

## Cotton ghosts (by Stefanie Giebert)

### **Characters**

Helen, working in the legal department of HarvestPro, a big agricultural company specialising in developing and selling plant seeds.

Maggie, a colleague

Asha, a ghost

Sarah, from the HR department of HarvestPro

### **scene 1**

*An office. A Helen and Maggie are colleagues in the legal department.*

Helen: Two-thirty on Thursday, ok, with Lewin and the guys from Research. I'll look into the sales figures for the region – can you make sure that they bring all their statistics as well?

Maggie: I'll keep at them. But they don't like us looking into their files...

Helen: Jesus - we're from the same company, aren't we? I could understand their hesitations if we were some crazy environmental activists, but we're from the legal department! We're supposed to help! I don't get it. *(rubs her head)*

Maggie: Don't stay here too long – you look tired. You're working too much.

Helen: And who's going to finish that report for the compensation law suits?

Maggie: Sorry Helen, it's my daughter's birthday. I promised to be home on time just once...

Helen: See – so I guess it's got to be me.

Maggie: Battle on, then! I can do more next week, I promise. See you tomorrow!

Helen: See you, Maggie! *(to herself)* And next week your son will be playing a sheep in a nativity play and you absolutely have to go and watch it because otherwise he'll be heartbroken... I know.

Ghost: Do you?

Helen: Sure, you told me about it last week. *(checks herself. Maggie is no longer in the room)*

Maggie? Hm. *(continues to read)* Swallowed their own insecticides. What a nightcap... 4453 in total in 2006 in Maharashtra. Oh for god's sake what did they think they were doing?

Ghost: The only thing they could think of.

Helen: Sorry? Maggie? Don't play silly games with me.

Ghost: As you wish, madam.

Helen: Thanks. *(checks)* Wait a minute. Maggie? *(there is nobody)* God, I'm hearing voices. I must be really tired. Coffee! Yes.

*She goes out. In the meantime a woman appears in her office, looks around, then sits carefully in her chair.*

*Helen comes back in with a cup of coffee. When she sees the woman, she is startled but tries not to let it show.*

Helen: Excuse me! What are you doing here? This is my chair. If you came here to clean, come back later, I'm not finished working.

Ghost: Is that the report?

Helen: Excuse me?! This is none of your business. If you don't leave this room immediately I'm going to make a complaint to your supervisor. Do you want that?

Ghost: I'm sorry but I don't have a supervisor, madam.

Helen: What's your name? Who hired you?

Ghost: Asha, madam. And nobody hired me.

Helen: Then what are you doing here? Get out or I will call the police! (*goes to her phone*)

Ghost: Of course you are free to do that, madam, but I think the police won't be a great help in this case.

Helen: What-

Ghost: You know, this chair is very comfortable.

Helen: Get out of here!

Ghost: But I am not an impolite person. I just wanted to try it. (*she gets up.*) Please, have a seat. I would desire to talk to you.

Helen: But I don't desire to talk to you.

Ghost: I came all the way from India.

Helen: Then go back there. I don't-

Ghost: Of course I did not come here straight away. I had to take a detour through... oh, it's complicated to describe. Oh, and I talked to your father. He says to give you his love, madam.

Helen: What? But my father is...

Ghost: Dead. (*Pause*) I know. (*Pause*) You know, when I was alive I could never afford to travel.

Helen: When you were alive.... (*Pause*) This is obviously a dream.

Ghost: Maybe. (*Pause*) You know why I'm here?

Helen: No.

Ghost: I'm from India. My husband was a farmer.

Helen (*has an idea where this is going*): Fine. Okay. What has that got to do with me?

Ghost: You work here, don't you?

Helen: Well, I have to earn a living somewhere.

Ghost: Me too. Unfortunately, I was born in a different place – Vidarbha. You've heard about it, I assume.

Helen: Yes. (*she looks at the report*) Actually, I've heard rather too much about it, recently.

Ghost: Cotton farming in India is hard. Yields are low. Most farmers only own small plots that they work very hard to earn less than the country's minimum wage. Like my husband and me.

Helen: Well?

Ghost: India experienced an economic boom in the last years, but Vidarbha was left behind.

Helen: What influence do I have on your crop-failures? Is it my fault that your region isn't suited for cotton farming?

Ghost: No. And of course it is not your fault that India pursues free trade policies now which leave us to compete in a global market.

Helen: It's a free world.

Ghost: Which is why the USA are subsidizing their cotton farmers?

Helen: Am I the government or what?

Ghost: No, you are just an employee of a company that sells genetically engineered cotton seeds to farmers, making great promises about their potential.

Helen: Well, they are resistant to cotton bugs and will reduce the use of insecticides. Moreover, trials conducted in many parts of the world, including the USA and South Africa, have shown yield increases in the order of 5-20%.

Ghost: That's exactly what your marketing people told us, too. And we believed it. We wanted to believe it. We went to a moneylender to take out a credit to pay for the seed – it was too expensive for us otherwise– because we thought that the investments would pay off.

Helen: Well, sometimes it takes a few years until an investment pays off.

Ghost: Unfortunately, sometimes harvests can also fail repeatedly. Also it only took the bugs only a few years to become resistant against the genetically implanted poison in the cotton plants. So harvests got even worse. Debts accumulated. And finally, interest increases over the years and moneylenders can become quite threatening. After some years many of us didn't see any other way out.

Helen: How melodramatic. I also had debts when I graduated from college. Did I kill myself?

Ghost: Apparently not. But, as you say, you had education. And debts. We only had debts. And insecticides.

Helen: How convenient.

Ghost: Yes, insecticides that had conveniently been sold to us by your company as well.

Helen: To kill insects, not people!

Ghost: Do you know that the region of Vidarbha used to be called the cotton belt? Nowadays, they call it the suicide belt.

Helen: That's not my fault. I'm just a small cog in a big machine. I just do my work. *(Pause)* We have studies that prove that the suicide wave was not connected to our products.

Ghost: Studies that you commissioned from, lets say, positively inclined research institutes. And you also helped them to be positively inclined – business lunches, stays at resorts in the county... right?

Helen: I never heard of that!

Ghost: Well, of course they would not make it known to small cogs like you.

Helen: But of course they tell it all to ghosts from India. Sure.

Ghost: No. But doors are no longer a hindrance to me. And I do not always choose show myself to people. So of course they didn't tell it to me. But I listened nevertheless.

Helen: Ok, great. So now why do you give me the honor of showing yourself to me? Take your complaints to the CEO. I can't do anything. Cog, you know...

Ghost: But if the small cog stops working, the whole machine might malfunction... And the smaller the cog, the longer it takes to locate the source of error. Your report will have an influence on how your company will deal with the compensation law-suits...

Helen: Yes. What are you implying?

Ghost: You surely have a conscience, don't you?

Helen: I have an obligation to my company. If we pay billions of dollars to the relatives of dead Indian farmers who bought our seed and then happened to have a few bad harvests, we'll be out of business soon.

Ghost: No uneasy feelings at all?

Helen: Of course I'm sorry when people die. And the figures *are* inconclusive. You can interpret them this way or that. But why should I want to harm my company?

Ghost: Because it would be the right thing to do?

Helen: Ok, ok. Maybe 10 years ago that would have convinced me. But I'm not so naïve anymore. I'm not here to save the world. I'm paid to be helpful to my company. Why should I bite the hand

that feeds me?

Ghost: Because it doesn't plan to feed you much longer?

Helen: What do you mean?

Ghost: As I already said, I've been on a tour round your company. I also passed through HR. I'm sure you have heard of outsourcing?

Helen: Yes, but that only works for low-skill jobs. I have a law degree.

Ghost: And there are a lot of Filipinos with law-degrees nowadays who speak good English and everything.

Helen: No, they can't do that.

Ghost: Yes, they can. Do you need proof? (*produces some papers from somewhere about her person and puts it in front of Helen*)

Helen: What? Restructuring and cost optimisation.

Ghost: Chapter 4.3.6

Helen: (*reads*) Outsourcing. Departments concerned: customer services, accounting, legal. (*stops*) Those bastards!

Ghost: So. Do you still have an obligation to your company?

(*Blackout*)

## Scene 2

*A week later. Sarah, HR person, and Helen, who is actually quite in a good mood, given the fact that Sarah is just telling her that she is fired.*

Sarah: Yes, I'm very sorry to say, but what with the high wages here and stagnating profits, we have to take measures. HR set up a plan for the restructuring of several departments and yours is one of the most affected, I'm afraid.

Helen: Yes, certainly. I understand.

Sarah: So, you'll receive two months compensation pay. But that'll be it, I'm afraid.

Helen: Oh, well. It could be worse, I guess.

Sarah: You are very calm about this.

Helen: Yes, well... I've been quite involved with a lot of Indian stuff lately.

Sarah: Ah, I see. Yoga and meditation and so on?

Helen: Yeah, and so on mostly.

Sarah: Well, then, Helen, I wish you all the best for your future career. You have always been an asset to HarvestPro. Goodbye Helen.

Helen: Goodbye Sarah. (*leaves Sarah*)

**Scene 3: some days later. In a café**

*Maggie, Helen's colleague is waiting. Helen arrives.*

Maggie: Hey, Helen! How are you?

Helen: Fine. And you?

Maggie: Not too bad. It's nice to be able to have time for the kids for a change. And time to sit in a coffee shop on a Wednesday morning. But I will need to get a job soon, what with our mortgage and everything.

Helen: Yeah, I know. Me too. How was the nativity play?

Maggie: Ridiculous. But Henry was a really great sheep. Have you read the paper today?

Helen: Not yet. Should I have? (*Maggie hands her the newspaper, she reads*) HarvestPro to pay 50 million \$ to Indian farmers as compensation for fraudulent marketing. Wow. Those Indians must have had a friend in HarvestPro's legal department.

Maggie: Helen?

Helen (*smiling*): What?

Maggie: Oh. Nothing...

*Lights down*