

A Rose for Miss Lall

By Devika Kumar

The girls of Class 6 looked with the besotted devotion of a single-minded beagle at their class teacher. The whole school recognised that Miss Lall was undoubtedly the prettiest teacher on the staff. Not just pretty. She was gorgeous. Her eyes were large and brown, with impossibly long lashes, and the peaches and cream complexion was envied widely. Her lips owed nothing to botox, and the delicate lipstick seemed to glow with the chiffons she wore! She taught them English and when she spoke, the girls would watch those beautiful lips shape each word and try to imitate her.

Nutan was the favorite. Pretty, petite and with her hair trimmed to a nicety. Nothing she said or did was wrong. The arrival of the new girl into a class-full of eleven-year olds provided much entertainment. She was small, wiry and dark, with hair in two well-oiled braids.

"Your name?" asked Miss Lall.

"Malini Narasimhan, ma'am," she said, standing up.

"What? Spell it out," demanded Miss Lall.

Malini spelt it out. The girls tittered. Malini's accent was 'different'!

"Sit near Nutan," directed Miss Lall. "Nutan, please help her catch up. If you can!"

Silently Malini watched the nuances of Miss Lall's speech. She came from a prestigious school but had not picked up the fluency of the English language as spoken by her teacher. Gradually it dawned on her that Miss Lall rarely smiled at

her. Only the pretty ones like Nutan and Noni, Vinita and Mala seemed to earn good marks and smiles.

Nutan had brought a rose one morning for Miss Lall and she graciously put it in a little vase that she kept on the window-sill. The class was learning to recognise the phonetic symbols and soon Malini mastered them. Her homework was always done perfectly. But Nutan received stars while Miss Lall inevitably drew red circles in Malini's book.

Malini put her heart into her silences. She became a perfect gymnast and sprinter! Her work in class was steady, but unrecognised. And the little barbs would fall from Miss Lall's luscious lips, dripping acid on Malini's hurt mind. She could never understand why she was reserved for this treatment.

Years went by. She finished school and went on to study English and topped the university. She began to teach in the university too. But memories of Miss Lall never faded. One day she told her class about her teacher.

"She was like an *ankush*, the goad used on an elephant. Her sarcasm proved a catalyst," said Miss Narasimhan in impeccable English. "When she criticised me needlessly, I realised the existence of a fighting spirit inside me. That led me to polish my performance and today I read the English news on TV too! And I teach English. I also write! Besides, I have learnt to love languages....Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, Marathi, Punjabi, Gujarati and, yes, Sanskrit too! I am currently learning French!"

That summer Malini, carrying a rose, visited her alma mater and looked for Miss Lall.

"Go to the mission compound," directed one of the teachers.

In the mission compound, Father Andrews had just come out of the church. Malini went up to him and asked for Miss Lall.

"Come, child," said Father Andrews, leading her to one of the bungalows in the yard.

On a verandah, in an armchair sat an old lady, one side of her paralysed. Her hair straggled in grey wisps and the once delicate skin was wrinkled. The lips were dry and cracked.

"Good morning, Miss Lall," said Malini. Something flickered in the old eyes as she looked at the dark well-dressed woman in front of her, with her long hair braided. Malini gave her the rose and a trembling hand took it as Miss Lall gave a lop-sided smile.

"Malini?" came the soft whisper. "You were my best student! The others wilted. You had the fire to prove your worth! God bless you!"

devika52@gmail.com