

The First Contact

K Rajagopalan *was witness to a transformation beyond belief.*

It was a January evening and the lights were rapidly fading. Through the window the top leaves of the avenue trees looked ink-green and the last batch of the birds were fluttering their way home. Ramesh had left on tour. Alone, Renuka was in no mood to light the stove. There was enough leftover in the fridge and the feeding time for the child was an hour away. When she opened the door to the balcony, her eyes fell on the man and a shiver ran through her. A lean, gaunt figure with a thick salt and pepper foliage covering the face was steadily looking over the balcony. The eyes were deep-set and sunken and in the fading light looked weird and insane. The man was in the mid-forties and wearing dirty khaki shorts. His mane of wild graying hair was gathered into an untidy knot and tied to the back of his head. He stood still, hands raised skyward and his mouth was working fast. Across his one cheek ran a deep long scar somber red in hue, obviously a healed up gash of a knife-wound. His forehead was

smeared with vermilion and the dark haggard face carried an angry scowl. The immediate impulse was to rush back but Renuka stood transfixed, fascinated, her heart pounding, ears tingling, perspiration breaking out. The next moment she rushed into the hall securing both the bolts of the balcony door.

She had a disturbed sleep, the gaunt insane face appearing at regular intervals. Morning light breaking in, she avoided the balcony. When she turned the tap to collect water, a thin flow ran out and then the tap died out. There was just one plastic bucket, which she had earlier filled in. She made her coffee and was drinking it when the door bell rang. She rose nervously and looking through the door-peep, saw that it was the newspaper boy. She collected the paper and when the boy was descending the stars spoke: "Look here boy, there is no water in the flat. Would you tell the man concerned to switch the motor on?" The boy nodded briefly and disappeared. Soon she heard the voice of the boy below shouting

CHACHA, MOTOR AAN KARDO (UNCLE START THE MOTOR)

After a while she heard the sound of water running down the kitchen tap. Evening was gathering in. Renuka lit the oil lamp, did obeisance to her gods and muttering her usual evening prayers entered the bedroom.

Varun whom she had put in bed was not there.

She searched everywhere including the space below the cots and his usual hideouts. She was getting alarmed. It was then that she looked over the balcony and saw the child in the dim light, trudging towards the motor room to the right. She stood transfixed and speechless and the warning she wanted to scream froze in her throat.

She was running down the stairs towards her only child. She was late. Varun was reaching the out-stretched hands of Chacha. Renuka's heart missed a beat and she stopped in her tracks speechless, completely at a loss as to what to do.

It was then that she saw the transformation. The hard-set features of the man had softened beyond belief and thawed into a weird but beatific smile. Oblivious to the world around, Chacha was cooing to the child and Varun was nestling closer to him. Renuka stood amused. Do children have that instinct to see through masks?

Chacha was advancing with the child in his arms. When he handed the child, his eyes were looking away and she had the feeling that the face was freezing to hardness again. But then she knew she had struck the first human contact in the colony. ❖



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