

One rank, one lane is how the houses in Cavalry Barracks were distributed. With the exception of Lt Col Sandeep Singh, whom the army had re-employed upon his premature retirement, all the officers in the Arumeys' lane had children aged between six and fourteen. The parallel lane — inhabited by majors, their spouses, their kindergarten minors, the nannies and the nannies' children — was noisy at all times. Beyond that, around the smaller houses along the enclave's boundary wall, there were often lines of diapers fluttering in the breeze: the captains' homes.

These modern bungalows built on the site of the colonial barracks were allotted to army officers of various units in the sub-area. One did not necessarily know the neighbours, but saw many faces and one generally knew when to smile. No lane was ever deserted and one had always had to drive carefully to avoid toddlers and young cyclists on the loose.

From the day they moved into their freshly painted house, the Arumeys did their bit to make friends with the nearest neighbours. Lt Col Reddy's family, in the cream-and-brick-red house to the left, responded warmly. Lt Col Ahuja's family, in the cream-and-brick-red house to the right, were polite. The Lieutenant Colonel whose name figured on the gatepost directly opposite the Arumeys' was away on a field posting and his wife and daughter kept pretty much to themselves. The Gills, opposite the Ahujas, got on famously with the Ahujas. They did not visit the Arumeys, but greeted them heartily if they met in the lane.

Six months later, when the Arumeys left for their vacation in Pondicherry, it was Mrs. Gill — she was

never publicly called Harpreet — who kept watch on their house.

"I'll tell that lady what all has been happening in her house in her absence. She is a simpleton to leave the keys with the maid. She could very well have left them with me or with you."

Mrs. Ahuja nodded. She placed her empty cup on the peg table and looked through the batman as he carried it away on a tray. Her plump palm drew a semi-circle in the air before pointing towards the bowl of fried savoury *dals* and nuts.

"No, no," said Mrs. Gill, picking a single cashew, "I'm putting on weight." A mild description that. "I tell you, all the inhabitants of their servants' quarters and their relatives have moved into the house. They're having a whale of a time. Every evening it seems like a party. Lights everywhere, music."

"I know, I know. How loudly they laugh! No shame at all. They're not bothered that so many senior officers can hear them."

"That lady is going to have a tough time when she returns. First of all, cleaning up the place. Then getting these people back in line. That's the hardest part. Once they sit on a person's head, they never get off."

Mrs. Ahuja thoughtfully turned her six gold bracelets round and round her left arm. The one on her right wrist clinked against them. "I know. But she is to blame. It is very thoughtless of her to foist this unpleasant atmosphere on the rest of us here. Doesn't she know it is a decent neighbourhood? Some decorum must be maintained."

"This *namkeen* is quite irresistible. Where did you get it?"

"Uh, *bhayya* has his contacts."

"I'll have to start my morning walks all over again," Mrs. Gill said. She now felt justified in scooping up a fistful of salted nuts and *dals*.

She was as good as her word. Every morning, before breakfast, she slipped her bare feet into soft pink sneakers whose laces were pre-tied in a double knot. It was difficult for Mrs. Gill to bend and she didn't want to call the maid every time.

On her surprisingly small pink feet she covered her entire beat within forty minutes, working up a healthy appetite for the



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spicy potatoes and sizzling *paratha* (merely one, since she was on a diet) the cook unfailingly produced. As she puffed along, her *dupatta* fluttering after her like flags to right and left, Mrs. Gill craned her neck at rhythmic intervals to look over the hedges she passed.

It was the hour of the fresh water supply. Most officers kept a front lawn and a gardener to hose it, she noticed with approval. From every kitchen window came the clatter of steel vessels. There was no shortage of cheap womanpower in Cavalry Barracks.

Behind each bungalow a couple of small rooms stood in line with identical rooms across the back fence. One room to a family, often an extended family. One toilet shared among as many families as there were rooms. The men got the quarters in exchange for gardening and running errands, the women for as much kitchen work as there happened to be in the bungalow. To pay the grocer, they worked elsewhere as well, sometimes at night. But in the morning they could depend on free-flowing water. Mrs. Gill looked away in disgust from the washing tied to the fence poles.

When she completed her round of all the colonels' hedges, lieutenant colonels' hedges and majors' hedges, she returned to the lieutenant colonels' lane, slowing down along the Arumeys' hedge and stopping at their gate to survey the scene better. They were away and she was doing them a good turn.

"There you are! Running up an enormous electricity bill for the master!" She was silent but her scowl said it all. She hoped to catch the gardener's eye, but he was nowhere to be seen. He was an old man who really loved every green thing. Since

his son's accident, he had tended two gardens, this one and the Ahujas', so that they could continue keeping separate quarters for his son's family and his own. All the maids and *malis* in that row were related to him. They were the permanent residents of Cavalry Barracks.

Mrs. Gill was aghast at the sight of the porch light in the daytime. Obviously the lot of them were not



doing what they were paid to do. She opened the Arumeys' gate and walked in confidently.

A row of shrubs hid her view for a moment. When she cleared them, she suddenly saw the black toes, then the plaster cast, then the crumpled blue-checked *lungi*, then the man in the chair. The gardener's son.

Raju had flown off the rear seat of his friend's scooter when it collided with a jeep one night. No street lights, as usual. By the time the surgeon in the government hospital began to set the multiple fractures, Raju knew he would be a cripple for as long as he could foresee.

He lowered the newspaper at his little girl's prompting. Seeing Mrs. Gill, he reached for his crutches and stood up. "Namaste, ma'am."

The woman nodded.

"I saw the veranda light burning. I came to switch it off.

She stood at the spot she had reached when she noticed him.

"I'll switch it off, ma'am."

"You! How old are you, child?"

The girl hid behind her father.

"Go on," said Mrs. Gill, "surely you're tall enough to reach the light switch. Run up the steps and put that light off."

The skinny five-year-old smiled at the pink arms pouring out of the tight sleeves of the woman's *kameez*. Then she looked into her father's deep brown face and smiled again. He smiled, too. He hobbled to the steps. The left crutch, the good left leg, then the right crutch went up one step. The plaster cast came last.

"Why did you make your father do that? Are you a naughty girl?"

The frilly dress fled to the veranda.

"Don't worry, ma'am. I need this exercise."

Mrs. Gill did not wait for Raju to find his slow way down again. The morning's walk had tired her out.

She asked the cook to fry a second *paratha*.

"Can you read?" she asked suddenly.

The cook grinned without bothering to hold up the edge of her sari to hide her mouth.

"A bit. I went to school till class three."

"And that *mali*'s son over there in Arumey Sahib's quarters?"

"Who, Raju? He's a clever boy, *amma*. He went to the government

college in town. He is a commerce graduate. Very sad, very sad, what happened to him.”

Mrs. Gill was not in a sympathetic mood. She was irritated. Why had the cook reminded her that she, a senior officer’s wife, was not a graduate? Her carefree college days had come to an abrupt end when her parents found her a husband they admired.

Literate or graduate, the servants and their families had to know their place all the same, decided Mrs. Gill.

So when, a few days later, she distinctly heard *Who Let the Dogs Out?* squawking forth from Lt Col Arumey’s bungalow, she leapt to her feet, flung her *dupatta* partly across her generous bosom, and in a minute was at her neighbour’s door, pressing the buzzer thrice in quick succession.

That Arumey – what a name to have, *baap re* – must have paid good money for such a loud music system, she thought. Even if he bought it through the canteen stores department, what a fool to leave such expensive gadgets in the hands of menials! They have turned up the volume so much that they can’t hear.

So Mrs. Gill pressed the knuckles of her left hand into her spongy midriff and the heel of her right hand against the buzzer button.

The door opened suddenly.

“Oh, good morning, Mrs. Gill! What a surprise!”

She knew she was blushing but could do nothing about it.

“Please do come in,” Lt Col Arumey went on. “I’m very sorry to have kept you waiting, ma’am, but I wasn’t in, well, mess rig.”

“No. Um, no. I didn’t know. When did you return from leave?”

“Oh, just about half an hour ago. You must have heard my daughter’s funny music.”

“I thought your servants were making a noise, so I came to tell them....”

She realized it did not sound right.

“Ma’am, I must apologize for disturbing you. I’ll ask Sonali to turn the volume down.”

“No, no, it doesn’t disturb me at all. It’s just that I thought you were still away.”

The officer’s swarthy forehead wrinkled. “Was there any problem while we were away, ma’am?”

“Er, no.”

“Any noise or something like that?”



Mrs. Gill hesitated.

“Why don’t you walk in, ma’am? I know things are a bit out of place right now, but please don’t mind.”

Curiosity got the better of her. The sitting room was disappointingly neat. The furniture was dust-free. The collection of silver-plated souvenirs, from the various units where Arumey had served, gleamed. Even the brassware had recently been polished and she saw the image of the ceiling fan spinning on every side of the armchair she sat on.

“Everything is spick and span here even though you’ve only just returned. I’ve not seen your soldier around either.”

Having toned down the music, Arumey could now hear her clearly.

“Oh, my Bahadur, Mrs. Gill? You’re right, he’s not here, he proceeded on annual leave on the same day as we did.”

“We always leave our soldier to mind the premises when we go out of station.”

“Could I bring you a cup of coffee, ma’am?”

She was startled. “Oh no, no thank you.”

“My wife will be here in a few minutes. She’s gone in for a bath.”

“She must be tired after the journey. I’ll go soon. Should I send lunch?”

“How very good of you to offer, ma’am, but everything has been seen to. We are lucky to have excellent help. They gave us a most thoughtful welcome.”

“They certainly had a gala time while you all were gone. Evening parties on the lawn and what have you. They called all their friends and relations over, I think.”

She watched him carefully. He smiled.

“I’m glad they did.”

Her narrow eyebrows shot up.

“You certainly treat them better than they deserve.”

“On the contrary, Mrs. Gill, I wish we could treat them as they deserve. Have you ever stepped into the back quarters, ma’am? No, I wouldn’t trade places with them. But I thought they’d enjoy living in this big house for a couple of weeks, while we didn’t need it.”

Mrs. Gill needed another *paratha* when she got home. □

After 20 years of gypsying with an air force fighter, the writer now grows trees in Goa. Many of her stories focus on women and other disadvantaged castes of military society.