

Happy Diwali

His Highness is here, of course. He sheds his nylon parka, a drab grey one, to reveal a satin shirt with splendidly billowing sleeves. It is the colour of fresh cream and has pearl buttons. His trousers, of grey flannel, are Etonian. Literally. He was already six feet two at public school and has not grown since. He would prefer not to be so frugal about his wardrobe but is running out of money.

Nalini Mahalingam, wife of the coconut-oil-and-papadam-importer, is here too. One expects to see her in furs, but no, she likes to experiment with the very latest and is wearing one of those quilted eiderdown things in a dusty pink.

I have always thought that padded and cross-thonged snow boots detract, in a rather serious way, from the delicacy of Kashmiri and Benares silk. But what is one to do here? The Canadian winter sets in early, giving no quarter, and one can hardly celebrate *Diwali* in anything other than one's costliest and most recently imported sari.

Namaste, namaste, we greet one another – or *namaskaram* – depending on regional origins and linguistic affiliations. Hands together before the face, heads momentarily bowed, like Norman Rockwell Christians at prayer. There are even some West Indian families who exchange what I suppose to be a calypso handshake and who are here, one must conclude, because they know which port their great-grandfathers were press-ganged from. Standards are slipping, but we need the membership dues. Already the Gujaratis are gathering in one corner and the Tamils in another. The Bengalis have put themselves in charge of the cultural part of the program and are busy organising everyone else. The Delhi group, always drawing attention to itself, is pining in ostentatious Hindi for Connaught Circus. Only exile and isolation unite us.

The cloakroom (we have rented the auditorium of the local community college for the evening) is impossible, rampant with

snow boots. They grow upwards, a tangled and fetid underbrush, toward the jungle of coats and dangling scarf creepers. Everywhere there is a steam of winter breath and damp mittens. One has to struggle, now, for hangers and space, plunging in between nylon and down thickets. I half expect to find Radha herself somewhere deep in there. The dankness, I suppose. The sense of rain forest and fungous murk.

New people keep arriving. As though it were part of the ritual, they place their Corningware casserole dishes – fragrant with Madras curries and Tandoori chicken and *kurmas* and *masala dosai* – delicately on the floor. For we are nothing if not small-town-Ontario and this is a pot-luck *Diwali*; which, I suppose, should be no more surprising than the fact that we are using electric candles instead of oil lamps. No doubt the goddess Lakshmi is sufficiently gratified to see her thousand lights bloom in an alien land, whatever the source of their flickering.

The bringers of casserole dishes peel off their Western layers of warmth, and lunge at the bloated coat racks.

Then: reincarnation.

Of course we are never surprised by it, not even those of us who grew up Christian. I watch the metamorphosis, gilded *avatars* emerging in a flurry of silks, cloth of gold, magentas, *salwar chemeez* as red as betel juice, blues exotic as Krishna's face or a peacock's breast. Colour, perhaps, is the last thing we let go of.

Two children, five-year-old Sikh boys with their uncut hair in little topknots, dart into the cloakroom shrieking with excitement. There is a sound of shattering. Ochre wavelets of lamb *biryani* lap at the snow boots and several people click their tongues in mild annoyance, stepping delicately aside. Someone nudges the shards of Corningware out of the way with one foot. No one thinks of reproving the children or of cleaning up. The fact that I think of these things is a mark of the extent of my displacement; and a measure of the embarrassing degree of sentimentality to which I will submit tonight. If I were to mention the mess, people would look vaguely puzzled. It is not a matter about which one should be concerned. There is always a *peon* to attend to that sort of thing.

In the auditorium, foil cut-outs of the Hindi letters for *Happy*

Diwali, each about two feet high, are strung across the front of the stage where they dance gracefully in convection currents eddying up from the radiators. Old and solid, the radiators are the coiled water-circulating kind, metal sculptures in their own right. I think, with a terrible pang of longing, of the cast iron ornamentation of the Queen Isabella Hotel in Goa.

From across the aisle, His Highness, standing as though on guard for all that keeps slipping away between our fingers, inclines his head and upper body slightly toward me. I make *namaskaram* in response. I persist in South Indian ways, a pledge of allegiance. We are all of us addicted to nostalgia, and it is here, at the annual celebration of *Diwali* (a Hindu festival alien to both of us, strictly speaking), that His Highness and I give way to our addiction. We indulge. We lay in (to use a metaphor of Canadians, which is what we now are, if documentation is anything to go by), we lay in, as it were, supplies of the necessary mythic warmth against the coming winter.

His Highness, Prince Sana'ullah, is actually the great grandson of a ruler who was deposed by "a wicked cousin" well before the abolition of the princely states, those "dark places of the earth", as Kipling called them, the numerous tiny feudal kingdoms that dotted pre-Independence India. The prince's great-grandfather was not merely deposed. He was beheaded. This has cast a permanent aura of romantic tragedy upon his descendants, and naturally even the wicked cousin and his successors felt obliged to see to it that all family members lived and were educated in a style befitting Moghul royalty.

But then the privy purses were abolished (though not of course before certain sums had been removed to England and Switzerland against just such contingencies). Prince Sana'ullah was given his obligatory British public school education, following which he was asked by his father, who had his own lifestyle to maintain, to consider life in the colonies, where both royalty and public school backgrounds were much rarer and consequently more revered. There is still a small trust fund, though it is rumoured that from time to time, when His Highness goes into seclusion, he has actually found it necessary to disappear into the more shadowy sections of Old Montreal to wait on tables.

I am not sure where I heard this. It is the kind of information one receives by intuition. We would never speak of it publicly.

I left Goa at the age of fifteen with one suitcase, a Parsi family name, a saint's Christian name (in Goa we are all named for the saint on whose day we were born), a history of family acrimony, and a Goan's happy nonchalance with it all. It is wise to acquire imperturbability with a name like Perpetua Engine-wallah. Anyway, I do not believe it is possible to grow up in the moist tropics without an instinctive and insouciant hedonism. It is quite possible to grow up in the dry tropics, in Mysore, say, or Hyderabad, or Allahabad, or Delhi, and be ascetic to the core. But those of us who drew childhood and adolescent breath on the dank monsoon side of the Western Ghats – whether we are Catholic, Parsi, Muslim, Syrian, Hindu, or Church of South India – know how to celebrate given bounty: of food, drink, ocean, beaches, the body.

So when I speak of family acrimony, I mean only this: the two halves of my family had no intercourse with each other, a state of affairs which is aberrant in India. My mother's family, Goan and Catholic, never acknowledged the existence of my father's family in Bombay. And vice versa. I think I recall that once our family priest told me that Zoroaster was the false prophet in the pit of hell who is referred to in the Book of Revelation. Just the same. Father Diego and my father used to drink tea together on the verandah of the Queen Isabella, quoting Shakespeare interminably and competitively. Their tea was laced with brandy, and at about the time the sandalwood flares and mosquito coils were being lit, they would become somewhat more contentious. Father Diego reciting from *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* and my father declaiming Persian and Urdu poetry in a caramel voice rich with vibrato.

My father taught English literature at San Miguel College (which shows how tolerant the Goan religious orders had become) until he gave a paper on "Zoroastrian Intimations in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*" at an international conference in Delhi. After this he received an invitation to teach at a prairie university in Canada and went. My mother refused to accompany him.

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It is now forty minutes after the hour designated as starting time on the *Diwali* invitations and we are probably drawing close to a beginning. Talk is muted. Children wander up and down the aisles in their new clothes, chattering to one another in English, a jasmine chain of fresh young faces. A timing discourse is still going on between the sitar player and the tabla player, but they are beginning to nod their heads and smile and murmur *achaa, achaa* to each other.

They are sitting on a low platform, about the size of an overturned backyard sandbox, which has been placed on the stage and draped with Kashmiri rugs. The sitar player is barefoot and the tabla player is wearing black socks, one of which has a rather large hole at the heel. Both men are wearing dark Western trousers, loose cotton Punjabi tunics not tucked in, and Kashmiri vests, richly embroidered, that look oddly tiny over the ample tunics – like Day-Glo identifying colours daubed on the upper reaches of billowing sails. It is an eclectic mix that strikes me as being just right for the occasion.

Deftly the tabla player turns his drums and taps at the pegs with his little mallet. *Baap, baap*, the drums respond softly, like bleating oxen giving mournful answer when the cart driver twists their tails to force a little more speed over dusty roads. The copper *bayan*, which he plays with his left hand, pleases the tabla player. He bends over it, smiling, as though conferring a blessing, patting its skin gently – *pampetty pam pam* – with his fingers. And the sitar player answers, caressing his seven strings in congratulation. Oneness of pitch has been achieved.

But there is still a problem with the *dayan*, the drum for the right hand. It is made of wood and suffers from the dry air of central heating. *Baap, baap*, it says, faltering, sliding in and out of the desired pitch. The gourd of the sitar is also troubled by the dryness and two strings have strayed again. Tap, tap. Strum. Pegs turned, eyes closed, heads tilted sideways. I think of seagulls on the white sands of the Malabar coast, heads cocked into the wind, waiting, their patience endless.

It is a curious ritual, this. I wonder what the other Canadians would make of it, the ones who dispose of pre-concert tuning in a few hurried minutes as though it were something furtive

and shameful. Of course this inability to perceive the wholeness of things is endemic to the Western mind. The very word foreplay, for instance. Suggesting a brief obligation to be got out of the way before the main event. They are strange people, Westerners.

But it is silly of me to say *they*. I feel *other* to Indians far more often. And I have learned to love Western music, I even have subscription tickets to the local symphony series, though there are things I will never get used to: that neurotic preoccupation with beginning on the dot of the advertised hour, coupled with the truly extraordinary custom of the blockade, of actually *barring entry* to anyone who arrives after the arbitrary moment in time when – in the opinion of an usher – a piece has officially begun. This is beyond comprehension. As is the puzzling absence of young children from concerts.

No sense of wholeness. That is what strikes me about the West. No awareness of the languid beauty of the tuning, ceremony, of how it flows into the first *raga* whose sounds will curl into the ears and the veins of the little children like soft mists smoking up between the coconut palms when the monsoon pauses. And the mists will cling and the children will grow into the sounds and the memory of them, and the notes will flower into the gift of listening. And for some chosen few into the gift of creating new music.

Oh the lingering. The long soft scars left by music. I remember the concert my father took me to when I was four. It began at dusk and lasted most of the night and it comes back to me through all my senses: the sandalwood flares, the smell of musk and jasmine, the rustle of saris, the sounds of babies crying and children whispering and giggling, the soft shuffle of people arriving and leaving throughout the performance, the feel of my father's shoulder when my head finally sank there in sleep. Everything. For a *raga* cannot be separate from the hour of its playing or the sounds of its setting.

The *dayan* has reached agreement with its brother drum now. The players make *namaste* to the audience, parents gather their children onto their laps. The sitar player, who has been brought from Montreal for this occasion, chants a brief invocation and

announces the *raga*. It flows around us. The radiators contribute metallic hiccups of expansion and occasional obbligatos of steam. Periodically the microphone (placed on the stage floor in front of the performance platform) speaks with a piercing electronic coloratura. Each time, someone in the front row gets up and fiddles with it and the soft magnified boom of his hand movements punctuates the *raga* like distant cannon.

We are dimly conscious of these separate details of sound. They are all part of the *raga* of an early winter evening in Canada, an unrepeatable performance, as each *raga* is.

For a short time I am able to exercise non-Indian skills of detachment and observation. I think of my seat at the local symphony concerts, seventh row centre. I recall the solemn hush, the decorum – a sacred rite that has come to excite me. For a short time I am able to look around and compare, to feel, even, briefly embarrassed. I note the rapt faces, the uncritical immersion in the spell, the eyes bright with tears, the full-scale Romantic-with-a-capital-R self-surrender. I am relieved that none of *the others* is present.

Across the aisle from me, His Highness is crying silently and unashamedly. Totally unselfconsciously.

And then I too enter the music, my ears full of jasmine petals, my eyes full of village festivals and tears.

Much later, after the *Bharata Natyam* has been danced so charmingly by two of the teenage girls; after the university students have done their skit (a comic thing about the near-seduction of a young Canadian girl called Sita by a ne'er-do-well named Ravana, and about her rescue in the nick of time by Rama, a medical student chosen by her parents as a suitable match); after the paper plates and plastic forks and pot-luck curries, His Highness says to me, casually, and in the presence of several prominent citizens: "Miss Engine-wallah, I was speaking with your sister in Montreal last week. There's no need for you to go by train in the morning. I'm driving there on business tonight and I'm delighted to offer you a ride."

"Oh, Your Highness," I demur. "I wouldn't dream of putting you to such trouble."

His Highness draws himself up to his full six feet and two inches.

“I do not approve of a lady travelling alone on the train,” he says. “I know it is very old-fashioned of me, but that is the way it is with our family. I would prefer that you travel under my protection.”

His voice has the inflection of one used to authority.

“Perpetua,” Mrs Gopalan says, urging propriety. “I do think His Highness is right.”

His Highness coughs. “With the support of Mrs Gopalan,” he says, “I insist.”

“Your Highness is too kind,” I murmur.

His Highness winks at me, ever so slightly, over the heads of several people. Though of course it could have been merely an involuntary twitch of his eyelid.

In the car we do not trouble to talk for a long time. Snow scuds across the road and catapults itself at the windshield in demented wraiths, a dance of Tantric devotees – though they also seem strangely like threshers flailing at the rice in the sun-white courtyards of Goa. His Highness, perhaps, sees the veiled women of the *zenana* dancing for his private pleasure. *Diwali* always lets us loose into our separate pasts.

I am pondering also the usefulness of my sister – though she is not my sister really, and she lives in Saskatoon. After my mother died of a perfectly standard tropical fever, I wrote to my father and told him I wanted to come to Canada. I had not seen him for six years, and it took a dozen letters back and forth to cajole him into sending for me. What no one knew, not even my Bombay grandparents, and what my father had neglected to mention in the annual letters he sent me on my birthdays, was that he had quietly remarried, and had two stepbrothers and a half-sister as well as a stepmother waiting for me. He met me at the airport in Saskatoon and explained all this. He said he thought it better not to upset anyone back home by telling them.

I must have looked subdued.

He put his arm around me. “You’re old enough to understand that these things happen,” he said. “And for a Parsi, education is the main thing. In Canada the very best is possible.”

My stepmother was an Italian who had been widowed. My father was definitely attracted to Catholics. It was linked, I think, to his love of Persian and Urdu poetry. He recognised that romantic tension between rigid prescriptive discipline and passionate intensity.

His Highness has reserved a table for us at Le Chateau Champlain, the same table as last year. I am always touched by this extravagance since it is almost certain he has to pay for it by considerable bartending in brasseries far inferior to this. (Of course a ritzy place like Le Chateau Champlain would offer anything to have such a princely *maitre d'* but His Highness cannot work where he might be seen by any of us. It would be an unthinkable shame for everyone.)

“Prince Sana’ullah,” I begin, ritually.

“Please,” he says, as always. “You must call me Sani. I insist. We set no store by titles in my family. The throne, I can assure you” – he assures me – “is a very lonely place.”

“It is difficult, Your Highness, to be so familiar –”

“You must try, Perpetua. To please me.”

“I don’t know how to thank you, Your Highness ... Sani, for such a beautiful evening.”

“There is a full moon,” he says. “Did you notice? The way it poured gold on the snow, the way the bare trees looked against it. I thought of how the minarets looked against the moon.”

He lapses into silence, hearing a *muezzin* call perhaps.

“In Goa,” I say, “when there’s a full moon, it’s bright as day.” I remember how it was: the white sands and white buildings glistening, and the palms waving like dark bunches of ribbons.

“Did you ever see the Taj by moonlight?” His Highness asks.

“I’ve never seen the Taj. I flew from Goa to Bombay and then to Montreal and Saskatoon. I’ve never been back.”

He winces as though I have punctured something, or have read from the wrong script. He seems disoriented. “Agra,” he says, thinking aloud. “We all see Agra. It’s required. I must have been ten. Just before being packed off to Eton the first time. Then back and forth, back and forth. Always back for the worst time, that hot dead time before the monsoon.”

“There’s been trouble near Agra,” I say. “Did you see in the *Times*?” (I mean, by this. *The Times of India*. We all buy it from Mr Motilal who has copies airmailed in to his newsagency.) “It seems Mrs Gandhi –”

“Yes, yes,” he says, brushing this aside. “It is inevitable. I don’t want to beat the drum or hoist the flag too much, you know, but when my great-grandfather ruled there was none of this ... this pettifogging disruption.”

We are both silent for a long time, I sipping my wine and Prince Sani his Scotch. (The Prophet, he is in the habit of saying, forbade only the fruit of the grape. On the subject of Scotch and cognac, he was silent.)

Our waiter comes and asks: “*Monsieur est prêt à commander maintenant?*” He has assumed from the start that we are French-speaking. Perhaps we have a Gallic aura of romance about us. We look, I suppose, exotic. Certainly not *des maudits Anglais*. (“This is a bilingual country,” my father said. “And my children will be bilingual. Even in Saskatoon.” In fact, of course, I became trilingual.)

His Highness says: “*Nous avons déjà mangé. Nous ne sommes ici que pour le dessert. Montrez-nous les pâtisseries, s’il vous plaît.*”

His Highness learned his French at Eton, but his accent is pure *joual*, perfected in the sleazier taverns of Old Montreal. The waiter is nonplussed. He does not know what to make of the combination of aristocratic bearing, Parisian syntax, and Québécois street French. His Highness is indifferent to what the waiter thinks. When it comes down to pure physical presence, Prince Sani can make any man quail before the mere disdainful flutter of his royal eyelids.

After we have selected our pastries, he says to me gently: “It was a command, you know, what I said last year. I insist you do something about your future. I won’t have you throwing your life away teaching school in a small stuffy town. It’s such a waste. You’re too beautiful and too intelligent.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

“Please, Perpetua. In my family we have never stood on ceremony. We do not hide behind our crown.”

“Thank you, Sani.”

“A private school in Montreal, at the very least. A modicum of elegance. The sisters will leap at the chance of having you.”

“I’ve applied,” I sigh. “All over. Nobody’s leaping at the chance. Teaching jobs are hard to come by. I’m lucky to have the one I’ve got.”

“It’s not ... *appropriate*,” he sighs. “Also it’s time for marriage. I ordered you to write to your family. Bombay and Goa, both.”

“I did, Sani. My mother’s family has arranged a match. I’m going back to Goa in July to be married.”

“Back to Goa?” He is startled, as though a figure in his dream turned and tampered with his pillow.

“Just for the wedding. He’s a professional man. Wants to emigrate to Canada. I’ve seen a photograph. And our horoscopes match.”

“Well,” he says. “That is very fine. Congratulations, Perpetua. It is the best thing.”

We both think it probably is, given everything. Certain traditions are comforting in their way. It makes no sense to flout them. Pointless as railing at the monsoon. Nevertheless we lapse back into silence for a long time.

Finally I ask: “What about you, Sani?”

“My father also is arranging something. Negotiating with the girl’s family. I think it will work out.”

We stare at each other.

We are aware, suddenly, that this will be the last such *Diwali*. Not that the festival belongs to either of us; it is alien to both our traditions. In a sense. Except that it was part of the totality of our childhoods and it has this private significance: we met at the *Diwali* festival in our small town four years ago.

“You remember,” His Highness says dreamily, “how the Taj looks in the moonlight?”

I smile fondly, beginning to believe I have seen it. For now the love-making has begun in earnest. Though of course it had already begun in the cloakroom before the concert, and was well under way when His Highness bowed to me across the aisle. It flows on through the murmur of nostalgia, the first accidental brushing of fingertips against fingertips, the holding of hands. It wafts us up to our reserved suite and through the long perfumed night while

our bodies converse. They are attuned to each other, the *raga* they make is like the dialogue between sitar and tabla. Our love-making is present also in the intervals of talking and reverie.

Near dawn, His Highness sits up and greets the first light with Urdu poetry. His voice rises and falls, a musk of sound, a long ululating chant that curls into the niches of elsewhere. And that is when I begin to cry, helplessly and unstoppably. His Highness turns tactfully away, not because he is embarrassed, but because he does not want to intrude. He stands in the window and watches the neon strings of light along rue de la Gauchetière. He knows I have fallen into my childhood – my father and Father Diego on the verandah, my mother in the kitchen.

Once – I must have been about eight years old – my father took me to see San Sebastian, a splendid crumbling ruin of a Portuguese mission, still ghostly white in patches between the creepers. The jungle had reclaimed it, and peacocks screeched in its bell towers. But inside, where bats and monkeys made their home, we could still see the faintest old gold sheen of the saints fading into the walls and my father murmured: “*Sic transit gloria*. But remember this, Perpetua, it is only when glory has gone that it is appreciated. Do you think the ancient Persians were anything but military louts at the height of their imperial powers? It is now, in the twilight of Zoroaster, that our poetry and art enshrine them. Remember that, Perpetua. We love best what we have lost forever.”

Prince Sani, naked and golden against the haze of city neon, turns away from the window.

I think about the fact that next summer Father Diego will unite me in matrimony with a man I have not yet seen. I wonder if he would consent to perform the ceremony in the ruined mission church?

His Highness takes me in his arms and brushes my damp cheeks with his silk handkerchief.

“Happy *Diwali*,” he says, kissing me.

You Gave Me Hyacinths

Summer comes hot and steamy, with the heavy smell of raw sugar to the north-east coast of Australia. The cane pushes through the rotting window blinds and grows into the cracks and corners of the mind. It ripens in the heart at night, and its crushed sweetness drips into dreams. I have woken brushing from my eyelids the silky plumes that burst up into harvest time. And I have stood smoke-blackened as the cane fires licked the night sky, and kicked my way through the charred stubble after the men have slashed at the naked stalks and sent them churning through the mill. I have walked forever through the honeyed morning air to the crumbling high school-brave outpost of another civilisation.

The class always seemed to be on the point of bulging out the windows. If I shut my eyes and thought hard I could probably remember all the faces and put a name to each. One never forgets that first year out of teachers' college, the first school, the first students. Dellis comes before anyone else, of course, feline and demanding, blotting out the others; Dellis, who sat stonily bored through classes and never turned in homework and wrote nothing at all on test papers. "Can't understand poetry," she said by way of explanation. There were detentions and earnest talks. At least, I was earnest; Dellis was bored. She put her case simply: "I'll fail everything anyway."

"But you don't *need* to, Dellis. It's a matter of your attitude, not your ability. What sort of job will you get if you don't finish high school?"

"I'll work at Valesi's. Or the kitchen at the mill canteen."

"Yes, well. But they will be very monotonous jobs, don't you think? Very boring."

"Yes." Flicking back the long blonde hair.

"Now just supposing you finished high school. Then what would you do?"

“Same thing. Work at Valesi’s or in the mill canteen. Till I’m married. Everybody does.”

“You could go to Brisbane, or even Sydney or Melbourne. There are any number of jobs you could get there if you were to finish high school. There would be theatres to go to, plays to see. And libraries. Dellis, this town doesn’t even have a library.”

Silence.

“Have you ever been out of this town, Dellis?”

“Been to Cairns once.”

Cairns. Twenty thousand people, and less than a hundred miles away: the local idea of the Big City.

“Dellis, what are you going to do with your life?”

No answer.

I felt angry, as though I were the one trapped in the slow rhythm of a small tropical town. “Can you possibly be content,” I asked viciously, “to work at the mill, get married, have babies, and grow old in this shrivelled-up sun-blasted village?”

She was mildly puzzled at my outburst, but shrugged it off as being beyond her. “Reckon I’ll have to marry the first boy who knocks me up,” she said.

“You don’t *have* to marry anybody, Dellis. No doubt you could fall in love with some boy in this town and be quite happy with him. But is that all you want?”

“Dunno. It’s better’n *not* getting married.”

I knew her parents were not around; perhaps they were dead; though more likely they were merely deserters who had found the lure of fruit picking in the south too rewarding to resist. I knew she lived with a married sister – the usual shabby wooden cottage with toddlers messily underfoot, everyone cowering away from the belligerent drunk who came home from the cane fields each night. The family, the town – it was an intolerable cocoon. She simply had to fight her way out of it, go south. I told her so. But her face was blank. The world beyond the town held neither fascination nor terror. I think she doubted the existence of anything beyond Cairns.

In the classroom the air was still and fetid. There was the stale sweat of forty students; there was also the sickly odour of molasses rolling in from the mill. An insistent wave of nausea

lapped at me. Dellis's face seemed huge and close and glistened wetly the way all flesh did in the summer. She looked bored as always, though probably not so much at her detention as at the whole wearying business of an afternoon and evening still to be lived through – after which coolness would come for an hour or two, and even fitful sleep. Then another dank day would begin.

“Dellis, let's get out of here. Will you go for a walk with me?”

“Okay,” she shrugged.

Outside the room things were immediately better. By itself, the molasses in the air was heavy and drowsy, but pleasant. We crunched down the drive and out the gate under the shade of the flame-trees.

“I love those,” Dellis said, pointing upwards where the startling crimson flaunted itself against the sky.

“Why?”

She was suddenly angry. “Why? You always want to know why. You spoil things. I hate your classes. I hate poetry. It's stupid. Just sometimes there is a bit I like, but all you ever do is ask why. Why do I like it? And then I feel stupid because I never know why. I just like it, that's all. And you always spoil it.”

We walked in silence the length of the street, which was the length of the town, past the post office, Cavallero's general store, Valesi's Snack Bar, and two pubs. The wind must have been blowing our way from the mill, because the soot settled on us gently as we walked. The men swilling their beer on the benches outside the pubs fell silent as we passed and their eyes felt uncomfortable on my damp skin. At the corner pub, someone called out “Hey, Dellis!” from the dark inside, and laughter fell into the dust as we rounded the corner and turned toward the mill.

Halfway between the corner and the mill, Dellis said suddenly, “I like the red. I had a red dress for the school dance, and naturally you know what they all said ... But the trees don't care. That's what I'd like to be. A flame-tree.” We went on in silence again, having fallen into the mesmeric pattern of stepping from sleeper to sleeper of the narrow rail siding, until we came to the line of cane cars waiting outside the mill. Dellis reached into one and pulled out two short pieces. She handed one to me and started chewing the other.

“We really shouldn’t, Dellis. It’s stealing.”

She eyed me sideways and shrugged. “You spoil things.”

I tore off strips of bamboo-like skin with my teeth and sucked at the soft sweet fibres.

We had passed the mill, and were on the beach road. Two miles under that spiteful sun. Close to the cane there was some coolness, and we walked in the dusty three-foot strip between the road and the sugar plumes, sucking and chewing and spitting out the fibres. The dust came up in little puffs around our sandals. We said nothing, just chewed and spat. Only two cars passed us. The Howes all hung out of one and waved. The other was a utility truck headed for the mill.

About one and a half miles along, the narrow road suddenly emerged from its canyon of tall cane. A lot of cutting had been done, and a farmhouse stood alone in the shorn fields, white and blinding in the afternoon sun. The haze of colour around the front door was a profusion of Cooktown orchids, fragile waxen flowers, soft purple with a darker slash of purple at the heart. “Gian’s house,” said Dellis as we walked on, and into the cool cover of uncut cane again.

Gian! So that was why he always had an orchid to tuck brazenly behind one ear. He was seventeen years old, a Torres Strait Islander: black, six feet tall, a purple flower nestled against his curly hair any time one saw him except in class. Gian, rakishly Polynesian, bending over that day after school till the impudent orchid and his incredible eyes were level with mine.

“Did you know that I killed my father. Miss?”

“Yes, Gian. I was told that when I first arrived.”

“Well?” The eyes were incongruously blue, and watchful under the long silky lashes.

I knew the court verdict was self-defence, I knew his father had been blind drunk, a wife-beater on the rampage.

“Well?” Gian persisted.

I said lamely: “It must have been horrible.”

“I hated him,” Gian said without passion. “He was a bastard.”

“I gather many people thought so.”

“Well?”

“What are you asking me, Gian? How can I know what was the right thing to do? Only you can know that.”

“I am the only person in this town who has killed a man. Do you realise that?”

We stared at each other, and then outrageously he let his eyes wander slowly down my body with blatant intent, and walked away. I was trembling. After that I was always afraid to look Gian in the eye, and he always dared me to. When I turned to write on the board, I could feel two burning spots on the back of my neck. And when I faced the class again, his eyes were waiting, and a slow grin would spread across his face. Yet it was not an insolent grin. That was what was most disturbing. It seemed to say that we two shared a daring and intimate secret. But he knew it and I didn't.

Dellis and I had reached the beach. It was deserted. We kicked off our sandals, lay down, and curled our toes into the warm sand. The palms cast a spindly shade that wasn't much help, but a tired wisp of sea breeze scuffled up the sand refreshingly from the calm water. So amazingly calm inside the reef. I never could get used to it. I had grown up with frenetic surf beaches, but from here you had to go a thousand miles down the coast before you got south of the Great Reef.

“Dellis, you must visit Brisbane this summer, and give yourself a swim in the surf for a Christmas present. You just can't imagine how exciting it is.”

“Let's go swimming now. It's so bloody hot.”

“But we don't have swimsuits.”

“Just take our clothes off.”

“But somebody might come.”

Dellis stood up and unbuttoned her blouse. “You spoil things,” she said. It hurt when she stood naked in front of me. She was only fifteen, and it wasn't fair. I almost told her how beautiful she was, but envy and embarrassment stopped me. This is her world, I thought; she is part of it, she belongs. She was tanned all over; there were no white parts. She ran down into the water without looking back.

I stood up and slipped off my dress, but then my heart failed me, and I went into the water with my underwear on. We must have swum for half an hour, and it was cool and pleasant. Then we ran along the water's edge for ten minutes or so to dry out. We

dressed and lay on the sand again. "It's good to do that," Dellis murmured. "It's the best thing when you're unhappy."

"Are you often unhappy?"

The look she gave me suggested that if I had to ask such stupid questions, why did I call myself a teacher?

"What I meant, Dellis, is that I'd like to ... if you're unhappy, I would like to ... I mean, if there's any way I can help ..."

"You don't even know how to chew cane properly." She was looking at me with a kind of affectionate contempt, as though I were an idiot child. "You don't know anything. You really don't know *anything*." She shook her head and grinned at me.

I smiled back. I wanted to tell her how much I was learning. I would have liked to speak of poetic symbols, and of the significance which flame-trees or Cooktown orchids would henceforth have for me. Instead I said: "Dellis, today ... Who would have thought? How could I have guessed, this morning, that today would be so ... would be such a ... ? Well, a *remarkable* day."

"Really? Why?"

"You spoil things. Don't ask me why."

She giggled. "But really, why?"

"It's very complicated. It has a lot to do with a religious and sheltered background that you couldn't even begin to imagine, and it would take a lot of explaining. But to put it briefly, it is a truly extraordinary thing for me to have gone swimming naked with one of my students."

"You didn't even take all your clothes off," she laughed.

Now the silence was close and comfortable, and longer and drowsier. We must have dozed, because when I sat up again the humidity was even more oppressive and monstrous dark clouds had billowed up out of the sea.

"There's going to be a thunderstorm, Dellis. We'd better get home quickly."

"Too early in the year," she said sleepily. And when she saw the clouds, "It'll ruin a lot of cane."

We were walking quickly, and nearly at Gian's house again when Dellis pointed into the shadowy green maze of the canefield and said, "That's where Gian and I did it."

"Did what?"

“*Did* it. He laid me.”

“Oh! ... I ... I see. Your first...?”

She looked at me, startled, and laughed. “He’s the only one I loved. And the only one I wouldn’t take money from.”

Virgin and child in a field of green. No madonna could have beheld the amazing fruit of her womb with more awed astonishment than I felt. Something hurt at the back of my head, and I reached up vaguely with my hand. There was a whole ordered moral world there somewhere. But I couldn’t find it. It wouldn’t come.

I said, inanely: “So you and Gian are in love?”

“He was going to give me money and I wouldn’t take it. But he was gentle. And afterwards he took the orchid from behind his ear and put it between my legs. I hoped I’d have a baby, but I didn’t.”

The storm was coming and we fled before the wind and the rain. At the mill we separated, but Dellis ran back and grabbed my arm. She had to shout, and even then I thought I hadn’t heard her properly. Our skirts bucked about our legs like wet sails, runnels of water sluiced over our ears. She shouted again: “Have you ever been laid?”

“Dellis!”

“Have you?”

“This is not ... this is not a proper ...”

“Have you?”

“No.”

“Gian says you’re beautiful. Gian says that you ... He says he would like to ... That’s why I hated you. But now I don’t.”

Then we ran for our lives.

All through my dinner and all through the evening, the rain drummed on the iron roof, and the wind dashed the banana palms against the window in a violent tattoo. For some reason I wanted to dance to the night’s jazz rhythm. But then surely there was something more insistent than the thunder, a battering on my door. She was standing dripping wet on my doorstep.

“Dellis, for God’s sake, what are you doing here? It’s almost midnight.”

“They were fighting at home again, and I couldn’t stand it. I brought something for you.”

She held out a very perfect Cooktown orchid. Somebody's prize bloom, stolen.

"Come inside, out of the rain," I said vaguely, listening to the lines from Eliot that fluted in my head – fragments and images half-remembered. I had to take down the book, so I showed her the passage:

*'You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
'They called me the hyacinth girl.'
– Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.*

"Dellis," I said, as (teacherly, motherly) I combed out her wet tangled hair, "for me, you will always be the hyacinth girl."

"Poetry!" she sniffed. And then: "What do hyacinths look like?"

"I don't know. I imagine they look like Cooktown orchids."