, carefully managing its long pleats as she stepped onto the verandah with a coconut in her hand. She was cautious in her movements, but blithely taking very short steps in the clinging confines of the sari. As she walked, she kept her eyes on the place where she would next place her foot; she didn't lean on anyone, and although her husband was right next to her she did not show any of the bashful shyness of the traditional bride. Her husband reminded me of a friend of mine. There was no weeping and wailing; her mother has kissed her deeply on both cheeks, and her father is passing his hand

over her head in blessing. A little moistness and the exciting prospect of a new life are at last glimmering in the girl's eyes.

Squirrels are running up and down the fence. Mother is telling me how astonished she is that the girl did not cry. According to her, the girl has been hardened by education, and she doesn't have proper love and affection for her parents.

"They're all like that these days. Not a single tear shed for the ones who have ground themselves into the dust bringing them up in the world..."

I am not in a mood to listen to such stuff. I notice that mother is enjoying the sunshine; wherever the patch of sunshine moves, she shifts to catch up with it. But just then my father declares, "In the old days, brides wept all the way to the village boundary, and if they didn't weep they were beaten until they wept, otherwise they had no chance of a happy life at their in-laws". Father was pained at the fact that it was no longer so; the old times were slipping away, and "the heart of man has become a machine, a machine!". At such moments, Father raises his voice, and the ruins of the dark age dance in front of his eyes.

Some small solitary shreds of cloud have come into the sky above our house and moved on. The girl's parents and relatives have come up to the gate and are standing there to see her off finally. The boy's family have brought a Herald car for the bride. The Herald looks like a greenish room. The greenish room slowly slips away. Now it's gone.

It's Dadi who bemoans it all the most; she's muttering away to herself, not caring if anyone's there to hear her. She doesn't understand this kind of wedding at all. "No marriage-square or lights, no pomp and celebration, no rich sweets. What's the point in

such meanness! And worse — not even to invite the neighbors! Three cheers for human values! Ram-Ram!”

Having seen the girl off, everyone has returned to the house. They have all brought chairs out for themselves and are sitting there outside. Now that the girl is gone, her mother seems a little downcast and melancholy. Several people have gathered around her and seem to be doing their best to cheer her up.

My friend Radhoo alleges that the girl has “been around”. I feel nothing but the depression that comes from a deep absence or loss. A strange emptiness! The emptiness of being left behind, or an emptiness resulting from Radhoo’s offhand contentions about the girl. Who knows. Sometimes the thought of her being unchaste is quite consoling in a degenerate kind of way. Perhaps I too, like the rest of my household, have a part of my mind that cannot stand the thought of our neighbors.

Night sloughs off the skin of evening. Across the fence, the people sitting round the table have one by one got up and dispersed. As usual, the bulb in the neighbor’s middle room has come on. The glass panels in the doors have a smudgy light sticking to them like stains in the places where they have been scratched clear. The neighbors’ night has become quiet, peaceful, regularized. Who knows what it must be feeling like to have one less person at home? In our house, neighbor-defamation is doing brisk business.

