

THIRD EYE EDITION

The other side - II (Fiction)

13 March 2013 at 19:09



6.45 p.m.

Disha was at a sleepover party at her best friend Anisha's house, two floors below. Neel's friends had left, door slamming, feet tramping down the stairs.

"I'm gonna sleep now," he thrust his head through the bedroom door. "Wake me up at ten, OK?"

"What about the science test?" She asked carefully, not raising her voice.

"That's my headache," his face was set.

She could feel a door closing between them. It was no longer possible for her to know what was on the other side.

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Manju had readied dinner. Casseroles of rice, *dal*, lady's finger fried in oil and chicken curry were laid out on the table. She was at the sink, rinsing the glasses and spoons, her quick, nervous hands creating a clatter that set Shristi's teeth on edge. For she understood that there was a reason for that jarring noise, those discordant notes that spelt out what was going on Manju's life. She was thirty-five, a mother of three, working in three homes for the last eight years. A short, dark woman, who lined her eyes with collyrium and revealed her paan-stained teeth as she smiled. Her skin glistened with mustard oil. She who would weep and show the purple bruises on her arm where her carpenter husband beat her. At the beginning, Shristi was indignant. Leave him. How dare he? Call the police. Manju would shake her head, horrified. She fasted for him on Mondays. Things would change.

7.30 p.m.

"Close the door, *Didi*." Manju called out, her glass bangles jingling. "I have to go."

Shristi rose from the table, bolted the front door and sat down, drawing a deep breath. Carcinoma. She touched her left breast, near the topmost rib, the lump hard, like an olive. Ticking inside her, the beginning of the end. I must feel sorry for myself. I must weep. I must be comforted by Partha, Neel, Disha in a tight protective circle. An inspirational story straight out of *Reader's Digest*. Don't I matter?

A month ago, she had ordered Orhan Pamuk's *Museum of Innocence* on Flipkart. She had read avidly of lovers meeting secretly at an apartment in the doomed love story. A month ago, she had her fruit facial, listening to Richard Clayderman as the girl massaged her cheeks in gentle circular movements. A month ago, she had brought out the literary magazine of her English department and spoken of Daniyal Mueenuddin's luminous prose. A month ago, she had gone shopping for FabIndia *kurtas*. And now, she was entirely someone. Someone already in the past tense, burnt with the acid of the word Car-cinoma.

She sat down at her table by the bed and began surfing the net, randomly, her mouth dry, her robe falling open, staring intensely at the screen. She was googling names, places, writers, rockstars, Star cruises, recipes, home remedies for dry hair, Tibetan medicine for cancer, Tata Memorial, mastectomy, Vellore. And then, without her being aware of it, she googled ghost photos and clicked images.

More than twenty images leaped up at her. Old black and white photograph of a stairway at a county manor in Bedford, and a wispy, nebulous outline of a woman ascending. Her eyes skimmed across the words, looking for an answer, feeling the orb of her left breast rotting, full of maggots, even as the lavender talc lay fragrant on her just showered skin. People describe ghostly encounters in a lot different ways. People see apparitions or strange lights, hear noises or feel a sudden drop in temperature. They smell a deceased relative's favourite breakfast cooking or hear a favourite song playing while the stereo is off. Objects fall from shelves and doors close and open on their own. Sometimes, people don't experience

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anything unusual at all, but they notice strange apparitions or shapes when they look at pictures they have taken.

Somewhere in San Antonio, Texas, an apparition silently crosses a rail road track, the image caught on surveillance cameras. A girl in a white dress stands next to a group of mourners at a cemetery. A long dead man sits on the leather couch of his library surrounded by his beloved books. Two young girls pose for a mobile photograph. Only there's three of them – a young girl holding one's arm in a firm grip.

10:02 p.m.

There were no sure answers. Leaving the computer on, she goes to Neil's room and wakes him up. They have dinner together. She misses Disha's non-stop battle. Neel, of late, makes her uneasy, wary, a sense of having failed him comes over her. And that rotting fruit on her body would turn everything upside down – his jamming, the Board exams. He closes the door to his room. She swallowed the pill and lies down, waiting for sleep. Partha would come from Delhi tomorrow. He would have to be told.

"Why?" She asks to the empty room. Her voice sounds different. "Why?"

12.45 p.m.

She thinks the door bell she has heard is in her dream. Then she sits upright, in a blind panic, her eyes taking in the numbers on the luminous beside clock and goes to the front door. It is Manju, "Forgive me." She has wrapped her thin cotton sari tight around her skinny frame. "He hit me again. I think my arm is broken. It is my fault. I answered him back."

"Let me stay here, *Didi*. He will not dare to come here. I will go in the morning."

"Leave him," Shristi say wearily. "I will send you somewhere. Go and lie down quietly." She reaches out and touches Manju's tearstreaked face, "It will be alright. Go."

8:15 a.m.

She goes back to bed and drifts to a deep, dreamless sleep. She wakes up and remembers what is to become of her. She puts her arms tight across her chest and tries to cry. She hates uncertainties. Last night, she had tried to see the other side. And it felt as if there was no other side, that you could never leave, and were cursed to haunt the places you lived, climbing and descending stairs, standing by windows, sitting unseen in park benches. But then, the photographs could be clever hoaxes, meant to scare and amuse. Nothing was what it was. A perfectly smooth, rounded breast, slowly decaying and spilling open, tissue, blood and maggots.

The landline telephone rang. It was Vandana, next door.

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"Have you heard, Mrs. Chowdhury?"

"Sorry?"

"So you don't know? It's so very sad. We know of course, he beat her. But that it would go so far..."

"I don't understand."

"Manju's husband struck her with a hammer. Head injury. No time to take her to hospital gone. You will have to look for someone now."

"You must be mistaken," she says.

"Manju is here. She came away last night, after 12."

"No, no, whole thing took place at took place at ten. My driver is from that basti. The poor children..."

Shristi walks to Neel's room. He has left for school.

"Manju" she calls. There is no answer. She calls out her name two more times. There is no answering exclamation and the thump of the mat being dusted on the balcony. No tinkle of glass bangles. And then, drawing a deep breath, Shristi finds her, in the faint sweet fragrance of the jasmine hair oil she used everyday before she came to work. That was the answer.

(Concluded)