



## The Breath on the Mirror

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AS she looked at the mirror, Sara's head inclined first towards the sweep of her hair on the right, then towards the straggling hair on the left. Suddenly, she saw her face tilted in the stance of a Renoir picture of a girl, which her father had brought her from Paris when he went to teach Indian art for a semester at the Sorbonne. And she felt she had almost succeeded in modelling herself on that lovely face, except that her hair was black and the Renoir girl's was a near blonde.

"Oh when will I go there to buy those lovely perfumes?" she had always asked herself. 'Mischief' was the one she preferred, because it suited "the bright young thing", everyone called her for playing pranks and being forward and outspoken as the darling of her father's house. Her mother was a

little 'J' about her good looks and her father's fondness for her and nagged, so that she would steal out for lonely walks in the woods across the road by Sector 10, or go to the rose garden with her girl friends, or be taken by one of her admirers among the teachers in the art school, boating on the lake. At last she had escaped the constant snubs of her mother through her marriage - that had also taken her away from the painter-teacher, Mahesh Chand, who had nearly seduced her. 'Sarama', he insisted on calling her by her full name. And when he wanted to be sentimental, he gave her the appellation 'Bitch-goddess!' and tried to hold her hand on the pretext of teaching her how to hold the oars.

Whispers of secret twilight walks with him passed with fugitive visions

of herself being worshipped as a goddess in the poems he wrote to her. She had never given herself to him, though she had let him touch her loveliness now and then. And now an inchoate warmth surged up in her breasts for him, her face seemed flushed in the looking glass, as her eyes were filled with the mist of the desire to be with him.

But she shook her head as she realised that she was now a married wife and not a flapper.

"I must call him Raju" she admonished herself. "Not be the demure Hindu wife, like mother, addressing Daddy always as 'Eh ji!'" She could see her mother looking servilely up from eyes grown dim with shame, and she was happy she had been married off even though by arrangement. She

passed the long ivory comb from Mysore through her hair, smoothened the dark strands with her left palm, regretting she had forgotten her silver handled brush on her dressing table in her mother's home. Fireflies flew from her eyes at the sensuous touch of her hands on the dark tresses.

"Oh will he pass his hands through them?" she asked herself as she inclined her head to contemplate the blemish of the mole on her right cheek. The painter-turned-poet had once recited:

"Flesh, flame, flower, Sarama, goddess - in your eyes a smile ....."

Shifting the contours of the black clouds abruptly, as she felt a shooting pain from the comb struggling through the tangles on the strands above the left ear, she recalled the folksong her mother sang to her when she was a child and would not submit to the making of plaits with the two-sided crude comb from Amritsar:

"When I pass the comb through my hair, mother, it pains --

Oh it pains so !"

And she recalled the secret thought of pleasure at the other part of the song, though she had protested against her mother's iteration of those particular lines:

"At night he tells me, I will get you a pair of earrings made

During the day he fights me

In the dark of the night there is thick talk, mother!"

Underneath the coy girl she had been, up against the elders who wanted her to be the well behaved daughter of a worthy household, Sara had imbibed from her mother the love of those homely poems she recited, repeating all grandma's constant eruptions into Punjabi song.

In her, as in Mahesh Chand, the words exploded in English distortions, in metaphoric profusion, casting all self deceptions about propriety to the winds.

To be sure, outwardly, she realised

she had become the serene undergraduate, at least at home if not in the College of Art! But, now, how was she to become a docile bride, if her old mother-in-law might come down to the flat which she and Raju occupied in the big mansion in Cuffe Parade. Perhaps *he* was free of the inhibitions and prohibitions of the family, though he still worked under his father, the managing director of the glass factory.

She had found the talk of businessmen and their wives banal. All the violent impulses in her, born of the open air Punjab life, would be submerged here in the showing off of her beauty in the airconditioned Taj Mahal Hotel or Oberoi International, with little or none of the exuberance of the free parties in Pinjaur gardens.

"I must put these whispers of guilt away," she said to herself. "But will love never come into my life?"

Her eyes looked bluish in the comparative dark. Her cheekbones, slightly pronounced, were more like Nefertiti's than those of the Renoir girl. The cheeks were moulded a little hard by the rouge she had dabbed on. The dimple softened the strong chin. And the long neck with the *guluband* of precious stones seemed to rise into the rebellious desire to win the lover from within the arranged marriage. She took the green pencil from the dressing table to smear on to the eyelashes the contrasting shade which might make the eyes smile and win him over to caress her.

Sadly dipping her forehead, she recalled that in all the days and nights of the first week here, he had not touched her, although she had waited to be wooed; that he had never looked into her eyes, lifted her chin, as Mahesh Chand had done, like the mad lover he was. And her Indian woman's desire, restrained by her mother's advice reappearing oddly behind the charming mask, had remained like a suppressed rivulet in her. And yet she, shameless

Sara, was ready to undress and surrender to his caresses, to be near him, if only he would lift her chin, so that the stranger he seemed could take the place of her abandoned poet.

She held her head in the long fingers of her hands. She must learn Bharata Natyam, someone had told her at a party at Napean Sea Road, yesterday, on looking at her long fingers - "Your hands are so lovely!"

"*Sringar* - near perfect!" she said to herself in syllables she was too shy to pronounce except in a sigh.

And, realising that, after all the care of doing herself up, she looked like a mask, she tried to convert the solemn face in the mirror into a smiling visage, and felt foolish doing so and blushed.

She recalled how as a child she had admired the ritual of Kangra girls playing with the doll of Ralli, as they went to dip the statuettes of the ideal couple in the river Beas at Kaleshwar fair on Baisakhi day, singing songs to their uncles about being a group of birds destined to fly away from parental nests.

Another look at the mirror and she felt that her face was like the moon she had wanted to be in all its splendour, without being round. And she wished that he, the sun, should come and shine on her.

"In the eye of the soul", the words of her mother's prayer from Guru Nanak echoed in her: "there is another light than in the eyes, which shines if it is not strangled." But her head was turned in another direction now, peering into her mirror for confirmation of her desire.

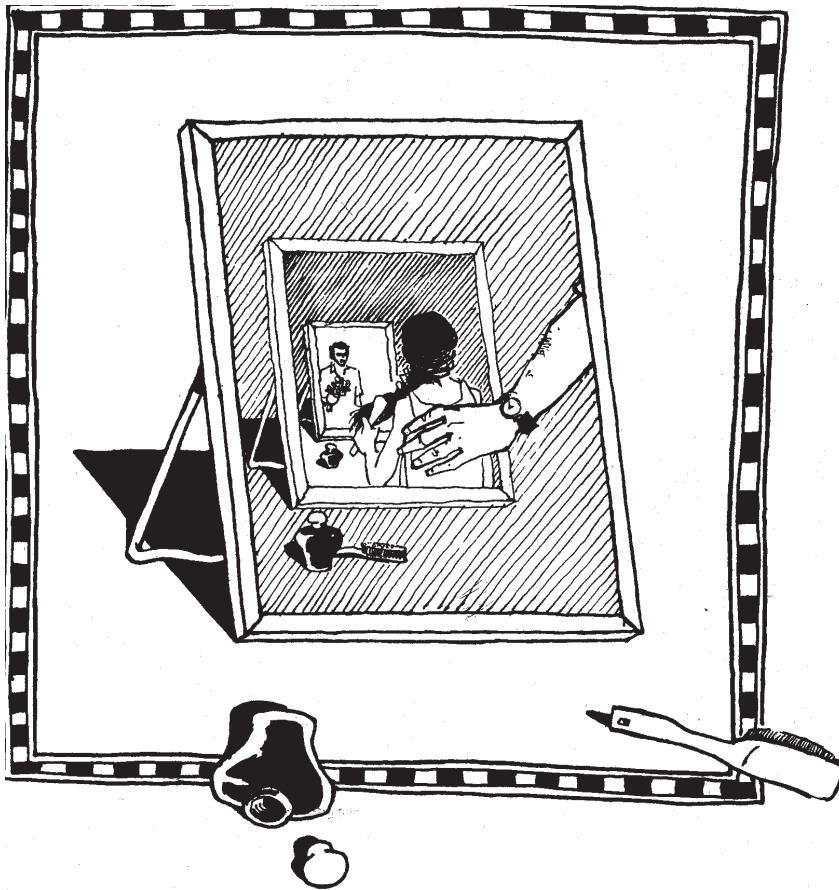
"Oh shameless fluttering bird!" she said in words without words.

She heard footsteps in the hallway Agog, she listened and was sure he had come. The sound split her attention from herself. She was seized by a sudden suspense.

The key turned.

Her heart thumped in spite of herself.

"Hi!" he called, "I have been to see



a film - a blue film!"

"Hallo..." she answered.

"Smile! -Pudding face! ... Dressed up like a dog's dinner!"

The verbal assault bruised her make up, until she felt her face was fractured. Why had she taken all the trouble?

Suddenly, he came from behind her with his arms outstretched in what she felt might be a tender overture.

But, before she knew where she was, he had clasped her breasts with his hard hands and said:

"I will make you happy!"

Then he breathed in and exhaled the smell of liquor-breath on to her face.

Sara had the feeling of being over-powered.

She wriggled. She found that in the flurry, she had escaped from his grasp, and capered towards the bathroom door.

Like an eagle he pounced on her frightened frame, caught her by her arm,

and dragged her towards the velvet *divan* bed she had brought in the doorway.

"Oh my pretty!" he shouted. And he slapped her hips.

Against her wish to go to him, she rescued her arm with a jerk, pushed him aside, ran towards the outside door, in a panic, and crouched like a beaten cat.

He chased her and caught her in the whirlpool created by her gyrating arms, his demoniac face distorted into the wings of a falcon pouncing on a dove.

Grabbing her with convulsive hands, he pulled her back to the *divan*, dragging her mermaid body across the blunted legs of chairs and small tables, upsetting the flower vase she had arranged. She covered her head and hid it on his chest, sobbing :

"Oh spare me, Raju, my hair, I have just done it up..."

Like the dove caught in the mouth

of the masterful falcon, she fluttered, flapped her hands and with some unknown energy, writhed and slithered to her feet, then ran to hide behind the carved Kashmir screen in the corner.

"Bitch!" he shouted. "You gave yourself to that lover! You are trying to escape me - your husband! Come, goat - after all one day your throat has to be cut!"

"Raju", she pleaded, from behind the screen, smoothening her hair and her long gown.

Subtly he made a feint and went to the right.

She was deceived into going towards the other side of the screen. He turned on his feet and, catching her arm, dragged her onto the floor, jumped on her, smothering her with the saliva and froth of his mouth, until he found her lips and closed them with his.

She wriggled like a snake under him. But his heavy frame had over-powered her.

"I am all for you Raju! ... Be tender..."

The demon pulled her dress, from below, with eager hands, tore the drapery on her breasts, pinned down her frail hands, which were fluttering to get free, and shook her into silence.

With a groan, like a death rattle, she yielded to the weight of his body. His heavy breath enveloped her. And she collapsed like a corpse.

"Bitch!" he raved. "No longer will you think of your lover!"

The shame of her silence choked her as she sobbed:

"I am for you! ... all for you!" In her heart, she knew that the thing she had for him had died and would never be his but Mahesh Chand's.

Afterwards, she went and sat by the mirror to smoothen her hair and to repair the damage.

She could not see her face properly through the tears in her eyes. She bent near the looking glass. Nothing was visible. Only the mist of her breath covered the mirror. □