

It was hot and humid, the usual sea breeze was playing truant. Cecil shivered violently and downed his fourth glass of water on the trot.

But his thirst was unquenchable. He couldn't sleep; he felt it would give him some control, being awake. It was nearly three in the morning and the dog had not barked once. Perhaps the deed was already done. His nonplussed enemy may have bitten the sand already. The reflection fed him to guilt and something like sorrow.

None of the positive energy that cruised through him earlier. His wife spread next to him, fat and ugly, like a beached whale he thought. She was snoring loudly and belching in between. He had wondered for thirty-five years how she managed to do both in the same go.

Her father was a fisherman just like him, he owned three motor boats and had promised to give him a head start in the fishing business. He wanted to invest in his future because he spotted great potential in the boy, he had once confided with Cecil's father. Cecil was rapt, but his parents were clearly not. That had made him angry.

## The Neighbour



'There is a catch, that guy is a born miser,' he had somehow deciphered his father's mutter. His mother had nodded her head in submission.

Cecil had married the catch: complete with a poor IQ and even poorer looks when her father added a fat dowry to his list of incentives. He had actually prospered and ended up owning two trawlers. She had produced two children in her own image, a boy and a girl. He had sent them both to the best Christian school in the village. The girl had pulled off a pregnancy just before her seventeenth birthday and the boy had flunked all his exams, Cecil's selfless funding had inspired the priests to prolong his son's suffering until high school.

He had married the boy off to a rich girl with a slight limp and just five years older than the groom. His daughter was only too happy to donate her child, delivered in stealth, to a compassionate foreign couple

before embarking on a series of brief flings with an envious parade of lovers.

'Let her have some fun, she has just one life after all.'

His wife had sympathized, straining her wisdom. He had sighed and said nothing.

He had sent them to the city, and they visited him once a year at Christmas. He was happy with that.

He could have called it his lot and moved on, if not for his neighbor. He was the real thorn in his side. The thorn had a name: Lionel. A fisherman just like Cecil, he had migrated to his village with his family

man. His wife had given him a son. The village men and boys had mourned in silence. The boy could only attend the cheap public school. But had stunned everyone when he came out with enough academic merit to enter university.

Cecil had been heartbroken; but was the first to congratulate the boy and his father. Lionel's son had blatantly progressed to become a successful banker and had thrust a dagger in to Cecil's heart by migrating to Australia. One of a rare handful from the village to settle in a first world country on his own terms.

The young man had sent enough money to his parents to buy a property and build a house, and Lionel had made the critical decision to be close to his friend. Cecil had celebrated the news of his new neighbour by popping an extra pressure tablet. He was forced to learn new skillsets. To smile when angry and feign love when in hate. He had wondered often why god could be so pitiless, so selective in punishing the worthy and blessing the undeserving. After all he was one of the principal benefactors of the church and its school and had chaired all the church committees at various times. He felt let down, badly.

But the last straw was the dog, the German Shepherd Lionel had recently procured, a New Year's gift from his son, he had revealed it when tempted by Cecil. Cecil had hated his boast.

'That guy is a born show off.'

He had complained to his wife. She had smiled stupidly as she caressed the dog, which was in the habit of visiting them daily. He had fought off a lunatic impulse to do the same, the dog was cute and infuriatingly friendly, it couldn't stop wagging its tail.

But the seeds had been firmly planted. Cecil had handed over the assassination contract to the local coconut picker for five hundred rupees. The man nursed a legitimate grudge against Lionel. He was caught once trying to steal some of Lionel's imported shirts from the clothes line and had been reported to the police. The law enforcement officers had deployed innovative genius in their interrogation methods giving him a permanent shoulder injury.

'Sir, killing defenseless dumb creatures will incur bad karma, it's not the price that I am worried about.'

The man's conscience had clearly clouded his unkept features.

It had vanished when Cecil doubled the price.

It was four am and there was deathly silence except for his wife's snoring. Cecil was worried that he might sleep late and miss morning mass. At last a sea breeze was now gushing in through the window grills. Intent listening had exhausted him. He gulped down yet another glass of water, his tenth. And he eyed his pressure tablets longingly.

Lionel wept like a child, his wife was no better. They missed their pleasant neighbour.

'He died peacefully, I didn't even know, I was fast asleep, it was a massive heart attack.'

Cecil's wife expressed the cold facts with unflinching sincerity and an accepting smile.

The dog bayed at the clear skies and paid its respects.

from another coastal hamlet when Cecil was just fourteen. He was incorrigibly likeable, a weakness that seemed to ripen with age. They had been good friends. The rot had started when he married a woman from the central hills, unblemished by the stench of fish and the crust of salt. Worse still she was real eye candy and educated; she had even finished high school. Her fair complexion the outcome of clean mountain air refused to cave in to the corrosive effects of the coastal heat. She was every man's toast and every teenager's dream. To top it all she was faithful and kind.

Cecil had felt snubbed, coming close on the heels of his own lucrative nuptials, he took it personally. He had started avoiding Lionel as subtly as he could since then, hoping distance would lessen the pain. His only comfort had come from his financial accomplishments and the social standing that piggybacked on it. Lionel had struggled with his economic situation, but continued to smile. He could only lease a boat throughout his unsensational career as a fisher-