

Carapace

by Romesh Gunsekera

(Adapted story. Intermediate level)

Some questions are difficult to ask. So you ask a different question, or you drop a little hint, and then a bigger hint. But sometimes people just don't want to hear. They have a carapace around them, like the hard shell of a sea-turtle, and they are deaf to your words.

The girl in this story has two men in her life, and a question she must ask...

Anura Perera is coming over tonight. Amma - my mother - says I ought to take him seriously. I told Vijay about it.

'So?' Vijay said.

'He's coming to see me because he's interested in me and he has serious marriage intentions. He lives in Australia!' Vijay smiled and said nothing. That's the way with Vijay. 'Do you know who Anura Perera is?' I asked him.

He shook his head. 'No.' Then he laughed. 'So he's looking for a Sri Lankan wife?'

'Yes!' I said. 'Anura Perera earns dollars, has a Sydney house, and a ticket to Australia.'

'So what are you saying?' Vijay laughed. 'You are going to marry this fool with a foreign job? Is that what you've come to tell me?'

That wasn't what I had come to tell him at all. I first met Vijay at the new disco. It was a birthday party and there were about twenty people in our group. I didn't know many of them. My friend Lakshmi took me along to it. It was her friend's birthday, and we had all been looking forward to going to this new place. Everyone was talking about it. It was crowded that night. The dance floor was fantastic - with lights coming on underneath and other lights moving fast around the room. Vijay was not in our group. He came up to me and said, 'How about a dance?' It was difficult to hear him, but when the lights shone on him, I could see in his face that he really wanted to dance with me. We danced all night. He bought me drinks and smoked lots of cigarettes. In the end he asked whether we could meet again.

Only the next day I discovered he is the cook at the Beach Hut. He is older than me; tall and long and always smiling. He has such lovely thick untidy hair, and is so thin. He never eats! He says he likes to see his food eaten by other people. To watch his customers, his friends, grow fat and happy. He says there is nothing he likes better than to cook his prawns in front of the ocean. His face is big and square, and he always seems ready to burst into a laugh. And when he does, the whole sea seems to break into smiling waves. The beach is so lovely with him.

When I went to see him today, he said, 'Hello,' with a big smile on his face. 'Come and sit down, I won't be long.' He had a bowl full of enormous prawns on his knees. He took off the heads and shells, then carefully pulled out a thin blue vein that curved round each prawn like a backbone.

'Look at that,' he said, holding the vein up, 'sea-poison.'

At first I didn't even want to say a single word about Anura Perera, but Amma says you must always go for the best you can. And I know Anura Perera will come in a big modern car, with a stereo and dark glass in the windows. I wanted Vijay to know.

When he finished with the prawns, he washed his hands and poured out some coffee for me. I wanted to know what he really felt for me. 'What are we going to do?' I asked.

'About what?' he said.

'About us,' I said. 'What are we going to do?'

He said, 'There's an American movie on at the cinema.'

It is so easy for him. He doesn't see anything. There are no problems, no difficulties. He's not like other guys, always trying to persuade a girl into something she doesn't want to do. He always says exactly what he thinks. But I suppose I looked worried, because he bent forward.

'What is it you want to know then?' he asked, touching my hand. He has such a light touch. His fingernails are like sea-shells, pale pink, with little half-moons visible. When he touches my hand with his fingers, I feel wonderful and I want to go on like this for ever, just drinking coffee together and looking at the sea.

I said, 'We've got to decide what to do. Going to a movie won't solve anything.'

'But you like the movies,' he said.

For months nothing has happened and now suddenly everything happens: Vijay first, then Anura Perera. When Amma talks to me, I see a whole new world. I don't think

Vijay could even imagine it. He would just laugh. Amma said we could go and buy a new sari. Something really nice. And I saw just the right shoes at Tonio's, next to the supermarket. Imagine flying, stopping in Singapore! I can't believe it, but it is what I've dreamed of all along; something happening, so I can be someone instead of this crazy feeling that nothing matters. But then when I go to Vijay, I really don't know what I want...

He looked at me and put his head on one side. 'So what matters so much?' he asked. He lit one of his thin cigarettes and stretched out on his chair. His head rested on the back of it; he let his mouth stay open like a fish. Sometimes he can be so silly!

But it isn't that simple! 'We can't just stay like this,' I said. The Beach Hut isn't going to be here for ever. The

wood is already going soft in the sea air, and the roof will soon fall apart. I looked out of the doorway and watched the green sandy water of the ocean rising and falling.

'You can't be a beach cook for the rest of your life,' I said. 'Or is that all you want? Do you really only want to be a cook all your life?' I didn't want to hurt him, I just wanted him to say something. But he just stared at me. I felt he was seeing me out at sea, floating across the ocean. But who is the drifter? Not me.

A crowd of swimmers arrived, looking for beer and food, so I said, 'I must go, you have work to do. Call me as soon as you can, before evening. It is important. Call me, please.'

He smiled sweetly. 'OK,' he said. Then he closed his eyes and breathed in the last of his cigarette smoke.

At home everyone was busy. I went to my room and stayed out of the way. I wanted to be alone. Nobody seemed to miss me. By five o'clock, when I look out, the whole place has been dusted and tidied up; Auntie Manel has even brought flowers for that awful green vase that sits by the telephone. The house even smells different. Amma has made sandwiches and little cakes to put out in her special silver bowl. I have never seen the place looking like this.

Amma is so excited and anxious. She's been rushing round, arranging everything. It's no accident that this first meeting is happening tonight. The stars must be in the right

position today, and that gives us our best chance of success - I know she wouldn't take any risks! I suppose I should stop all the preparations and ask her, 'Do I have a choice in all of this?' But I don't want to choose. I hate choosing.

It's all so crazy. What's in Australia anyway? Everyone wants to go there, especially when there's any trouble here. But what for? I like the beach here. I like our road, the purple bougainvillea flowers climbing over the wall, and that sandy path we take down to the sea. I like travelling by yellow three-wheelers. Just to live in a large house with a view of Sydney Opera House or something! What's so great about that? Vijay would say it's all in the head.

I wish he would think of something. But Amma would die if she knew about him. She'd go crazy. A cook on the beach! What she wants to say is, 'Good evening, Mr Perera, so pleased to meet you. Do come and take my daughter away; change her world with your importance - and your nice fat wallet. Give her a modern house, a big car, designer clothes, shoes she can afford to throw away after every party. Give her expensive things, and also your lifelong respect, and all will be well. She will be good for your business, your position in society, she will be a priceless jewel to you. Just take her, Mr Perera, please take her to Australia away from here, and don't forget her mother...'

I waited and waited for Vijay to call. I didn't know what I wanted him to say, but I thought he would find

something. He wouldn't let things slip if just a few words could solve the problem. Then about an hour ago the telephone rang. I let it ring for a bit. Amma was in the bathroom. Nobody else answers the telephone in our house. In the end I picked it up. I was trembling so much that I almost couldn't speak.

'What time can you come out to eat tonight?' Vijay asked. 'I've made a special dish - fantastic, with those big prawns!'

I could hear the ocean in the telephone. I could see him with a big smile on his face, pulling open his white shirt and rubbing his bony chest with his long thin fingers. He would have the lamps lit under the trees.

I said, 'I can't talk, the iron is on.' I was ironing my green sari, the new one that Amma bought for me. 'I have to put the phone down,' I said. I put it down.

He won't ring again. He thinks I know his number by heart: Mount Lavinia 926979... 926979...

- THE END -

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