

THIRD EYE EDITION

The other side - I (Fiction)



6.12 p.m.

Nobody must know. At least, not yet. Shristi thought of this as she climbed the stairs, on the way to her second floor flat. Shristi passed by the doors of seven other flats. Doors that were almost always shut. But always, something outside each closed door lay like a clue to the people on the other side. A child's tricycle – carelessly abandoned. Three pairs of hastily discarded shoes and sandals, raised tones and laughter inside another. A square piece of paper pasted on the third door, black front gravely telling the world that the man inside had two Master's and a law degree. Shristi took these clues and often, on her way up or down, idly mulled over the worlds that she thought existed on the other side of seven doors painted white that shut off the outside.

The door of her flat was ajar. She left her pumps on the shoe rack on the passage and padded on barefeet into the sitting room. There were two rucksacks carelessly flung the sofa, and a half-full coke bottle on the glass top table.

THIRD EYE EDITION

Manju was holding an earthen incense pot trailing clouds of blue smoke that made her eyes smart. Shristi took on the sight of the vermillion glowing brilliantly on the parting of Manju's hair. You poor fool, she thought.

"Baba bring friends again", Manju made a wry face, smiling at her. "I made four Maggi packets already. Now he wants cold coffee. But the ice is finished."

"Fill the ice trays," she said wearily. "Let him wait."

Neel was jamming in his room. Discordant notes of the stratoscaster drifted out of the half-open door of his room. She could no longer understand the lanky stranger who lived on the other side. His voice was different, his chest had grown hair. There were posters of his heroes everywhere – men, boys in tattoos, chains, earrings, charged, angry, unleashing storms that shrieked through the woof box.

6.20 p.m.

There had to be a place where she could be alone. Somewhere nobody knew who she was or even cared about why it was so important for her to be alone. She imagined a quiet, impersonal hotel room, with its regulation closet with the hangers and deep shelves. The golden glow of a table lamp on a writing desk. The heavy drapes shutting out the light. Flat screen TV, shampoo and soap packets on the sink. White towels and a hair dryer. She would register under an assumed name. There would be no baggage, none at all, if that was allowed. Not even the handbag with the big square envelope rolled inside. Especially not that bag. She would order tea and run the bath water, leaning to check it for the right temperature. And lowering herself into it, she would feel the weightless pleasure of being a foetus in a womb, adrift, dreamless. They would find her, of course. They always had extra keys when hammering on the door did not help. Extra keys to find out about the silence of an occupied room. But by then she would be truly alone. They would never even know who she was.

But going away was never easy. You were not allowed to do it. It was not fair. I am only forty-five, Shristi thought. Neel has crossed the age when he needs me, but Disha is just eleven. I had to make her pancakes one midnight last week, because she suddenly decided she was fat and skipped dinner. We have not even gotten around talking about the birds and bees. I gave her a baby pink Barbie doll diary with its own tiny silver lock and key. She writes in it, locks it, and hides it new places in her room everyday, making sure I don't find it. Then she loses it and tears through the room, grim-faced, flinging away books, clothes, stuffed in toys, and she finds it and only then am I allowed to enter and clear the mess. She has secrets too. By giving her that diary, I let her have secrets. And I don't want to know hers. Mine is enough – a ripe, rotting fruit, waiting to fall into the ground, split wide open.

6.35 p.m.

THIRD EYE EDITION

Partha will have to told, Shristi thought, towelling her hair after a shower. She would have to be calm and reasonable, maybe even add a bit of humour. We ought to stop arguing for a bit, you know. Neel's lousy grades at school and the down payment details – they have to wait. Something's come up. The tests came back positive. See, I don't really want to involve you in this. Yes, of course, you had to receive your boss at the airport. And that audit report couldn't wait, could it? So, I sat in the hospital waiting room done last week, undressed at the cubicle, had fine needle aspiration on my left breast. I was alone when they showed me the tissue slides today. They will have to operate, they are also talking of chemo... But you have the annual general meeting coming up, don't you?

Shristi had these conversations in her head with Partha all the time. They felt real because even when they were actually talking, Partha rarely spoke. There would only be the shrug at the end, meaning, "Do what you think is best." What is the best you can do when you are slowly, inevitably dying?

(To be continued...)