

CARAPACE

Romesh Gunsekera

ANURA PERERA IS coming over tonight.

Amma - my mother - says I ought to take him seriously. I told Vijay about it.

So?

He's coming to see me because he is interested in me and he has serious intentions. He lives in Australia!

Vijay grinned and said nothing. That's the way with Vijay.

Do you know who Anura Perera is?

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

Yes! I said. Anura Perera has a dollar job, a Sydney house, and an Australian ticket.

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

20 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 was a crowd of 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 but we had all been waiting to go to this new place. Everyone was talking about it. It was packed out that night. The dance floor was fabulous: round, with lights flashing underneath and all sorts of fantastic gadgets turning around the room. Vijay was not in our party. He came up to me and said, How about a dance? I could hardly hear him, but I could see his mouth in the dark. And when the lights flashed on him I could see him looking straight at me like he really wanted to dance with me. We danced all night. He bought me rum and coke and smoked lots of cigarettes. In the end he asked whether we could meet again.

40 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 a mop of hair and is so skinny. 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 stir his pan of squid in front of the ocean. His face is big and square like a bony box stretched over with skin; his lips barely keep his teeth in and he always seems about to burst into a laugh. And when he does the whole sea seems to crease up. The beach is so lovely with him.

When I went to see him today he said hello with a big grin on his face. Come sit down, I won't be long. He had a basin full of enormous prawns on his lap. *Loku isso*, he said.

60 A newspaper spread out on the floor under him was heaped with plucked prawn heads and shells. Orange whiskers. After peeling each prawn he carefully pulled out a thin blue vein that curved around it like a backbone. Look at that, he held the vein up: sea-poison.

At first I didn't even want to open my mouth 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 Mitsubishi, air-conditioned with tinted glass and a stereo. I wanted Vijay to know.

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

About what?

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

80 He said, There's an American film at the Majestic.

It is so easy for him. He doesn't see anything. There are no problems, no hang-ups. He's not like the other guys around here, always trying something on. He comes straight out with what he thinks. But I must have looked worried; he leaned 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, slightly pink, with little half-moons peeping out. When he touches my hand with his fingers I feel tremendous and I want to go on like this for ever, just drinking coffee together and looking at the sea.

I told him we've got to sort things out. Going to the pictures won't solve anything.

But you like movies, he said.

100 For months nothing has happened and now suddenly everything happens: Vijay first, now 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 saree. Something really nice. And I saw just the 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 clicked his tongue, So what matters so much? He lit one of his thin crackly cigarettes and stretched out on his chair. His head rested on the back of it; he let his mouth stay open like a fish gulping. Sometimes he can be so idiotic!

120 But it isn't that simple. It isn't! We can't just stay like this, I said. The Beach Hut isn't going to be here for ever. The bamboo and coconut will split. The wood on the window-frame is already rising, turning itself inside out. I looked out of the doorway and watched the green sandy water of the ocean swelling 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 upset him, I just wanted him to say something; but he just stared at me. He looked at me as if I were way out at sea, already floating across the ocean. But who is the drifter? Not me.

140 A crowd of bathers turned up looking for beer and his beach *roti*, so I said I better go; he had work to do. I asked him to call me as soon as he could, before evening. It is important. Call me, *please*. He smiled sweetly and nodded OK. Then he screwed up his eyes and sucked the last of his smoke through his fingers and held it in his chest.

At home everyone was busy. I came 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 looked out, the whole place was dusted and tidied up; the floor in the front room has been polished and Auntie Manel has even brought flowers for that ghastly green vase that sits by the telephone. The house is filled with a kind of sea musk. *Amma* has made sandwiches and *patties* and roasted cashew nuts spiced with red chilli to put out in her special silver bowl. I have never seen the place looking like this.

160 *Amma* has been having palpitations; I know she has been rushing around all over the place arranging everything, her breasts heaving with excitement. She is so anxious, but it's no accident that this first meeting is happening tonight; she would have consulted her astrologer. She wouldn't have taken any risks! It must be the most auspicious day of the month. I suppose I should make a fuss and ask her: Do I have a choice in all of this? But I don't want to choose. I hate choosing.

180 It's all so crazy. What's in Australia anyway? Everyone wants to go there, especially when there's any disturbance here. But what for? I like the beach here. I like our road, our bougainvillea slumping over the wall and that sandy walk we go on across the railway tracks down to the sea. I like the disco. I like going by *putt-putt* yellow three wheelers. Just to live in a large fancy bungalow with a view of the Opera House or something! What's so great about that? Vijay would say it's all in the head.

If only he would turn up with something. But *Amma* would die if she knew about him. She'd throw a fit. 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; transform her world with your brilliance - and your nice fat bank account. Give her a modern house, a big car, fancy clothes, shoes she can afford to throwaway after every party. Give her expensive things, and by-the-by your unswerving respect, and all will be well. She will be an asset to your career, a pearl in your crown. Just take her Mr Perera, please take her to Australia away from here, and don't forget her mother . . . *Anura*.

200 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 just for the want of a few words. 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. Eventually I picked it up. I was so nervous I could hardly 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 grin on his face, pulling open his white shirt and rubbing his bare bony chest with his long fingers. He'd have the lamps lit under the trees.

220 I said, I can't talk; the iron is on. I was ironing my jade green saree, the one that *Amma* bought for me. I told him, I have to put the phone down. I put it down. He won't ring again. He thinks I know his number by heart: Mount Lavinia 926979, 926979.

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