

'THE CHILD STEALERS'

a fiction by
Gilmarie Fernando

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PART ONE

– A TRIP BACKWARDS –

The bat winged secretly across the sky as darkness fell. The child, ancient, unyielding, watched. Something unnameable in the silence arriving from afar. She ran quickly back to the fold, dissolving into mother in the lamplight and the hungry little ones scattered around the house like sultry kittens, falling into weaknesses before bedtime. Brooding wars against each other fought out in the sunlight kingdoms, laid to rest a while, surrendering the small victories won that day - as if the daylight cared. Fast asleep in the government flats by the windy ocean's edge - who could tell of what the children dreamed?

Bright as a button, quick as a fly, that was Sandy. With seven years, the seven years of trial began for her. Looking back you could say they reared their stormy heads the day the space man came. Yes, he did. As the gay kites flew and dived into the evening breezes. While the children played their wild games and the sea shimmered in its silver sounds. All the while in Sandy's head a song had been singing. She burrowed her feet deep into the beach sand. It was her father's night voice that sang, a great fat lullaby. He called the stars out of the sky and sure enough there they were just beginning to peep. A moon would sail in a while, a-shining down on all.

Del, was his name. He stood guard over the night, led the older children into the dreamland while nearby the tiniest ones fought for his wife's milky body and curled there snugly suckling into the dark hours. It was he who was always there for the older children. Their very own Sandman. A doting

father who you could twist around your little finger and sometimes tell your secrets to. Sandy knew that from the start. His was the softest of the night sounds, more soothing than a sea wave and his song took you drifting faraway with those wartime melodies from the films of his youth.

For a decade of his life the talk had been of another war in Europe. Then in 1942, the war had come and felled a generation. And gone. There were just the American songs on the radio left now. So he sang them: *'Down in Pago Pago ...far among the blue seas ...'* now how did the rest go ... ?

If he was in a jolly mood he sang:

*'I went to the animal fair –
and who do you think was there?
The great baboon by the light of the moon
Was combing his golden hair... tra-la.'*

It continued like this:

*'The monkey, he got drunk,
And sat on the elephant's trunk!
The elephant sneezed and fell to his knees
And that was the end of the monk, ha-ha,
Oh, whatever became of the monk?'*

Across father's voice the sand blew, the wind whistled. One night he was so tired he fell asleep without singing - and that was why it happened. The breeze chanced to dip and suddenly he was there: The Space Man. Smiling. In a slow motorcade winding down the Galle Road, city of Colombo, Ceylon, also known as Serendib. Or Seran. Or Lanka. Or ... Or ...

There was another song Del sang in the nights before he forgot how to sing, as he lay with Kit and Sandy upon the palm leaf mats spread over the cold cement floor, two of his four children gathered into the sadness that hovered over his heart like a big blue balloon:

*'He flies through the air with the greatest of ease,
That daring young man on the flying trapeze,
His movement so graceful, all girls did admire,
The man on the flying trapeze.'*

Somehow she knew just Who he was thinking of again, as she lay there on his warm and furry breast. Why, she almost saw him herself (!) – Victor, 22 years old in his grand Royal Air Force uniform, a cap perched jauntily on his head, a smile playing on his full lips. He'd been lost in a lightning raid over Germany.

A lightning raid? Why, yes! Missing in Action during 'Operation Gomorrah'. A tear trickled along a gold brown face and seeped into a soft pink pillow. The first night of the attack had been the 26/27 July 1942. R.A.F. Bomber Command lost twelve bombers. Four hundred and forty aircraft were lost over the port of Hamburg alone during hostilities.

Father, do not weep so inside. They died in swarms. And we may never know *Why?* Grandma 2 (Grandma Rodriguez that is, not Granny Maeve (!) had lived on in Hope. No, that's not a town. It's what you try to do when you're not allowed to cry. When she had consulted the chiromancer, he'd looked at her hand real hard and then he looked into her sorrowing eyes and said that the bomber pilot still lived but had lost his mind. Well, hadn't they all?

A starry-eyed pilot from the commons supplies, had stumbled over England's grave and greedy cause, enticed by the glamour

of airmanship, the speed of the steel winged steeds. Victor thought he'd found in his heart sympathy for the grievances of the empire's routed industrialists and aristocrats, sympathy for their struggle with those awkward bits of humanity they encountered while trying to coerce the peoples of a common earth into subservience. 'Ceylon' had stayed true to the 'Crown' through both world purges. What choice had she? After each slaughter the world briefly ground to a halt. The war talk bluffed a while. As if they didn't know that a new one was hatching!

It was the seventh day of the month in December, 1961 and the island was a-buzz. It's what the office worker fathers employed in Government Service had been discussing on the cricket green for weeks as they waited every evening for their children to finish play. Sandy heard the words that made the meaning but she couldn't string them together into any kind of sense. What was the gist of it? It was just like the time she'd puzzled about the mynahs. There had been a terrible accident involving mynahs. They'd been stuck in a hole in the ground for days somewhere in northern Europe, and everyone was trying to get them out! She didn't understand – whyever did they go there? And what a fuss! Some of them had died, (true) and the rest were carried out covered in soot! Soot? Yes, as in coal-dust. Coal? *Ah, kohl dust!* It all came to no good at all in the end anyway.

And this secret of daddy and Mr. Anthonisz's was finally out! It's name was *Yuri Gagarin*.

He appeared among the shoeless crowds on the main road while the kites tossed heedless in the beach wind. A Russian spaceman. Famous. Now what was he doing here so near their playground? The children of the flats scuttled out like little

rabbits to check. Even Sandy, feet buried deep in the sand, felt a compulsion to go. She ruefully shook herself free from the mound she had been dexterously heaping around them. Carefully cleaned the grains from between her small toes, shook out some of the grains from her hair and sped off to see him. Funny. Some of the kids from the housing blocks just did not bother. Why didn't they then? The score was 19 runs, 2 out. That's Why. Engrossed in their laconic game of cricket in the wind, what was Yuri to them? Were they not soon to be the next all schools tournament champs? And then during the challenges and cups season, teams of riotous schoolboys swept through the city on their racing bikes. They tore through the government flats too, a whizz-zz of wheels. Everyone rushed to the balconies to catch a glimpse of them and wave little flags in support of their own college teams.

Sandy spotted Del with Mr Anthonisz, wound inside a great coil of a crowd. She wormed her way along the elbows ducking carefully to avoid getting a Very Bumpy Forehead. The two tall men were dressed in spotless cricket whites and deep in their discussions, their wide cotton trouser legs flapping loosely like slack ship sails. Sandy crushed her father's little finger till it hurt him and then he noticed her and lifted her up to see above the heads. Mr. Anthonisz took a long drag on his Senior Service Navy Cut, (filter-less). Del flicked the burning ash from his and took a deep breath. The air seemed to stop flowing as things went deadly quiet. A motorcade approached, riders clad in leather. A man in an open car. He looked a bit tired. No wonder! Sandy thought. Then came the oohs and aaahs and let me have a looks and suddenly, quite suddenly it was all over. Quite simply. Over. The motorcade was disappearing in stately fashion, proceeding down the coastal road in slow motion. But Ooooh! What a funny feeling of déjà vu she had had!

It was sundown. People strolled excitedly back to their flats, everyone talking all at once. Sandy lived in Block E, on the 3rd floor in the brand new residential government housing estate. It had only gotten as far as Block M. (a long way still to go to Zzzzz... had they fallen asleep then?) Every one knew every one else and endlessly popped in and out of each other's houses very much to the annoyance of various distressed mothers. Her friends and neighbours Seetha and Savitri lived motherless next door and half her school class peeked out from balconies around. If it was a Friday, the Catholics (Roman that is) of the flats would pray a Novena after dinner. 'Nove' was Italian for nine and that's how many times you had to pray it. And she would go too of course before dinner. Nine evenings in a row of Fridays, reciting the decades of the rosary to Our Lady of Lanka who long ago had appeared to a coolie at Madhu in the angry north. Why they were angry? Oh, that's a long story. Anyway, everyone took their turn before the lighted candles flickering on the picture of the bleeding heart of Jesus, gravely repeating the Our Father who art in heavens, the Hail Mary's and the Glory Bees to Gods. When the kids were even younger they'd all attended a retreat - at Madhu that is - sleeping on the earthen floor of a bare hut and fasting for a few days. The grave voice of a priest was saying *'Remember Man, that thou art dust; And unto dust thou shalt return.'* Now she wasn't going to forget that in a hurry!

»*So what do you think will happen now?*« Mr Anthonisz was asking Del, »*They are keen to impress us...*«

»*Who?*« Del asked as if he didn't know. »*The Russians,*« Mr Anthonisz replied helpfully. »*That's why they sent him here, you know -.*«

But Sandy's father *was* impressed. A careless Sagittarian laugh escaped from his long face. He laid his bets with lord Jupiter. He stuck a firm chin out. *»We are a backward nation. The lords of this land are idlers. No one knows the meaning of the word work. It's just one long nap under the palm trees with a bottle of toddy!«*
No colonial overlord could have put it better.

»It's the heat,« Mr Anthonisz explained mercifully. *»Besides, there's nothing to be won from working for them. You know that. Our role is: The Eternal Underdog. Perhaps the P.M.'s got it right? Perhaps we should return to our native roots. Turn it all around and reclaim our country! Learn to speak our local languages and stop aping our oppressors.«*

Del said nothing. *'Native languages my foot!'* he thought. Things were moving fast in those days. It was the time of the Assertion worldwide against the repressors. African workers organized themselves under the R.D.A. unions at Bamako. Mao Zedong had red books to gift to rice-planters and rubber tree-tappers and the spirited ideas of Mohandas Gandhi had permeated into Asian consciousness. Del looked down at his polished shiny black office worker's shoes. He wanted to go up in the world!

»We need to go up in the world,« he said. *»It's been just one downward spiral since Independence! Now Government wants to change the official language! It gives me vertigo! What shall we all squeak, I mean speak? There are hardly any books printed in Sinhalese! It's a deuce of a language. I can't get my tongue around the syllables!«*

Silly birls? Sandy saw the ancient Pali letters of the Sinhalese alphabet that she was voluntarily learning in school slowly

swim across her mind like shy, curly water-bugs, round and round and round ...

»*The children seem to pick it up quite easily – It's us who've got a prejudice ...*« Mr. Anthonisz was saying, throwing out the lifebuoy.

»*They need a future, an education to face the world with! 'Sinhala first' government schools aren't worth attending,*« Del retorted throwing it right back. »*And besides that, we're not Buddhists! It would be a damned shame!*«

It was Mr. Anthonisz's turn to say nothing. He had two boys of his own at the Catholic Missionaries' school. Anybody who was anyone did. The teachers were re-modelling the whole of the sub continent! »*The Magnificent Seven is showing at the Majestic on Sunday,*« he said tactfully - and they changed from the troublesome topic. Phew!

They were just passing by the de Witt's flat. *Sugar! Sugar! Sugar!* Sandy thought. She had been having piano lessons with Leila twice a week after school and was supposed to go and practice the scales *every* evening. Yes, Every evening. Having moved on from '*The Campbells are Coming*' she was just learning '*Valse des Fleurs*'. She looked away and changed her perfected skip to hide behind her dad as they passed Leila's doorway, just in case ... well, just in case her inquisitive older sister Marjorie, who never had anything particular to do, was looking out and called her in. At once, Miss! Sandy was a good young student and always obedient, yet music lessons after school were hard on a wholesome kid. She had Trinity College examinations pending among all the other exams to be passed, small pox and polio vaccinations to be endured and God only knew what else the adults would come up with next. Someone (Del she meant) might be proud as she walked up the steps to receive her

awards on Prize Giving Day at the Convent of Our Lady of Sorrows, but truth to tell, it was an ordeal always getting things right - just the way the grown-ups insisted! Last year she'd been given 'What Katy Did' and 'Goldilocks' for excellence in Sinhalese.

»Yul Brynner's a Russian too...« Mr. Anthonisz was saying. The Majestic Cinema was The Place to go for big screen talkies after Mass and Holy Communion. They attended the church of St. Ignatius but her mother's favourite church had always been the Church of the Infant Jesus in Slave Island. That was a central district of their capital city. Sundays were the highlight of the week! Choc ices! A matinee performance. But how to stop a block of choc ice dripping slow onto the red carpet below the towering Hollywood icons? Marilyn Monroe wrapped in moving kitten fur or Elizabeth of the hypnotised violet eyes. They'd rolled 'Spartacus' and 'Psycho' but the kids were not allowed to any of those. Too scary, Del had said and shuddered. »The Magnificent Seven will be just fine ...« Sandy's father was saying and Mr. Anthonisz nodded and agreed to bring his boys along too.

Sandy was beginning to get a bit worried about the space man they had just seen. Del said not to bother because he was Very Famous and it was a remarkable achievement of the Northern powers. The first human to leave the Earth and float in outer space. »Why?« she asked. He wasn't listening to her. The men reverted to their most engrossing talk about the movie stars, the baffling suicide of Marilyn Monroe. Why ever might she have done it? When she smiled the way she did? When they moved on to Doris Day and 'Houseboat', Sandy skipped on ahead, dancing on air, home to mother's languid smile. Half heard rumours, a heavy butterfly trembling outside waiting, that was

the wide world. She felt like Yuri maybe, hovering far from the earth nearing the undiscovered moon.

Yuri Gagarin was one of the big butterflies. And Solomon Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike was the other. Sandy had come to learn about the assassination of Prime Minister S.R.D. Bandaranaike in 1962 in a peculiar way that she'd had long to puzzle out: The older boys in the government flats had an odd new song as they whizzed around on their racing bikes – now Who could make head or tail of it? It went to a regimental marching tune ... Rappa-parappa-rappa Parappa-rap-pam-pam ... '*Soma, Soma-rama - has only one big ball ...*' She pestered Kit for days. At last her older brother condescended to explain: The prime minister – Bandaranaike - had been shot dead and killed by a Buddhist monk. Somarama was the monk's name. He wasn't explaining about the balls!

Bandaranaike was dead? Ban-dara-naike whom Del and Mr. Anthonisz seemed to have been discussing all her life? Dead? Was he sure? »*Of course, I'm sure, dummy,*« he'd said. She'd have to interrogate Del about that then!

Solomon Dias had been some kind of conjuror. A politician, who'd been embedded in Oxford, who casually adjusted the land from the solar to the lunar calendar. Flick! Flick! Flick! He re-ordered the languages too. 'Sinhala first!' Pfaff! - relegating English to last place and changed the island's workings - overnight. The European inspired missionary schools were just so much collateral damage. He was said to favour the Buddhist path, yet he seemed to have been quite a bit short on tolerance, ending up by compromising all the faiths in a land rampant with religion. Mosque and temple, kovil and cathedral – had come to stay. Lord forgive him, maybe he knew not what he did. He didn't seem to understand what he did to the Catholics

anyway. Branded by the grand Jesuit knights Loyola and Xavier, summoned to sup at the table of the Lord God and drink from his holy chalice of (real) blood. And as for the rebellion he unleashed among the Hindu deities! She thought of Kamal and the quarrelsome Tamil cricketers with whom Kit was constantly entangled in combat on the playing field. Well, they'd certainly do something about 'Sinhala first'! That was for sure. This Solomon trod unwisely. He stepped on burning embers but he had never learned how to walk on them. A sleepy volcano had been roused. And soon the lava was to bubble over.

Sandy's thoughts drifted to Vasantha whose desk was twinned to hers at school. They had sat next to each other all through Standards II and III endlessly borrowing erasers and pencils, bubblegum, etc. etc. from each other on a civil basis. This would be around the time when Sandy first started nibbling her nails (just a bit). Vasantha was an Anglophonic Tamil and quite the most brilliant student in the class. Classes were designated by language and not religion because all the non-Catholic children were supposedly in the process of converting (asap) in case they died in between in immortal Sin. And so kids got baptized every now and then, to play safe. Sandy didn't mind Jesus, but she wasn't too sure about God. It was a bit unclear to her what he was doing up there in this faith business, watching everybody from the sky when they didn't show up at church. Anyway, you weren't supposed to ask questions – oh, No! No!, No! and Suzanne and the other kids at school certainly weren't bothering. They had better things to do. Such as comparing skin colours at break time to see who indeed was the Fairest Of Them All (well, it was the Burgher children of course with their wayward European ancestry!). Only even there the rules were rather suspect. There was the sunlight to contend with for a

start. It had different effects on different types of skin pigments. *Pig-ments?* Yes, they didn't all tan at the same rate. And then there was a bit of unfair cheating too. Some children were saved from shame by being deliberately kept out of the sun by their mothers to stop them from getting '*sunburnt!*'

And so when the Free Dutch Burgher children started their ablutions and confessions, the 'unclassifieds' did not have to prepare for Holy Communion or Confirmation. A most desirable concession, Sandy thought. While she memorized her doctrine of the Catechism and dutifully carried out her prayers and penances, she knew Vasantha took temple-dancing classes given by a friend of her mother's. Her name was Therezine and she was in theory left behind on the shelf. Well, fact was she had a chap but mixed marriages were frowned upon severely by the righteous spinsterhood – so covert co-habitation was the only open option.

If A was for alphabet and E was a block of flats - then M was for Mother, that dazzling word set always dancing on a child's lips. And truth to tell there was indeed no space for Mary, Queen of Angels because it was Lilian who was adored. The aforementioned deity called on Therezine one sultry evening accompanied by her young daughter, after they'd been shopping in the old Fort district for first communion candles. The Fort was the place where the Portuguese had first landed when they took over Ceilano previously known as Lanka - before the Dutch saw them off and the English the Dutch that is!

Lilian had to get a veil embroidered for Sandy who was fast approaching seven and first communion age. There were seamstresses among the mothers of the little temple-dancers who took in sewing work. Veils, wedding trousseaux, just name

it - their quick, thin fingers deftly whipped up crisp white tulle and pale chiffon into things you never thought stitches could do. Afterwards the veil for the umpteenth juvenile bride of Christ, would have to be stored in camphor to save the frail embroidery silks from the tiny mouths of ravenous moths.

She saw Vasantha at the back of the room in silky, coloured clothes amid the riffs of sandalwood that rested delicately in the air. Tiny bells tinkled on her ankles. She wore jasmine in her hair. Her eyes shone in black looms of antimony, that is to say a type of native stibnite commonly called kohl. She broke into a very intricate stepping routine. Quite, quite fast. And then she stamped and stamped and counted and stamped till she burst out laughing and fell down in a heap. Sandy giggled behind her hands. The goddess Shakti sent sparks of energy through the cool floors of the temples that dotted the length and breath of the isle. Sandy could just see her stamping through the streets, leaving great red henna footprints everywhere. And with her went her three goddesses, strong and terrifyingly wonderful: Mahalaxumi, Saraswathy and Saiva, threading their dancing, weaving bodies through the crowds. Dropping petals of the flowers of the leafy Margesa tree among the heaps of poor huddled on the pavements. Not deigning to knock on the doors of the mixed-bloods and protected beings in their rambling estate plantations. She was lost for words.

– THE BIG SHIPS DOCK –

It was some months later Sandy's Muslim school friend Yasmin asked:

»Will you remember me when you go away?«

She'd given her a beautiful book of illustrated stories. It contained wonderful stories of faerie lands of the north. '*The Bunyip.*' That was about a man who stole bad children and carried them away in a bag on his back. '*The Gold of Fairnilee.*' That was about a bairn by the River Dee, in Tyneside who was stolen by the fair folk for eleven long years. And there was one about a young girl called Brideen, who'd carelessly let her doll catch fire because she'd loved a new one better. The '*World's Best loved Stories for Children.*' They sat right there in her hands. She certainly loved them.

Sandy had spent a week collecting autographs from the schoolgirls in her autograph book with its picture of Queen Elizabeth II (Her Majesty, Queen of the Common Wealth) on the front. Half the school class seemed to be emigrating these days. The Burghers seemed to be abandoning their homeland! The Modder twins were already at sea, poor things! She imagined them tossing out there frantically approaching the arid Australian land mass.

On their walk over the railway lines to the tiny chapel for daily morning mass, Del had asked Sandy whether they should go to England to live? He was in two (or three) minds. A field of golden daffodils appeared in her mind's eye. '*Beside the lake, beneath the trees, fluttering and dancing, in the breeze.*' Wordsworth. It was a poem they were studying from her *Fourth*

Reader, Everyday English Classics Series (1961), Macmillan & Co.
She didn't know why not. »*Why not?*« she said.

They'd purchased the school book for Standard IV English, at Dharmadasa's booksellers in the Galle Rd. They called there every term, returning with piles of slim ruled exercise books with the faintest turquoise lines, new lead pencils, rulers, sharpeners – and music manuscript books. It was always a very especially fragrant evening before the first day of the new school term spent protecting the school books with crisp brown paper and sticking the covers down, with the odorous scent of almonds emanating from the tub of white glue with its tiny spatula and a silhouetted logo of a pelican on it. And then you carefully inscribed the name they said was yours and a subject you were going to study on the front, in your very neatest handwriting.

29 Rise and Shine, 62 Tickety Boo. Del was forever trying to win something. It used to be scholarships but then he moved on to more serious pursuits - lotteries and bingo. *Bingo?* Bingo! A poor man's diversions: 71 Bang on the Drum, 81 Stop and Run... He had in fact, previously won his way to an all island second in government held examinations for civil servants and then the so important certificate papers had gone missing as such things often seemed to do. He'd studied hard at boarding schools, won leather bound books with gold letters on them: Goldsmith, Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Longfellow. He'd walked up steps onto stages to receive their works amidst cheers and applause. But when the spotlight dimmed he'd been forced to spend his youth working as a clerk on lonely tea estates, '*never seeing a soul for weeks*'. After great efforts on his part he managed to get himself a clerical position at Matara, a town at the end of the

known world as far as he was concerned in those days. Next stop Antarctica.

It was wartime by then. The Anglo-American South East Asia Command had eased itself into the central jungle land of Ceylon around Kandy and all the dancing, fun and frolics were to be had in the towns where the British and American soldiers were stationed! The Indian Ocean was not just teeming with barracuda in those days, but also with gunboats and naval flotillas. In 1942 the Japanese Navy attacked Colombo harbour, sinking two Royal Navy battleships southwest of the island. It must have been hysterical.

Imperial management instructed the Lankans to stop acting so squeamish, and prepare – if bombs fell – to shelter underneath the desks in the jungle schools. Chin up now! Luckily for them, the thrashing Lord Louis and his yes, milord, no, milord, three bags full milords, got from the Japs persuaded the gentle British giant to relocate quite satisfactorily faraway to Kilindini near Mombasa in Kenya, where the beastly bruisers put their grand Indian Ocean fleet to work in the invasion of Madagascar – now who could stop them? Bang! Bang! Bang! Ranavalona the fierce Queen of Madagascar, had surely turned pale in her grave!

D.E.L. Rodriguez (the initials stood for Delaney Ernest Lamotte) got his first appointment as a civil servant in Government Service in March 1941 as a stenographer at the district court at Galle, recording all the details of the hearings at the tribunal on his inky new machine. But the bureaucratic procedures were more muddled than a Caipirinha cocktail! He came to a tardy realization that what he would have really wanted to do all along was to become a judge! At least that way you stood some chance! But he was Far Too Poor. He would have to settle for what he could. *And that was that.* But then Lady Luck played her

hand. Someone fell in love with him. It was Lilian, a rich young convent girl, lovely beyond loveliness. Malicious tongues wagged and it was against everyone's better judgment but it couldn't be helped! So off they went and got hitched and honey-mooned in Jaffna. And that was when the *babes* started arriving. They were all born at Durdan's, the only Place to be born, amidst a great deal of fuss and T.L.C. (*tender loving care*).

Sandy's details:

Diagnosis Card, Durdans Hospital, Colombo District 3

Name of mother: Rodriguez, Lilian (née Delft)

Address: 83, Mc Kinsley Place, Colombo 4

Case History: Second child. Full term

Normal delivery: Girl 8 lbs. 5½ oz.

Treatment given in hospital: Caesarean, Suture healed.

Comments: Mother and baby doing well.

Date: 11.12.55

But the placement Del won in the civil service, and later at the Colombo Treasury did not bring in much in the way of a salary. He ~~worried~~ worked at that time for a boss called G.R.R. Grrr! That expressed things best. Then there came the windfall! He hit the jackpot! First Prize of 10,000 Rupees in the B.C.C. Sandalwood Election Prediction Contest in 1962.

Lilian and he had just returned from their holidays up country to find reporters with flashbulbs waiting for them at the flats and a great deal of fuss and bother. The children were asleep on their feet after the long, whistle-y tunnel, steamy train journey to the lowlands from the small town up country which was an ancient Hindhu shrine cum rail depot for tea transport. They'd been at their grandparents' home and were bundled off to bed in boisterous commotion while Del bravely attempted to tackle

the reporters. The next day their pictures were in the newspapers and everyone said how lucky they were.

Yasmin. It meant jasmine - in Arabic. »*Oh, Yasmin!*« Sandy reproached her friend. »*Of course I won't forget you - How could I?*« Yasmin looked sadly away. And Sandy? Did she not have an inkling then? Had no one told her that the gulfs of adolescence loomed, worse than navigating your way between the clashing rocks of the Scyllas? Only the hardy could get through unscathed. And absolutely No one could if they weren't bound fast to the ship's mast!

There had been a spate of farewell parties in the school canteen with soft drinks and sugary cakes. Every émigré student threw one while the wannabes watched in trepidation. Now it was Sandy's turn. Cakes and fizzies from Schweppes or Elephant House. Mmmm ... ginger beer. Rumesh brought them rebelliously, mounted on his getaway bike. *Rumesh?* Rumesh the errand boy. He'd been living with them just a few months. He was called upon to deliver a sacred Tiffin lunch box at the school gate for Sandy, filled with scented hot rice and yummy curries cooked by Lilian who'd set all her tin pots and chatties chinking on the burners of the little stove at home. The boy usually dodged off for the afternoons, learning how to smoke in the company of other children whose parents could not afford to send them to school. He stretched out his long, restless legs and his ride for as long as possible. The Rodriguez's lived a stone's throw from the school yard and he was supposed to pick up the Tiffin box and steer the dawdling child home at 3.30. That was the deal.

Not that he always showed up. One day he ran away completely. Sandy wandered home alone telling no one. Past the beggars with their wanting hands and open sores and

quickly past the Sannyasi Bunyip whom she'd been warned about several times. The school girls said that their parents had told them that he stole children or could lay a charm on you – just like that! The dried old man sat dolefully reciting his mantras in the street with his long curved fingernails and three lines of grey ash on his forehead with a blood red dot (a pottu) right in the middle of it. She did not doubt for a moment that he did!

Sandy had done a tyrannous deal with her mother about Rumesh too. It's true that she had agreed to go to school ... BUT, ONLY, IF, at the very instant the school bell rang, as she lifted her eyes from her books she would see him waiting under the umbrella tree ready to return her home. Immediately! Yes, immediately! Having already escaped once from her first day at Montessori, she'd been bargaining with Lilian a while on the education issue. Running away instantly in the first five minutes had already won her a victorious year free of kindergarten. But the next year she'd got an empty 4711 Eau de Cologne bottle to take with her. And the Tamil boy escort. She should try her best to fill it up each day and collect as many tears as possible for M please, and the case *might* be reconsidered. The more she tried the less she cried. So, unable to convince Lilian of her utter misery she got stuck at school for a long time after that. And they were desperate days, but such were the peace treaties of the times.

Rumesh wasn't really a servant as such. He had clear grey eyes for a start. He was born out of wedlock on one of the tea estates to a white planter and a native tea-picker - a '*coolie*'. Now he was about fourteen and homeless. His father had returned to Gloucester or someplace like that. Sandy's Uncle Titus once brought the boy downhill from the estates to his sister Lilian in Colombo seeing her struggle with her brood in the poky

government flat. They hoped the lad might perk up seeing something of city life. He was supposed to help out a bit running errands while living in. But Kalamba was not the place for an unsupervised young boy from the high country. His roots were among the Tamils who worked the tea estates, the backbone of the cheap and struggling labour force. Silver-tongued and slippery, he was too surly for friendship. It was said he lied a lot but Sandy didn't know since she spoke no Tamil anyway. People might perhaps be shocked to hear that he slept on the floor – but then so did everyone else, including Sandy. If she was allowed to that was! The floor was the coolest spot. But certainly, it wasn't for Lilian. She wasn't used to such dreadful things. Coming from her rambling house in the hill country (where it was much cooler anyway), none had sunk so low, so to speak! She had undergone a genteel upbringing under the auspices of the Roman Catholic sororities and theomorphic de-sexed priests. She spent her time on music, embroidery, poetry and religion with a capital R. Nothing to trouble the consciousness excessively. She'd worn starched white gloves to church and arrived on time in a smart black Wolseley saloon. Truth to tell, by marrying Del, she'd come down in the world, with a terrific bump!

Everyone slept on palm leaf mats until Del knocked his creaky plank bed together with ten nails. Del was no gifted handyman. He was allergic to physical labour, it seemed. He was the most impractical of people as far as hammers and nails were concerned. He just didn't like the look of them! It was as a dreamer he was skilled while chatting was one of his greatest lifetime passions. And he desperately loved dancing! He knew the ins and outs of the Quickstep like nobody did: *'For an advanced dancer, the man will do a heel pivot on 6. and 7. of the Quarter Turn. The beginner can use a chassé in place of the heel pivot.*

The lady does the same step in both cases. The step is usually danced in the corner of the ballroom ... ' Ballroom? A cigarette is a light at one end and a fool at the other as some wit had once said.

So Del was a smoker, a man of clouds and dreams. And light, amusing Conversation.

The wooden bed was launched in what was really Kit's room - when the bedding situation seemed to be getting desperate and bedtimes a bit too bellicose all round. He was the oldest boy and accordingly the only one who was brave enough to *Let Go of Mother!* Sandy clung onto Del 'cos there was just No Room free anywhere in the vicinity of Lilian who was jealously guarded by Jem and with the Jinx perched possessively there upon her breast there was absolutely no chance. So while Kit had his own room, Del and Sandy unrolled a mat each night and humbly slept on the floor there. Sometimes Jem the third kid, came over too if he got into a territorial fight with mother.

Kit had his space crammed full with comics, mostly cowboy stuff, the Lone Ranger, Tonto, Roy Rogers and Gene Autry. Brer Rabbit, Spiderman and the like were also likely to be found hiding out at the outlaw's quarry. Uninteresting for a girl except that Sandy herself was hooked on books and always had her nose poked deep into the roots of one. She was a junkie there. She sometimes even read the Lone Ranger. It took just one peek ... Once Granny Maeve up in the hill estate, had looked up from her knitting and sharply told her to put away the 'Woman's Weekly' which she had delivered to her, when she realized Sandy was soaking up the love stories there. Imagine! At her age! (Granny Maeve with her grand infant progeny had had no choice about the knitting and mainly had the monthly delivered for the patterns).

Hi ho Silver away! Of what use was a bed! Except as fortress for a pillow fight! It was so much cooler on a raft on the cool red stained cement that was polished clean with wet coconut refuse, under the swinging, ceiling fan that made a soft whirring sound above the sea noises. Kit strung the bed sheet up and Ship Ahoy! it flapped there like a slackened sail in the breeze. People could be shocked about the lack of shoes too but really nobody cared a hoot for them! They were horrors to be worn for school! They couldn't wait to kick their (faithfully whitened) tennis shoes off and strip off a starched school uniform (even if it did have a hand embroidered monogram on the pocket), asap and run Outside as naked as possible onto the warm red rebellious homeland soil.

– THE EMPTINESS –

Sandy proudly showed her new autograph poems and signatures to her mother. Some kids had really taken a lot of trouble with their coloured page:

*I called to Sandy to come to town,
She was in her bath and could not come down,
I asked her to slip on something quick,
She slipped on the soap and came down in a tick!*

A hand-painted cartoon accompanied the verse. She smiled amused. That was sulky Marissa's contribution. She was dropped off everyday at the school gates by her dad on a Lambretta scooter. She was the one who sat sideways on her school chair, lolling against the wall smouldering, pretending not to listen to Mrs. Senaratne's lesson. Really she was first flush and took in the tricky math all the time. Then Roshan had tucked in a 'sorry, goodbye forever' letter, apologizing for having treated Sandy SO badly – not that she could for the life of her remember any quarrel. There was a delicious stencilled painting of leaves done in oil paints by one of her teenage cousins and so the autograph book reeked headily of turpentine.

Lilian said *just a minute*, she'd look later. The cat had given birth to several sick kittens and it had eaten up some of them and now lay moaning pitifully in a basket. Sandy went to look immediately but it was dark under the cupboard. Lilian was as usual up to her head in kiddies and cooking, busy in the small kitchen filling feeding bottles, searching for Farley's baby rusks and contemplating the impending bed-wetting situation. With

three young children and a new-born she was hardly able to rest from all her weary chores. But funnily enough, she was usually to be found in good cheer. She had a little verse pinned inside her wardrobe door. No one knew where it came from:

*'I have only just a minute,
Only 60 seconds in it,
Didn't pick it didn't choose it,
But it's up to me to use it,
Give account if I abuse it.
Just a single little minute,
But Eternity is in it.'*

(Could be true, certainly, because you'd almost pass out for C₁₀H₁₆O mothballs if you ever neared the wardrobe). Once Del had written a newspaper article about her and put it in the 'Ceylon Messenger' under a 'nom de plume'. Oh, la! la! He liked writing things and before he had married he had contributed to a weekly column for under 21s in the 'Ceylon Times' writing anonymously because that was how you could say what you wanted to. He got into some stiff arguments with other contributors sometimes. So he tried to stick to safe subjects such as the joys of idling, the agonies of bus-riding, the perfumes of the Colombo socialites, stuff like that. With just a little splash of politics, if you please. Ice and lemon - not too fizzy, now!!!

Sandy climbed onto the chair by the kitchen sink and began to wash the supper dishes, soon getting distracted into playing with the rainbows in the soap bubbles. The little ones were fussing for their boat shaped milk bottles and getting into tempers because they were just too tired. The baby was wailing. The Nestlé powdered milk was spilt on the floor.

»When are we going to England, Mums?« Sandy asked her mother blowing a bubble.

»Ask your father,« she replied gently. She lifted Sandy down from the chair and knelt down to her at eye level. »I really don't know if we should. I've told him that I'll go for seven years and not a day more. That's when Kit and you will be through with school. And then I'm coming home. Don't think I'm not! I won't be able to bear it away from everyone for so long. We're doing it to get a better education for you all. That's the only reason.«

Lilian came from a large and widespread family of planters who had never left the hill country in a couple of centuries and were never going to either! Some of their ancestors went way back to Holland and had shipped out with the early colonists of the Dutch East India Company. The Portuguese and Dutch had interbred with the Sinhalese and Tamils to become the Ceylon Burghers. They were quite a mix but no one was bothered to track it all back. There was even a photo of a General Delft with a bristly grey moustache and shiny epaulettes that hung discreetly on a wall somewhere in their country house - but he'd been just one of many folks who lived among the quartz hills upland. Next to his, hung another framed photo showing the quartet that composed the island's populace - the European, the Moor, the Tamil and the Sinhalese. But it was all stuff from *once upon a time*.

Lilian had had brothers and sisters a plenty: Long tall Titus who claimed to have grown high by eating grass. His hunter fisher older brothers, Abe and Dodo. And Marius the merry, the youngest of the boys. Then there were her dexterous sisters: Celeste, Esther and Eleonora.

So her children had always been spoiled for pretty, new clothing, hand-made on the whirring Singer machine. And there never had been a shortage of child-watchers during school holidays. The older two, Kit and Sandy, were always packed off to the hill estate on the first day of school vacation to be guarded by an entire troop of young aunts and uncles. Whether Jem came or not depended on his tantrums. There were three Alsatian dogs to race around with: Rex, Trooper and Juno, paint-boxes, hunts, Balboa cigars to help roll and pack, wading ducks, pigs and turkeys and letters to write to Lilian - if you ever got round to missing her.

But one hot day when they *were* big enough to care, the island sailed away from them as they stood on the deck of a big white ocean liner, the '*Castel Felice*'. The island with its snakes and monkeys, its birds and flutterbies and heliphants, with Granny Maeve up country and Grandma 2 in the lowlands. All those sad aunts and cousins, slowly disappearing while they passed over to another side and were tipped over the edge of the world. And that was when Sandy knew why the spaceman had come: To bring the Emptiness.

Years later things came back to her: The sea tossing in the porthole. The shoes sliding along the floor to and fro, to and fro. Her father's tears on Lilian's soft shoulder. And she remembered how he wasn't crying alone. When the time had come for them to board the launch that would return the visitors to the shore and separate them, everyone was saddened because somehow they knew that it was there that their ways parted. Two minutes more, 6,000 miles to go. The sad eyes from the tea estate watched the white ship as it vanished from sight. The same people were never to meet again. Not in that hope-filled joyous way of the young folk they then were.

Years later Del wrote: *'It hit me hard that I was breaking up this happy group of folk. It brought to mind our fond Christmas goodbyes and all the happy times when we were then only returning 'downhill' to Colombo – not voyaging to an unknown future. I was very sad and confused and when the time came for me to say the separate good-byes to all those there, I could not utter a word.'*

Little did Lilian suspect that she had bid her mother 'Goodbye' and not 'So long', because when she looked for her a few years on, Granny Maeve was gone. And Granpappa Johnny too did not wait for Del's return. He even missed saying goodbye, as funnily enough he fell ill just on that very day. Who knows what of? Heartache? Maybe he just couldn't bring himself to say goodbye, my son - as he had so recently done to another. In any case he never came. And they never returned. Not after seven years. And not for a great many more. Things happened. The hardest things. The children changed too, grew older, colder, hardened their dark little hearts. It was the fault of the better education.

Sandy stood on deck watching the lonely seas and singing loudly to herself: (She had learned all hers songs from Radio Ceylon):

*'I joined the navy to see the world
But nowhere could I find
A girl as sweet as Sandy
The girl I left behind.
Cindy, oh Sandy,
Cindy, don't let me down
Write me a letter soon
And I'll be homeward bound!'*

Here they were like Yuri going nowhere floating off far away. Like a kite on a broken string. They were going someplace called Genoa. That's what the Neapolitan sailors said joking with the dizzy brown kids, skidding around on deck. They were on the big ship Lollipop, with a cinema, an ice-cream parlour and a swimming pool and it was en route from Sydney, Australia to Southampton, England, first stop Port Said on the Red Sea. (What happens if you throw a blue stone in? It makes a splash. Ha-ha.) Aden, Yemen up the Suez Canal, across the Mediterranean to Stromboli and Naples, up to Genoa to load and into the grey Atlantic. Twenty-one days in all. They had a cabin for five and a crib for the babe. And the sea sickness.

PART TWO

– HARD TIMES FOR HARTMUT –

»I asked for a boy!«

»No boys today, mister.« Siri's mean eyes were snake slits. A little man in a dirty sarong. But he smiled his cobra smile.

»Mista, I tell you, you take the girl tonight. Tomorrow I go Colombo and bring you a boy.«

»No deal, man.«

»Please, mister. I no money.«

»Take the kid away before I vomit, arschloch.«

It was no use. Arschloch! Arschloch! It's all you ever heard. It meant butt-hole. Siri dragged the reluctant six year old away. The German tourist turned on his heel and stormed out of the guesthouse.

There was mischief in the light, resplendent, sparkling on the leaves, on sultry people while the wind burrowed into all the silver silences of the sea. Splish splish splash. It was the first day of a vacation. For Erin Liscannor and a best friend: Sandy Rodriguez. The latter had just stepped out of their room onto the dining terrace, long wet hair woven into a heavy red towel, just as the man stomped off. »What's with him?« she asked Erin jerking her thumb in the direction of the disappearing tourist. Erin cocked a lazy eyebrow. She'd learned that from Robert Mitchum no doubt. A disinterested shrug relaxed her shoulders. She'd just ordered breakfast. »They just came out arguing, he and the little feller over there.« Sandy, the silversmith, that was her profession, looked over but the man had just slipped away from sight.

While they waited hungrily for breakfast, her eyes followed the slow progress of a band of laughing vendors as they dawdled along the waterline. A catch of squirming fish had just been hauled in. There were jesting voices, a knotting and re-knotting of turbans as a lively barter took place in splashing water and the poor fish asphyxiated in slow agony. Erin sat in icy radiance, her round Atlantic eyes monitoring it All. She was in her last year of post-graduate training in ophthalmology. Sandy could just imagine her at her projected future career, calmly probing into the depths of the retina, adjusting faulty vision, lazering grey star cataracts by the dozen from the eyes of their aging possessors.

And Sandy? Hydrogen, carbon, oxygen? Sandy was of less earthly matter. A casing of fine shell, a submarine creature long withdrawn into defensive solitude. Was it not said that a human was composed of so and so many milligrams of gold? And veins, lungs of blue rivers? Slow ruses and careful tricks were needed if you wished to coax her out from under cover. And if she had a heart at all – well, let it be of mother-of-pearl. »*Too bad!*« she whispered with a touch of ferocity triggered by the recent exhibition of ugly behaviour.

On the island, it was a year which was later to reveal heavy loss of life caused by ethnic violence. Erin and she had flown Singapore Airlines from Heathrow. Hours later, the faintly azure silhouette of the airplane shadowed Tel Aviv and Haifa touching down on a fleeting Kuwait in a sand storm, labouring onward crossing the oil sheikdoms and the glittering Gulf of Persia. Tossed up like a flake of chaff in the stiff trade winds, they were landed on a wisp of morning luxuriance at Colombo International Airport.

As they stepped off the plane they'd had every intention of keeping right off the tourist trail and yet they'd fallen directly in with it. It was *'Just one look, Miss!'* Ranjit who had done the mischief. It had been impossible to simply say *'No, thank you'* through the jetlag and the man had successfully commandeered them the moment they'd stepped off the airport shuttle. He was armed with a book of glowing write-ups penned by people who'd been his satisfied guests. A little while later he'd driven the two young women down the coast in his air-conditioned van, chatting non-stop through the Marlboroughs that seemed to permanently lodge in between his lips, while the sleepy sounds that came out of their mumbled mouths did not quite reach him. *'Just the ONE night!'* was what they were trying to convey to him.

It had been early afternoon when they pulled into the drive of the low bungalow with its rented guestrooms for tourists. The guesthouse was planted in a thick grove of palms around which a wattle fence made a feeble endeavour to stay upright. Earth, soft and fertile embedded the place, blown into drifts in corners, muddling in with crumbling leaves into a soil the smelted golden tint of a painter's palette. All around a reigning vegetable kingdom, a kitchen garden, wandering greenery, growth at ease, in light. Light that seemed to shine through the old woman who tottered over to greet them, draping a lucid strip of sari over her silvery hair. A stiff leaf broom constructed from palm midribs clung to a tired hand while a face crumpled into a sweet mad smile. She chewed a slow swag of beetle, the cavity of her mouth a gash of vermilion. From the cast of her features and genetically speaking, she just had to be Ranjit's mother. Somewhere behind the open windows of the guesthouse a radio broadcast its catchy tunes. It had been Sandy's first sure indication that there were pockets of the earth

where time stood absolutely, resolutely and rigidly still. A laze filled voice basked on the radio as all those drowsy island afternoons of her past flooded in on her. It was the Big Surf himself, Harry Belafonte. And he sang:

*'This is my island in the sun
Where my people have toiled since time begun
I may sail on many a sea
Her shores will always be home to me.*

*I see woman on bended knee
Cutting cane for her family
I see man at the water-side
Casting nets at the surfing tide*

*Oh, island in the sun
Built to me by my father's hand
All my days I will sing in praise
Of your forest waters, your shining sand.'*

A bay of a dazzling blue energy coiled around her. Yes, he was right alright. Sand shone! It shone in minds and in the deeps of the heart. Caught into the solar spell like every other dozing thing around, Erin and Sandy had crashed out fully clothed as soon as they entered their rooms.

Hours had passed before Sandy came to again. A slow rally back to the front from those fields of mystery that men call sleep. Her wristwatch read 7 p.m. A low rumbling resounded in her duodenum bringing to mind the fact that they had eaten very little that day. She tracked Erin down, reading quietly in the dark foliage of the garden unaware that she was turning a luminous night green.

»*What are you reading?*« she mumbled.

»*Mmm...? Oh, Reich. Wilhelm Reich: 'Listen Little Man'.*«

»*Wilhelm Reich? Who's he?*«

»*A kind of psychologist cum scientist who wrote a book. Got himself in trouble with the establishment. They knocked him off.*«

»*Oh.*«

They? Who on earth were *they*? In the sky the birds massed: Crows at feeding time. The hunger signal. '*They*' were the ones who always did the awful things. Her biological clock veered toward a false alarm situation. »*Let's go eat,*« she said a little quirkily. Erin stood up then. Something like phosphorescence emanated from her.

Ranjit's Guesthouse, south of Unuwatuna Beach. The proprietor didn't seem to be about but they remembered having seen a flurry of restaurants along the stretch of coast approaching the guesthouse and they soon found themselves sitting at a weathered table positioned on a wooden platform raised above the tide line beneath which the waves tossed. A raucous batch of Ceylon black crows perched on a rail nearby. Dusk was falling and big waves boomed deafening the cries of the birds amid clouds of spray. Food was being prepared and a scent of lemongrass and onion drifted. A breeze fluttered gentle among tiny candles where flames struggled. A few locals busied themselves around an American tourist and someone, slender as a snake wound his way over to them seating himself down uninvited. A diamond glittered on the lobe of his ear in stiff competition with the evening star. He seemed to be offering them a currency exchange. When they'd asked him for his name he'd replied: *Lalith*.

The crisp banknotes of the unspoken contract changed hands. After the transaction the man excused himself and returned to the group of tourists with whom he had been. If Erin and Sandy had been less under the influence of a long air flight they might have been more cautious about who they interacted with but as it was they were too overwhelmed by the transformation of their natural surroundings to absorb any warning signals on that particular occasion.

– THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE –

A day of white silence on the beach followed when words were rarely exchanged and those that were spoken only half heard. Sandy dreamed the time away watching the clouds drift in ephemeral sky while Erin sketched sun worshippers with big, bold strokes in her Daler A3 pad, purchased in Baker Street, downtown London. As the morning passed she slowly filled in the line drawings with watercolour – burnt Siena, alizarin, a stormy Payne’s grey. At intervals Sandy read, looking up from her book every now and then to watch her friend at work. Captive in her task Erin rarely noticed.

At one point a group of people passed and Sandy saw a man lifted out of a stainless steel wheelchair and parked upon the sands. It was the American they’d seen the evening before at the restaurant. He was crippled from the waist down. She looked up with a question on her lips but Erin wasn’t reachable. So back went Sandy’s pert nose into her book. Half an hour later there was a vivid commotion and looking up she saw the big man being floated out to sea on a raft pushed out by a group of swimming children. He was on one of those comic blow up rafts – a wobbling yellow island with a palm tree. They were all laughing. A very thin man sat on the shore and cheered feebly while a mangy dog ran around him yipping. The graceful man who’d changed their money for them the previous evening was behind him smoking a cigarillo.

Sandy fell asleep for an hour. After that she went for a long swim exploring underwater at the coral reef and yet a long while later the two of them took a bus ride into a nearby town looking for a snack, popping into one of the livelier bars at the

resort on their return. The bar room was dimly lit and as her eyes became accustomed to the illumination, she noticed the *Lalith* of the evening before, there once again with the westerners. A global village it certainly was! In the pauses between jukebox songs, the lilt of a southern states accent rose and fell. It came from the man in the wheelchair. A little way apart from them, yet with the group, sat another person, dressed in loose white cotton clothes. He was somewhat young in appearance and seemed concentrated in his own thoughts. Yet from time to time, the two women felt the eyes of the stranger upon them, studying them quietly, the red glow of a cigarette lighting up between his lips in the darkness.

Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday slipped by in an unperturbed fashion. On the fourth morning, disturbed by the sound of foraging, Sandy flicked open a reluctant eye. A cockroach? A scorpion? No. Erin burrowing into the deeps of her backpack, hauling out an arsenal of sun-protection creams, hair gels and insect repellent. Out came the eye-drops, rejuvenation creams and skin repair kits. She was only twenty-seven! Articles of flimsy summer wear, lay scattered on the bed-sheet among flakes of sunlight. Sandy turned over and pulled the pillow over her head. Erin slipped on a new pair of espadrilles from '*Monsoon*' and was away after mumbling something inaudible about breakfast.

Once Erin was gone, having considered the breakfast issue, Sandy rose rather reluctantly. She was in one of her truly crabby moods! Had Erin accomplished, single-handed, a hostile take-over on Boots the chemist — or what? She changed into her swimming costume and headed for the ocean before even a sip of tea had touched her lips. Now that in itself was truly extraordinary but it was the dawn kiss of the surf she was after

today. To wash the world away, to wring out all its tired folds and creases, the way one squeezed out water from squeak clean hair. Her feet sank deep among the dry white sands, making little smoky puffs and then she struck out toward the reef in a powerful crawl stroke, soon perching among the black clams infused by strange silences. Not a sound to be heard but the relentless pounding of wave on rock.

When she swam back a little later a group of dizzy little kids were waiting for her. They had been observing the stranger in their territory and impressed by the swimming, came running up to the water's edge calling out excitedly. Purple coastal flowers peeped among small fingers. A little boy held the flowers out shyly. She took them not knowing what to say and they ran away giggling in satisfaction at her bewilderment. In the distance she could see that Erin had been joined by a big hunky chunk at the breakfast table. Warning lights came on! Wasn't that the angry tourist they'd seen stomping off in a huff when they first arrived? She hurried protectively toward her friend.

»Dortmund, Düsseldorf ... Yes, I've been there...« Erin was saying. *»Your tea's cold ... «* she said icily to Sandy. Brrr! Seemed she'd have liked her to come back sooner! *»OK, cold tea,«* Sandy said and sipped it stoically. She glared in unfriendly fashion at the German. Ranjit brought fresh pineapple and paw-paw. Ranjit brought steamy coffee. Ranjit brought bleached deckchairs.

»Lufthansa from Hamburg...,« he was responding to a question from Erin. *»I run a taxi-service back in Essen.«*
»Well, we've not been here long,« Erin was saying ... *»Singapore Airlines, London, Rome, Q8. We transferred in a sandstorm. We're just staying a few days. I'd love to go to Thailand too ... «*

Sandy caught the tail end of the conversation. »Hi,« she said forcing a smile. »You fresh from Bangkok?«

»Sure. You should stop by,« he said. He looked her up and down. »Fabulous!« he said. She cringed. »You from here?« he demanded as if he had a right to know.

»Yes. No ... sort of,« she mumbled intimidated. »I don't come so often. Is this your first visit?« she asked politely, wishing very sincerely that he'd just buzz off!

»Lord, no! I'm no stranger here. I've been coming for years. I want to buy a piece of property and settle down.« (But he just didn't look like the 'back to the land' type).

»Oh? You like the place, then?« (A cringe from him this time).

»Yeah, ... well, I'm not so sure ... «

»So why not go back to Thailand?« Sandy suggested, (the sooner the better she thought).

»No, the offer's better here.«

»Offer? What are we selling?« she asked, worried.

»Everything you've got, I hope.« A wide grin spread over his huge opportunistic mug. There was something absolutely repellent about the man.

»I don't know that land purchase is permitted to foreigners,« Sandy returned, knowing it wasn't.

»Oh, there are ways round that!« He rubbed his fat thumb and middle finger together suggestively.

Magic dollars. The international lingo. Saddened by the fact that it was true, and feeling she had to say something, she said

»I hear that there's quite a scene in Thailand these days. All the restless navies of the world floating about, people prostituting their kids from desperation.«

»I don't know about desperation – but yeah, it's cool. Like Amsterdam. You look in the windows and choose. Cute kids here too,« he added.

They looked at him dumbfounded. His eyes were roving to the beach children now. The poorest, skinniest, most shoeless kids who had ever scampered to greet a tourist, were now calling out cheekily to her. She waved back.

»Aren't you the lucky one - they really like you!«

Did she imagine it? Was there some kind of a sneer in his words? Suddenly it made her feel like crying. She stood up to go. »Have a nice day,« she said.

»Have a nice day yourself,« he parroted back, standing up to leave himself. Sandy plonked herself back down on her seat as soon as he had vacated his.

They really like you? she said conveying a baffled look to Erin. It was an odd comment. He'd sounded almost jealous! But she thought no more about it.

When breakfast was done, they piled the fruit skins up into a little mountain on the plate to tease Ranjit and went off into a 15 second fit of giggles for no particular reason. When it was over, they turned to the topic of what they were going to do that day. During her chat with the German, Erin had heard that there was a brand new luxury hotel complex nearby and she was just rearing to go and have a look. She cast an expectant glance at Sandy. Noting an undercurrent, Erin didn't venture any further. She had automatically taken in the tilt of the downcast head with its straight dark hair carefully coerced into its long smooth ponytail. The traffic light was distinctly red! They'd clearly go separate ways that morning. '*Same old secretive Sandy.*' Erin thought as she strode off confidently: '*Bury your troubles deep!*'

– A LONG DISTANCE CALL –

Two hours later a tiny crustacean scuttled across the strand, scurried past the ten neatly pedicured toes of a girl lost in a little red notebook. The wind reared in Sandy's tarry hair. It blew all around her lifting its tiny particles of silver glass and beating them gently against her skin. She closed her eyes soothed by the shade of her new Armani sunglasses as she sank below the present time into a reverie of a long ago when she lived in a golden age with her parents.

He flew through the air with the greatest of ease ... *that* man on the flying trapeze – her father, Del. Before they left the country, he'd spent a year sending off transfer applications and attending job interviews at the Ministry of Finance and then the Government Treasury. Solomon Bandaranaike's head had been on all of the tiny purple stamps that Sandy's small tongue faithfully licked before she posted them for him at the pillar box on the Galle road. Then he got a big break – an embassy posting in America! And you know what? It all fell through just as suddenly. But Lady Luck was still smiling his way – she hauled him up again. Del got a second offer and this one did not fall through – a posting in the centre of London, England. Certainly not a place for pioneers or borderline cases.

A small pebble landed by her. The beach kids had been trying to attract her attention for quite some time now and she hadn't really taken any notice of them. The problem was that they were now turning into a positive pest since the dreamlike morning episode before. Having lost patience with her, they'd most decisively stopped being cute and shy and she was doing

her best to ignore them. Suddenly their cries grew more excited. Sandy looked up. It was picture postcard land. Erin was returning from her trip to the Triton, walking along the waterline leaving footprints in the sand. The children raced off to target her now. *'Can I have a biro? Got a pen for me, miss?'*

»Go. Away.« Erin said.

»Don't talk to strangers!« Sandy yelled. They ran back to her then. Mexico, Tunisia, you name it. It was the same the global world resort over: An evident lack of school bios. »Missie, you gotta biro for me? Plee-ase!!!« It wasn't a biro they were after – they were after some financial assistance. And who could blame them! Some got holidays in the sun, some didn't get a pen to do their school lessons with. Tough and unacceptable, but if only their parents heard!

»No. No. And No again.«

Erin pushed her way through the crowding children, trying to shoo them away like chickens. One of them vexed, threw a small stone at her. »Ow!« she screamed.

»A nation of beggars!« a mean voice said passing by. »Just asking for it!«

It was the breakfast guest. Hartmut. Ah, pleasant company at last!

Sandy returned grimly to a supine position determined to assert her territorial rights this time. Something landed with a flutter on her stomach. This time the missive was from Erin. She flicked open a glossy publicity brochure to read: *'The Triton Silver Reef Luxury Complex: Deluxe suites with balconies and ocean view, marble bathrooms, Jacuzzis and floodlit swimming pool. International and local cuisine plus sea food specialties. Taxi service, telephone, TV, 24-hour in-room service, cocktail bar, tropical gardens, fitness centre and beauty salon. A gymnasium, tennis courts and a*

luxury spa offer a range of Ayurvedic therapies for an ambience of wellness and relaxation. The Sea Lounge Bar has everything to offer the discerning traveller from devilled lobster à la carte to crackling prawn delicacies served with green rice and bamboo shoots ...'

»Now that, you must admit, you should have seen,« Erin said somewhat reverently.

Sandy was hesitant. »You sure?« Erin nodded her head as if she was trying to shake it off.

»Sounds a bit yucky but if I must ... «

»You must, « the devotee confirmed gravely.

»All right. They'll have a phone there won't they? E.T. must report in.«

»What exactly do you imagine they might not have there?« Erin asked grinning. »They've got it All.«

When they got to the Triton, Erin plonked herself down in the lounge and ordered a long drink while Sandy made a 'Yes, we've safely arrived' long distance phone call which went something like this:

»Yes. I'm fine... No, I promise... Yes, of course I will bring you some rubies for Jeanne.... No, I probably won't visit any relatives... Yes, I know I'm awkward... I'm from a different worldview to theirs now.... Yes, I know ... I know ...Oh! since you ask, I don't know really. I might take a look at the Government flats where we lived before.«

The voice in Ontario seemed irritated. She held the receiver away from her.

»I imagine it's all the same as before, Sandy! Maybe even worse! What on earth did you want to go back there for?«

»I'd like to visit mum's seamstress friend Therezine.«

»Therezine is missing. She hasn't been heard of in a long while. We found a letter some time back. Her house was burned down during the

riots and all her golden jewellery stolen. Her sewing machine disappeared too.«

»Oh!« Sandy gasped.

»You can forget it, Sandy,« the voice whined on. »You won't find anyone we used to know. They all upped and went! And besides it's bad luck to go poking around. What's past is past. Leave it be.«

»All right. I'll ring again. Bye.«

An aunt? Or perhaps a brother? She put the phone down. Yes, a brother: Jem. Storm-ridden Jem. The last of the Rodriguez generation? More like the last of the Mohicans. What was the difference? Whatever had happened to them all? Orbits had changed. They had grown light years apart. That's what.

»Tequila Sunrise?«

»What? Oh, yes.« She'd forgotten that she was stationed in the 'Cocktail Lounge'. *»And why ever not?«* she replied with one of those false disarming smiles you learn from TV commercials. The hovering waiter disappeared suitably impressed. Sandy looked around. Erin was some distance away casually inspecting the mall shops surrounding the swimming pool. The bay window beside her was occupied by a glistening baby grand piano. Her fingers itched to stroke its calling keys but she didn't dare invite attention to her very private self in such a very public space. She parked herself longingly on the seating beside it instead sinking into the silky cushions of a divan. In truth she was in deep waters about Jem and the government flats. In fact about all the things that had gone *missing*. Like her mother Lilian for instance! She had drifted sleepily down to the port like the unsuspecting tea, the rubber and coffee awaiting shipping from Colombo harbour under the auspices of agents and handlers, waiting like the traffic bound for the high seas,

for that benevolent green light from the Port of Colombo Authority. Off to a better life! *Whoo-osh!* Who's next?

Who was next? It was Lanka. She was just a slip of an island, a half-drowned floppy mollusc that had been basking on the continental shelf off the Indian mainland for about as long as anyone cared to remember. To stretch a point, the little thing was just 140 miles X 270 miles in size, that is to say, not exactly *large* – although of course she held herself for something far vaster. And quite rightly so! She'd had so many names because she'd had as many curious and invasive conquerors, many more than were good for her, lying as she did on major sea routes between West Asia and the Orient. On her west coast lay the harbour of Kalamba (read Colombo) and on her eastern flanks, turquoise Trincomalee hailed the approach to the glittering bay of Bengal and the mercantile attractions of the untapped Indo-Sino hinterland. The sleepy dhows of the Arabs had sailed for Tyre and for El Qahira (oops Cairo) laden with cardamom, cinnamon, peppercorns and sapphires through the long centuries. Around her stretched a chain of whitest sands. Sharks spawned in her river estuaries and birds massed above her coastal lagoons. But none of them could save her from drowning. With a lack of true guile and with misplaced native trust in a benign world, Lanka *failed* to civilize her conquerors. Like so many others she became a pretty pawn, tossed between the paws of the imperial dynasties of Europe.

Lanka's quandary lay in her memory. Or rather in her lack of one. A long while before, a Hindhu prince, Siddharta, had chanced to catch his reflection in the glass of a mirror. Whoa! Just a minnit – Who, what in the world was *that?* he queried. A mysterious being wavered before his eyes. Cosmic matter, conjured by forces of energy that manifested as men or as

whole planets? Yes. Very much so. Not abandoned, not exiled but homed in the unnameable thing within itself, able to recreate in its own kind and measure? Why, certainly! Well, then! How should such a body with a stake in eternity, comport itself?

You could say that from that point on, this prince had understood that a searching and a clutching for a permanent definition created a problem of stagnation and nested it inside a person. The universe was *in motion*, functioning impeccably to weights, balances and laws. Who should stop the sun in its cycles? And why try, pray? No statutes on earth and no maritime law enforcement officers could erase the inner codes of behaviour. He promptly gave up his princehood.

»*One Double Sunrise Miss. Three hundred and sixty rupees, please.*«
She handed the cash over, picked up the heavy Collins glass, removed a tiny paper umbrella that perched sexily against the sugar-cruled glass rim, and took a sip. Orange bubbles rose into her nostrils, tickling her sinuses. My, was that citric!!! She toasted the tree of Bodh Gaya and pondered further. What was Vasco da Gama to the people of Siddharta? Or Yuri to a Nereid?

– MOVERS AND SHAKERS –

From Bodh Gaya in India a very unwarlike branch of a Bo or pipal tree had been brought by the disciples of Siddharta and planted in the jungle city of Anuradhapura, in Lanka where it grew to become the world's oldest historically documented tree. The thing was that twenty two long centuries later, in the uncomfoting year of 1944, another Prinz had arrived upon the scene - Ludwig von Battenberg of the regal bloodline of Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Glücksburg in Middle Europe. He came to roost at the Royal Sinhala Palace at Kandy determined to defend his right to an extended run in the chicken coop and he was in any case very much of the opposite persuasion to the afore-mentioned ex-prince Siddharta. Deflating the Self like a bicycle tyre? Bah! He reached swiftly for the ~~bottle~~ .., er ... pump. Empire? Give me More! he roared.

Vegetarianism? No one got ahead with dopes like Pythagoras or Socrates! People like Lord Lou had the appetite of a squadron of Grenadier guards! Plus + an utter lack of fondness for other terrestrial mammals, a wandering moral conscience and a roving eye for a good rump. To boot! After all, human resources, that is to say 'meats' of exceedingly rare and interesting texture were there to be misappropriated from far flung reaches of 'uncivilized' global areas and could be processed through the most hygienic slaughterhouses. A touch of stolen spices pepped up the main body of the meal. A solid gem garnish and a costly silk dressing and there you were! Hopta! A banquet fit for a king! All washed down with several shots of Jamaica rum and a steaming cup of Darjeeling! Well?? Why not? The non-combatants of the esoteric east had lean

flesh enough left over for a spot of sportive blood letting during lapses of enjoyment caused by moments of recurring ennui. Moral restraints! Bah! Invidious spoilsports! *'The world's oldest documented tree? All the better for chopping my dear!'*

Steeped in Magna Graecia, roving like Ulysses, the stubborn clippers of the Anglo Sachsen traveled intrepidly from the dingy banqueting halls dredging through the dull and sluggish Thames water. To and fro, fro and to. Apparently they didn't understand a thing about pendulums: that exaggeration could set off a series of backward cycles! Trampling among the hallucinogenic flowers of nutmeg, in groves of Cinnamomum Zeylanicum and Cardamomum on an island where an ancient Bo tree had rooted firmly into the fertile soil of tolerance, did they ever notice that they were trespassing?

Had the enchantress Circe been in residence in Lanka instead of Siddharta, they should long have been returned to their true manifestation - a herd of rapacious swine! It was the devil's silvery tongue they bartered with - forked, spiked and eloquent. It brought them all the remuneration they could amass through hyper-activity, incognisant of their true malaise: *Despair*.

Far above the ocean the white butterflies that flocked on high Sri Pada were undeniably in a state of mild psychic shock. But thankfully the established Hinayana Theravada or lesser vehicle tradition of Buddhism advised them not to even try to cope. A great and ancient patience settled upon the indigenous populace for several decades and their acquiescence could easily be interpreted as consensus.

The alcohol simply slipped down Sandy's throat and the magical potion began to creep into all those intricate feminine veins and arteries, dulling their discreet functions. Soon it

wasn't just the Curacao staring brazenly back from the bar shelf that had turned an ocean blue. Well, she thought, the desires of the nobility should never be thwarted! Just a little cigarette should just about finish things off! How she wished she had one to light up! She went over to a table and begged a lounge lizard very courteously and since there's no one more obliging than a fellow nicotine addict, she soon returned to her seat by the piano, inhaled and let loose a series of perfect smoke rings. A Lucky Strike. Aaah! What a relief!

Argh! But what's in a name, anyhow? she battled on. Well, In any case one overlooks a hefty title at one's own peril. A name has always been a most useful tool for achieving a most critical and highly desirable shift of perception. Oh, yes it was! And it wasn't half a bad trick! For instance, it had allowed Count Ludwig von Battenburg, to mutate into *an Englishman*. He became Lord Louis Mountbatten K.G., G.C.B., O.M., G.C.S.I., G.C.I.E., G.C.V.O., D.S.O., P.C. British admiral, statesman, Viceroy, 1st Governor-General of independent India, 1st Earl Mountbatten of Burma, and 1st Sea Lord. So there! And what's more, the entire populace of the British isles rallied around him, a Germanic knight, taking up arms against the Hamburgers, Frankfurters and Brandenburgers of the continental heartland!

Oh! K.G., G.C.B., O.M., G.C.S.I., G.C.I.E., G.C.V.O., D.S.O., P.C.? That's Knight of the Garter (garter?), The Most Honourable Military Order Night of the Bathtub (no kidding), Order of Merit, The Most Exalted 'Order of the Star' of India, The Most Eminent Order of the Indian Empire, the Royal Victorian Order, Distinguished Service Order, Member of Her Majesty's Most Honourable Privy Council, er ... O.K.? Got that?

Yes, well. Um ... understandably - confusion has grown. Lanka, Seran, Serendip, Taprobane, Ceilano, Ceylon – how should a little island behave now she was growing up? ‘*Developing*’ so to say. A long night session at the Tavistock think tank could do no better than the ‘Crown Colony of Ceylon’. And so that’s what she had transformed into in the Great Game of worldly deception. And whose was the crown and the colony? Why, for a long while it had belonged to a most dear aunt-in-law of Lord Louis, divinity in persona - the good Kaiserin von Indien, the Empress Alexandrine Viktoria who pounced upon an English throne and squatted there from 1837 to 1901 leaving behind disastrous after-effects for both ‘her humble subjectives’ at home and her even more ‘umble servants’ in the slave colonies – although you could of course argue about that with the blue-blooded until you turned a whiter shade of pale.

A title! An appendage! Of course it brought success! Suffice it to cast a glance at a map for proof of the pudding! Someone had so meticulously and lovingly fondled all those remote places of the world and carefully found for them their lost names! Now would anyone ever have known that West New Ireland truly lay in Papua New Guinea? Or that New England lay right beside her? Rome’s in Georgia and Birmingham in Alabama! One could go on and on until one reached the very Disappointment Islands themselves. In any case it is to be understood that places do not exist in their own right prior to being named. Obviously instant possession ensues. Especially if accompanied by a small square of cloth with a few geometric shapes attached upon a stick and plunged into the ground with due pomp and circumstance. (As in the case of the moon). Yes. It’s all yours now sirs! Ready for leasing! Known in knowing circles as ‘staking a claim’ – something on the level of ‘*finders keepers losers weepers*’.

»*They put one over you, if you're not paying attention!*« Sandy thought, suddenly coming to with a shudder. She finished off the sunrise in a gulp of dismay, vaguely regretting its knock-out effects but at the same time livened up by a deviant stream of ~~gin~~ djinn-inspired reverie. The waiter reappeared in a flash! Not *from* a bottle but *with* a bottle. And she ordered an '*Agent Orange*' that materialized almost as instantaneously. Down it went.

Well! Back to the tricky topic! Now how she must delve! The ability to decide over the lives and deaths of others – A Just Dominance, so to speak - not such a bad proposal! The glamour of godly power was intoxicating! Why ever should not one man aspire to own the world? You tell me! Removing it from others entirely? Well, yes! That had irresistible appeal! Instructing, guiding and kidding the human race along? Why not! It simply was a matter of '*enterprise*'. One did it just to teach them! That's right! Bash! Bash! Bash! What was the lesson? No matter – (one didn't need to know oneself). Actually it was to teach them that one knew better! But just a mo, what was it one didn't know? I mean, surely, was it not so, that the signature of a great teacher could only be a student more intelligent than his teacher and not one that had simply been taught to venerate his monumental errors? One who superseded his teacher, and was in a new position to question his authority? Now, come!!! The learning process was not about advancement but the *containment of Curiosity*. The outright killing of the spirit of enquiry, no less!

For the experts on the world it was just a matter of infallible methodology. Since they had long since taken charge of education, rulers had always managed to effectively impair both the questioning and the learning functions and could thus

constantly invest stale beliefs with new leases of life. There were ample options open to force everybody to your way of thinking if only you were quick enough to seize them! Providence for example, had provided so many of the practical answers through that most magical of words: *'Trade'*. A straightforward sale of flowers for instance! *'Papaver somniferum'* to cite an example. Blooms left unguarded by the jealous god of sleep, wild dreaming Morpheus. How very careless of him! A swift incision with a sharp blade into the unripe capsules, when he wasn't looking, a spot of spontaneous evaporation, and you had something which turned strong men into raving sex slaves and cookie sycophants. The big O had ever been for Opium and it had brought some of the very softest feathers to a golden nest. It was an absolutely sound business venture.

Sandy lifted the drink to her lips once more. How far could the ultimate cage designer go? Napalm? She squirmed uneasily, and headed for the *'Ladies' Powder Rooms'*. Nausea or diarrhoea? (Both as it turned out). When she came back she found that her seat had been usurped by a bulky Hollander. In a way it was a relief – she knew that shouldn't be tipling mid-morning! She left the drink unfinished, paid up and went out to orbit on the terrace. There was no sign of Erin anywhere. So she plonked herself down on some steps, took off her sandals, stuck her bare feet into the sand and wished she could go home.

Home? The over-spilling, Noddy toy-town where all roundabouts guided the citizenry to the carefully guarded inner city shopping mall to be studied by hostile, policing eyes that dissected you like a laboratory rat? *'All the better to medicate you, my dears!'* And all around scampered the consumer mice lured by a glitzy display of tacky rewards for obedience among which

the basic provisions were also strategically stored - *on condition*. But the little mice never even troubled to squeak: '*On condition of what?*' Nothing had changed in an Eternity but the glossy packaging of the Nightmare.

She looked up at the very blue sky, receding into nothingness and went back to the lounge looking dejectedly for her circulating friend. She stood around for a few moments taking in the somnambular lounge with its discreet lighting, luxurious leather fittings and *refreshments*: Bottles of alcohol lined the shelves in battle regalia waiting to deliver the punches of bewilderment and disorientation. The waiter bustled over. She had as little defence as the next woman and her lack of resistance irritated her.

»*Stop being so humble!*« she snapped at him disgusted by his obsequiousness.

»*Take a seat, Ma Dame! What can I bring you, please! A dash of gin?*« She could have killed him!

»*A 'Savoy Corpse Reviver',*« she almost spat! »*No, on second thoughts, make that a glass of water, please. Purest Evian - with a dash of polar ice.*« He went away delighted to have once more been 'of service'!

Sandy was just beginning to mount her very high rocking-horse but she couldn't stop herself. Mineral water! Where had it made its way to her from? The Alps? Argentina? '*What is wrong with the Kalu Ganga down the road?*' she enquired of herself indignantly. The same thing that was wrong with the sun of course - solar power was not an option open to any of the equatorial nations because like air it could at the moment not be canned, sold or taxed! And that was why the topic remained

quietly un-touched upon by the counselling, consoling and charitable all-knowing *super nations*.

Democracy you could forget, Sandy decided, because you would already have to have it in order to establish it and things were never allowed to get that far. It had never yet arrived anywhere in the world and never could. 1% 'owned' at least 70% of the world's wealth, if not more, through a most carefully maintained system of screwing one's own nation. In an honest world you'd call it criminal racketeering, but they were not in one. Besides, the mice were determined to stay fast asleep most of the time, only participating in their own lives like sleepwalkers and entirely missing the point of the exercise. And their indifference and co-involvement was carefully engineered by busy manipulators of the public spectrum as initiated by the 1st Viscount Northcliffe, Mr. Harmsworth, who established the tabloid press — the most canny tool yet for misguidance of the uncommon people. Would they ever be able to question what might have happened? *To them?* Not likely! It would be like trying to de-program a Moonie. Or get a Manchurian to remember his encrypting. Freedom? God forbid it! What was needed was the strong arm of the law to keep unruly outlandish next door neighbours in order! How about a public jury system to pass or veto government decisions? Thank you but very firmly, No thanks. That could call for *an effort*. How could anyone return rights to a mouse people who weren't keen on having any? That pariah theme of *independence* again!

There no longer was of course any believable threat to survival of the race — the previous excuse for violence. But funnily enough people still voted in those who opted for militarized thrones. Had the imperial classes escaped again from the history books they'd been locked away in? Governance

attracted cliques of self-elected, self-interested authoritarians who clung to the mind-set of a medieval fortress. Disease having long been brought under control, the ever busy apothecary had a new challenge – *to recreate it*. What do those dopes feed on? Sandy asked herself, already hearing in her head the thud of a dull answer. *‘Sechs Pfund Ochsenfleisch ergeben eine gute Suppe!’*

Now, come on, be a sport! said another voice in Sandy’s head; ‘Putting a spin on something doesn’t mean *misrepresenting* the truth to achieve a dishonest end! Really! You go too far! It’s all covered in the book of fair play and the rules of bowling! Read the microdot: *‘What’s mine is not yours and what’s yours is mine. Make your paw mark on the dotted line ... OK?’*

How long would the populace hold out? Or blunder on to Armageddon? She took a big slug on her Corpse Killer. Or was that a Corpse Reviver? Water? Never mind. *Where on earth was Erin?*

– A GAG ACROSS THE KISSER –

She walked round the mall twice and returned. There was no sign of Erin, so she sat down again in the lounge to wait.

Ah, wasn't it just great to be on holiday where the sun never sets for Thomas Cook!

But how many gun boats does a small country need? And how many drinks is one drink too many? She quizzed herself. Well, it was another one of those things — nobody could tell you!

She caught the big brown eye of the waiter. Time for a top up it enquired telepathically. He came over with the drinks card and stood there waiting patiently with his hands folded across his neat sarong while she pored over the names: '*Alabama Slammer*', '*Dumping in Demerara*', '*Pink Peril*'... What should she try this time? Damn! She didn't want a '*Cuba Libre*' (*Who did?*) What was that wretched drink named after Hemingway? The one he discovered when he went off to broaden his (extreme) experiences and improve his table talk? Ah, never mind!

»An '*Adios Motherfucker*', please,« she ordered. Aw, what's in name?

The waiter smiled benignly. That famous lying Lankan Smile. Just the same way they did when the U.S. and British fleet settled themselves snugly into the pristine lagoon of Trincomalee all those years ago. For who could reason with them? Possessions! Dominions, potentates, prelates, territories, liberties, nation states – they had had them by the dozen from Tristan de Cunha to Tuvalu, from the Gulf of St. Lawrence to Antarctica. White Rajahs from Eton had moved in on Sarawak and Sir Cecil had seen to it that by 1914 the United Kingdom had commandeered nearly 30% of Africa's population.

Sir Cecil? Sir Cecil Rhodes! *'To think of these stars that you see overhead at night, these vast worlds which we can never reach. I would annex the planets if I could; I often think of that. It makes me sad to see them so clear and yet so far.'* And so free perhaps?

How to keep the public pliant, ruined, manageable — and breeding? A good war every now and then beat them to their knees and got rid of most of the sub standard males who might otherwise stop the seizure of rights to grazing and watering. Nevertheless, even stone blind Del had had begun to have serious doubts, »*Er... to smoke or not to smoke ... er ... what was the question? Sorry. 'Senior Service', 'Capstan' or 'Navy Cut'?*«

Ah, yes, he inhaled his nicotine and quizzed himself: How to reconcile two opposites? Monarchy was not autarchy and never could be. I mean did a tree have to be granted authority to grow? And as for all this business of blue blood — I mean — *blue* blood? The poor died so quietly. So wasn't it all just an excuse? An excuse? An excuse for what? Monopoly? No. These were not games that were being played — *because there were no rules*. It was about seduction. *'Couldn't I tempt you with another ... crime? Go on just a little one! For old times' sake — I won't tell. I promise! I'm in if you are!'*

Hah! Annexing the stars! It was just the beginning of the mission! How boundless was this *liberty* of theirs! And what in heaven's name was a Crown Colony? Was Lanka really an 'ally'? Of whom then? And what could a tiny pacifist nation *do*? By the year 1942 the grab for territory peaked: War erupted across the globe like a series of ugly sores. Too late for homeopathic flower remedies. Vaccination? It was it to be a bad case of Death.

Well, who could tell about the wrongs and rights of it? No sooner had the blood dried in the ground after the second ruinous world war, than the princely were back at their stale old rituals, re-instating a non-sense-ical state of belief with a severe de-bunking of Lanka's Declaration of Independence! In reality Her Britannic Majesty, Elizabeth II renewed her Affirmation of Possession: *'I declare before you all that my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong.'*

On the 2nd of June 1953, the ruler of the waves and wildlife was back in circulation with the concept of 'a Common Wealth of Nations'. It was that sad 'I' - the 1st representative of the 1st class packaged gene, speaking: *I, Head of the Commonwealth, I, Supreme Governor of the Church of England, I, Duke of Normandy, I, Lord of Mann, I, Paramount Chief of Fiji. I, Queen of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Jamaica, Barbados, the Bahamas, Grenada, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, and Saint Erins and Nevis, etc. – Ahem ... and Heaven too perhaps? So 'disrespectful' to 'er majesty, eh? The slaves tut-tutted shaking their solid wooden heads. But is she not disrespectful to Everyone Else?*

Yes ... well, perhaps. But the gown? How about that gown, now? The embroidered Coronation gown! Ah, yes! *That* gown. Floral emblems adorned her mortal body. No flower lovelier than the red rose of Tudor England, a thistle for the thorny Scot, a leek for lukewarm Wales. Shamrock for shattered Eire, wattle for the continent Terra Australis, a maple leaf for the lands of the first nations of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, a fern for 'New' Zealand, protea for South Africa, cotton, jute and wheat for the green valleys of Punjab and Pakistan. And two lotus

flowers, one for India and the other for Ceylon. 'My' Ceylon. Certainly, a length of embroidered fabric and a rifled Koh-i-noor could take a girl a long way. It qualified you to seize, to annex and to coerce territories. O Queen, it was a most formidable gown. It begot a 'European Theatre of War', atomic missionaries and an iron curtain. Concocted from 'Little Boy', 'Fat Man' and 'Elona Gay'. From Dresden, Hiroshima and Sobibor. Purchased by 39 million dead men now rotting in the sub-soils. Was it all some kind of sick and private joke?

»*Why don't you at least try it out? You might like it?*« a voice nearby was saying. It was Erin speaking, interrupting the fury in Sandy's embattled head.

»*Oh, hi Erin. What's that? What did you say?*«

»*I said, Why don't you try it out? You might like it.*«

»*What? Bribery...?*«

»*The swimming pool, idiot.*«

»*Oh. Many be ... I mean maybe. Later. I might drown right now.*«

»*You're drunk, Sandy. The pool's fabulous. Utterly.*«

Erin went back to the heavily chlorinated pool dripping and slipping alluringly on the shiny tiles, while several pairs of appreciative eyes followed her progress. Sandy watched her disappear with a double-flip dive into the blue pool.

– MARIA AND THE TOUCH-ME-NOTS –

Maria Montessori was the woman who in 1896, had become Italy's first female medical doctor. She then got herself thrown out of Italy by her co-patriot Benito Mussolini for spreading non-fascist ideas in the mind and went off to set up a children's school in Chennai, India. Later she toured around the sub-continent giving talks, intent on passing on her extraordinary insights in the field of child education. As it happened, Sandy's mother — Lilian Rodriguez (nee Delft) — was at the same time training to become a nursery school teacher. And when Mme. Montessori visited Ceylon, she happened to be among those would-be young mums who responded to her teachings like a heliotrope when the sun's rays first touch.

Dott.ssa. Montessori had written: *'Like others I had believed that it was necessary to encourage a child by means of some exterior reward that would flatter his baser sentiments, such as gluttony, vanity, or self-love, in order to foster in him a spirit of work and peace. And I was astonished when I learned that a child who is permitted to educate himself, really gives up these lower instincts. I then urged the teachers to cease handing out the ordinary prizes and punishments, which were no longer suited to our children, and to confine themselves to directing them gently in their work.'*

Lilian had explained the core of it to Sandy using *touch-me-nots*, the common thorny, purple flowers of Lanka that were so very hyper-sensitive that they retracted upon insensitive touch and just would not open again for ages. Well so too, she said, were the antennae of the unformed mind. It was between the ages of one and three that a child made its journey to thoughtful action.

It was essential to shield the invisible chrysalis that nourished it like a placenta during the critical time while its *nature* was forming - when it was in need of massive protection from the outside interpreters of its own reality. Maria Montessori seemed to have understood how not to make the child shrink back into its own defeat upon first encountering distressing stimuli. How to try to save it from retiring into the unreachable regions of the psyche in resentment, fear, fatigue or forgetfulness, in defence of its entity. The principal task of any guardian or educator was to hinder blocking mechanisms from locking permanently into position.

Lilian went on to explain that she thought a person could observe this if they were willing to look beyond with clear eyes. Sandy nodded her small head trying to follow the gist of it. Children were notoriously energetic, Lilian said, you could go further - and say inclined to *run riot* — yet they were quick to break down psychologically — especially in adult company. They were also restless, clumsy and unsure. And uncooperative, (giving Sandy a funny kind of look at that moment). Sandy had put on her *Who me?* face defensively – just in case. But luckily, nothing happened. *Now why might that be?* Lilian continued. Yes, Why? Sandy asked interestedly. Well ..., maybe, just maybe, Maria had understood that kiddies felt desperately under threat because – that was actually the case! Like little puppies to be trained and led but never ever asked anything about themselves and where they'd been, with the deep respect *that was due*. Treated with disdain because they seemed inexperienced in worldly ways. Yet ... she wasn't at all sure about that! She'd been watching very, very quietly and thought she'd caught a faerie shimmer of the just and generous human child, willingly, voluntarily, seeking and finding its own worthwhile and inventive tasks, steered and balanced by

its own reasonable volition. The confident, wondering, magical human child. And there lay an unspoken truth: The child - like light itself – possessed a *Dual Nature*.

A lost nature? Now wasn't that Rousseau? No. Not that lost nature, silly! She was talking about something altogether different, that is to say, the distressing, schizophrenic adult ambient around a young child, that it was forced to accept and would have to adapt to, contriving shields to vanish behind. How to keep it safe, steer it away from a false sense of autarchy, to mind fullness? Away from all that was false-hearted, that led to the crippling of the spirit and the forming of a tyrannous personality where vices emerged instead of ability? As Madame Montessori explained it, you could say it all came down – not to a battle of wills – but to a worthy address. An address that bequeathed to the child its lawful, awesome and sovereign dignity.

For example? How about ... *Hoheit* (Your Highness), *Majestät* (Your Greatness). *Excellency?* *Your Omnipotence?* Or how about '*Your Megalomania?*' Would that work? Was that what she'd meant? NO!

'Burn the upstart witch!' screamed the Hexenjäger. *'I will have this! And I will have that!'* shouted the Pharisees and sea commanders. *'You will confess under torture'*, bullied the popes and Holy Roman emperors. OMG! What had gotten conjured up in those three first vital years of childhood? A kind, cherishing, ~~villifying~~ vivifying nature? Or were the vices seven nearer to hand in the aristocratic courts of a narcissistic world? Could it have been those awful addresses that did the damage? In those critical formative years?

Hmmm ... Madame Montessori moved among the masses. And Lilian? Well, in those so faraway days, Lilian moved among the Carmelites - escapees from captive Eire, holy men from Leopold III's Belgium, Cistercians, Jesuits, Dominicans ... They were there to missionize - but what was their message? And did they have an inkling of the basic decency of the autonomous, undefeated, unimpeded human child? Could they advance a free born spirit's path to divinity? Or would they wound it, stain its clean heart with their tormented fears, placing all its magical creativity in a distant hope of resurrection, in a murdered man nailed to a crucifix? Had not the priestly classes failed the Christ? Had they not usurped executive mandates? Were they not steeped in materialistic schemes contrived to conduct the human spirit into abject bondage through the staging of mass rites and inexplicable ceremonies? The eating of a body of a victim of human sacrifice? The drinking of a chalice of blood? Were these not sinister and sombre symbols of a macabre world? And did not a crucifixion also carry with it a subliminal message from the crucifix-makers? About an age of endless punishment - for sins unknown? *That all eternal debit account?*

A little scene from those halcyon days: A rainy evening in the early sixties. Sandy sat perched on a stool in front of a bright new looking glass. Sandy's mum was with her loyal confidante, Therezine the seamstress. They chatted dreamily on the porch while the mosquitoes flit about and the wet crickets chirped loudly. The new communion veil was being fitted.

» ... *First they behave atrociously so as to create problems. Then they 'save' us. You'll hear no end of everything they have done 'for us'. And the trouble is we believe it. The men and women roosting on the higher echelons of the caste system don't give a damn -*«, Lilian was saying when she was suddenly cut short.

»Do they know what they do to the human race?« the little seamstress had fired up in indignation. (A rich client of hers was refusing to pay the price agreed *after* an entire wedding trousseau had been sewn, embroidered and delivered!)

»I guess not,« Lilian had said into the deep dark long ago. Therezine tossed back her head rebelliously. Her sari slipped from her shoulder softly. She draped it back in a sweep of fuchsia flowers and pinned on.

»They surely know no better,« Lilian said sadly. »It's the competitive culture we tolerate.« Her kind eyes fell on a print of a painting on a shiny June page of a calendar. It was 'The Birthday of the Infanta Doña Margarita de Austria' by Velasquez. »You see, it's the thwarted doll-children who are the heirs of the earth. Not you, I or the rest. It is their projection that is unfolding here on our island, too. Everything is tailored for their protection.«

»And we? What are we doing here, where is our place?« Therezine demanded.

»We are watching.«

»Watching? Watching what?«

»A remote encounter with reality,« Lilian said.

The thoughts of her thoughtful Tamil friend wandered away as they pinned and placed tucks in the fabric. They wandered to the words of the Holy Communion prayer from the Sacrifice of the Latin Mass for the 5th Sunday after Pentecost which she had just attended: *Panīs, quem ego dédero, caro mea est pro saeculi vita.* (The bread that I will give is My Flesh for the life of the world. John vi. 52). What on earth was being suggested? *Give up?* Everything? *For whose benefit?*

Lilian's eyes were like two deep wells. Outside the great street splashed noisily with the swish of wet tyres and rickshaws

wading through the puddles. A turgid night lay ahead. Two black umbrellas topped the hedge and travelled along it seemingly in a hurry. Sandy's head popped up like a jack-in-the-box. Lilian pointed to the Infanta. »*Now, I ask you, could that child move for clothes?*«

Was her mother talking about her? Sandy fidgeted awkwardly with her new communion veil and swivelled back to follow her mother's gaze which now fell critically upon the calendar princess. But at that moment her own head and gyrating torso were firmly pulled back by two pairs of determined female hands. »*Can you never stay still!*« Lilian shook her in a brief show of vexation and a box of shiny silver pins tipped very upsettely to the floor. They bounced in all directions like the raindrops and fell back together in a magnetized mass. Sandy shook herself mother-free and started to pick the sharp and tiny artefacts up. She'd been carefully studying the pictures accompanying the fourteen stations of the Way of the Cross in church that day. Sharp nails and a crown of thorns. The little pins were like the lances of the Roman soldiers that pierced the side of Christ. One by one by one.

»*Prickly thing!*« Lilian scolded her. There was a little tussle and the child doll was stood up firmly once more by the dressing mother. A flurry of stiff white net was impatiently rearranged and falling tresses re-pinned onto a twisty head with tight black hair grips. The crown of artificial flowers was slipped on top to hold it all in position.

»*There what do you think?*« Lilian asked Therezine, beaming. The young mother and her friend sat back to study the Madonnaesque effect. There was no doubt about it. The seamstresses had done it again! An exquisite job! The child was finally beatified.

Oooh! Lilian experienced a sudden crippling twinge just then and her face contorted. Had she pricked a finger? Sandy wondered. No. It was *that* baby who had kicked again in exasperation inside her mother. Lilian was eight months into gestation again. »Do you think it's going to be another girl?« she asked Therezine in wonder. Sandy, staring into the mirror and the vision in front of her, shrank back in horror. *Another girl?*

Bother that needle! *Now wherever had it gotten to?* When 'Independence' seemed to have failed for them in Ceylon – Lilian and others like her had gone to search it out. And where had she ended up? On the assembly belts of Frigidaire on the periphery of London among the displaced Poles, Jamaicans and other struggling peoples of the ramshackle nations. Harsh was the exile, not always friendly the people and biting blue the wintry airs blowing over the North Atlantic dampening every mood. As the weary years went by Lilian lost her gaiety. The slender fingers that had skipped playfully over the keys of a pianoforte became rough and allergic from cleaning and laundering. In the dull winter drudge of a smoggy London bus queue she experienced sweet and bitter chagrin. Why ever had they come? To preserve their culture? Where on earth was it? To speak their mother tongue? No one spoke to you here if you had an 'accent'. It was necessary to try to camouflage it. To practise their religion? Of what use were rebellious children in school uniforms refusing to go to Holy Communion? Hardship had turned its hard and angry eyes on her and the trying load of motherhood bore heavy on her heart. She knew then that no one would believe that she had once been gay and free on a green plantation. Did she even believe it herself? And Del - that daring young man on his flying trapeze? He'd gone Up in the world. That's where they were.

– FLYING HIGH –

Sandy shot up like a bee in a tizz and walked over to the wide French doors that opened onto the beach. The little children of the souvenir vendors were flying kites. She watched one soar up and plummet suddenly. Like a dead firework. Del. His brother Victor. They flew too high. They all did. The broken strings. You never came down again. Never landed with a child's hand to pick you up as you crashed down through the wind, to carry you home to be repaired. Anxiously stirring a pan of gluey flour, till it was just sticky enough. Careful! Careful, struggling fingers wrapped round a tiny pair of silver scissors. Chop. Chop. Chop. The shiny, waxed paper crumpled but it still stuck up the patch! There now! And maybe even a gay replacement for a lost tail-bow too? So you would fly brightly again. *Tomorrow.*

The waves frothed. Erin was back from exploring the mall. The sky was light and fluffy. In the upper regions airy expanses collided and bounced off each other. And boom-boom-boom went the breakers.

»*How many have you had?*« she demanded. It had long been proven that Sandy could drink a fair amount of people under any table, but she hadn't tested out this capability in recent times. She held up two fingers to Erin in the peace sign, changed it to three digits to prove she could still count. Erin hauled her away bodily from the cocktail lounge and they let themselves be blown around in an exploration of the swish hotel. Then they availed themselves of showers and freshened up, finally collapsing back upon the divan in the piano bar again revived by fruity shampoos and essential, essential oils.

»He's got it in for me!« Sandy said indicating the approaching waiter. »You'd think he'd noticed you can't stand!« Erin stated icily.

Yet what could they do? Who were they to resist the designer theme park 'Tropica'? Pineapples and paw-paws vied for attention among sparklers and party streamers. »'El Floridita'« ordered Sandy with superb confidence.

»A 'Daiquiri', thanks,« added Erin in quiet disgust. The drinks soon arrived in glasses crackling smartly with crushed ice. It was 'Happy Hour' - they didn't even have to pay for them. And so they sat there daintily sipping for a while again.

Security guards in uniform strolled around casting long ultramarine shades among the sun parasols and down by the waterfront, the sleek ebony men amused themselves by harassing the beach vendors who withdrew their souvenir displays to no man's land at the water's edge. A vivid confusion of bright batik cloths, towels and cheap souvenirs flapped defiantly against the turquoise seas. Erin and Sandy had of course even less right to be where they were. They were after all, guests at an entirely different, cheaper and shabbier set up but having the right affluent look, no black guard would trust himself to challenge them! Sandy's sense of decorum (and hearing) was suddenly threatened by an inebriated someone descending onto the baby grand. It was the chubby Hollander. She decided to quit and swaying like a palm, made for the beach exit leaving the bar resounding behind her. Glancing back from the doorway, she figured out that Erin was trying out lip reading. She was getting herself entangled in a conversation with a stunning Scandinavian tourist, who had plonked himself down on the divan in Sandy's recently vacated

seat, no questions asked. However, he seemed pretty disgruntled.

The conversation she could not hear ran as follows:

»I would never have come if I had known it was going to be like this,« he asserted vehemently over the din. »The hotel staff say we shouldn't go anywhere at all on our own. And after dark there's a curfew. But they won't tell us what's going on.«

»Well, what is going on?« Erin asked him, alarmed.

»Gruesome things. The people in room 16 partied late last night far down the beach. They crawled back around dawn and you know what they saw?«

»No. What?«

»Three dead bodies at the crossroads with their throats slit.«

Erin sat there stunned. The young man continued: »The guards aren't answering questions. Say it's not their job.«

»Huh?«

»There's some kind of a fight going on after dark, after curfew. You can hear things late when the wind dies down.«

»What things?«

»Cars screeching around, shouting, doors slamming, people crying.«

»I thought the Tamil fighters were up north,« Erin said.

»I think this is something different. It's an insurgency. They're called the J.V.P. - Sinhalese against the Sinhalese government itself.«

»Oh!«

»There's serious political unrest. In my opinion the place is on the verge of anarchy. Soldiers made shop owners open up at gun-point yesterday. They'd been ordered by the insurgents to stay closed. It was a show-down to show who's doing the commanding,« he explained.

»And we're the 'care-free' tourists on a package holiday, sipping our 'Piña Coladas'?« she asked, her head hung low.

»It's enough to drive you loco-motive,« he said.

»So we're to draw the blinds and concentrate on in-house entertainment on our air-conditioned coach excursions, while things go over the edge?« she asked.

»Sure. Why should we wake up?«

»Some party. We were half asleep when we were driven here, but my friend Sandy was convinced she'd seen a human leg burning on a tyre. I told her she'd dreamed it – I didn't want to ruin our vacation.«

»Well we could be in for a rough ride - the flights out of Paradise are all booked. See you later,« he said getting up.

»See you. Where are you from?«

»Copenhagen, Denmark.«

»What's your name?«

»Sven,« said the glum young man, loping off.

At that point Erin left the bar too in a sudden panic search for Sandy. She found her sitting on the beach chatting to a boy vendor. She'd just bought a lime green headscarf from the bright twelve year old and was wrapping it around her head as a bandana. But the breeze had other plans and Sandy went chasing after her new purchase. She finally retrieved it and returned to them out of breath.

»You're going where?« she asked the boy picking up their interrupted conversation.

»Switzerland.« A silver smile. Teeth like tiny pearls.

»Ah, Switzerland. You'll miss the sunshine, you know. Believe you me! It's freezing! Don't do it!«

»I'm being adopted. I'll have everything I've ever wanted. My own TV. They said so.«

»Well, I'm pleased for you. I hope it all works out. But, what do you know about those people? I mean, do you have any friends over there?«

»No,« he replied a bit insecure. »But it'll be ok.« His mind was set – cost what it might cost. He cast a worried look at Erin.

»Hi,« she said. »This is Kumar,« Sandy explained.

»Hello Kumar. Can we talk, Sandy?«

»Bye Kumar, must go. Good luck!«

The pals collected their belongings and headed for the pool area. Erin led Sandy to a quiet table and told her everything the Danish tourist had told her. She finished off by saying, »You know, I'm getting pretty nervous. Everyone's acting as if tourists are sacred cows who can wander about grazing anywhere. As if no one's going to harm us.« Sandy began to fidget nervously with her new headscarf. She was close to tears.

»Erin, we shouldn't have come. It's my fault! I insisted! We should have gone to Tenerife or Mozambique or someplace safe.«

»Well, it's too late for regrets now!« Erin retorted. »I'm going to go inland, I want to see the Bo tree at Anuradhapura. I don't suppose you want to come?« (Erin was er ... a Buddhist – yes, honestly.)

»No, Sandy replied. »I can't. There's something I have to do. You know - I told you before we left.«

»Yes sure, we said we'd split up for a bit.« There was a short pause during which she decided not to press Sandy on revealing more. She continued »The people at the reception desk say they can get me into a car with a driver for tomorrow if I share the costs with other travellers. I guess I'll take up the offer, then. You just keep clear of the beach boys, ok?«

»Ha. Ha. Very funny. You watch out yourself!« Sandy indicated the Dane who looked like he might be considering a new approach,

»I suppose he's a Buddhist, too, eh?«

»Huh? His name's Sven. Look, he's ok – just zonked. Like you,« she added helpfully.

»Hey, look there's our man Ranjit!« Sandy burst out. He was walking along the beach toward them. At that point the Dane abruptly veered off his course toward Erin and grounded himself with a group of girls he seemed to know.

»Hey, Ranjit!« Erin yelled cheekily. »What's the matter? Stomach bug?« He looked upset. In fact he looked very upset.

»I was looking for you,« he said, his face awry.

»What the matter?« He didn't say anything. Then a bit of it came out.

»That man you were speaking to this morning? I've had to tell him to go.«

»Hartmut? That scum bag! Didn't he want to pay?«

»No, it wasn't that,« Ranjit hesitated. He seemed ashamed. After a few moments he took a deep breath and said »He had a small boy in the room. Couldn't have been more than six years old.«

Two pretty mouths fell open at the implications. Ranjit became noticeably distressed as they walked with him along the waterfront. He wiped his eyes roughly from time to time.

»Where is the child now?« Erin asked.

»The police took him. I called them. I heard him crying behind the locked door and tried to get in. Hartmut left in a hurry. He left his watch and some other things. I told Siri to go too. It's true that I've been sending him to Colombo to bring back guests – but not this type of guests.«

»Well, I guess you did the right thing Ranjit.«

»Such a horrible thing has never happened at my place before,« he said, struggling with his feelings.

»Look, I'll pay for the shit-hole's room tonight,« Erin kindly offered.

»Sandy wants to stay on a bit longer at your place anyway. She'll be here so you can go look for guests yourself tomorrow.«

»*Thank you,*« he said regaining a bit of his composure. With his head hung low, he walked home in the sunset to his guesthouse.

»*Oh, Erin where have we landed ourselves?*« Sandy asked in dismay.

»*And I thought I was coming to tell you the worst,*« Erin replied despondently. »*Are you sure you don't want to come away with me tomorrow? Things are pretty evil here.*«

»*I'm sure,*« Sandy said resolutely. »*We could meet up in Colombo towards the weekend – it's not long. I've got to go there anyway.*«

»*Oh?*« No reply. »*Oh, why don't you ever tell me what you're up to?*« Erin said with a show of impatience. How she would have loved to have given Sandy a good shake at that moment!

»*I'll tell you on the plane back,*« the annoying friend said in a mumble.

What on earth was it about? Erin was mystified. Sandy had never told her a thing about what she'd done when she'd spent months on the island six years back or why she'd ever made that trip at all. But since there was no information forthcoming, Erin got talking to the group of touring holiday makers she'd be travelling with the next day. Sandy made her way back to the guesthouse, angry with herself for not understanding what was going on sooner. It had been staring her right in the face!

She passed by a row of beach cabins on her way. Jimi Hendrix's guitar wailed out from inside ... *Tell the wind to remember ... all the dreams it has held in the past ... Happiness is just an illusion ... footprints dressed in rags... And the wind screams – .* On the terrace sat the crippled American in his stainless steel wheelchair studying the horizon with an expensive pair of binoculars, his long hair a dark gold halo in the setting sun. On the steps

beside him the thin guy who seemed to have the shivers. This time she put two and two together better. That was a heroin addict. Period.

They stopped talking when she walked by. After a moment's hesitation, he called out '*Hi!*' She acted as if she hadn't heard. It was a relief for her to find Ranjit propping up his porch pillar, drawing on a light beedie. After supper, she asked him about the men she'd seen earlier. He closed off like a clam! And she retired to bed. In the dark of the night sleep evaded her and she lay there listening to the rough sea crashing outside.

– RAPID EYE MOVEMENT –

Between 6° and 10° degrees north of the equator the sun rose early. Set its creatures into waking mode and they hopped and leapt in feats of work before the clock in the sky wound them down again. Erin scribbled down the phone number of where she was heading for, ran a brush through her spiked blond hair and left for the Triton shortly before eight. Ranjit had left early for Colombo to find new guests. So Sandy found she had the run of the place. She went for a swim to clear her cocktailed head and then tracked back across the sands. The palms swept low in deep S curves, brushing the ground. It was here in one of the flimsy sand-filled cajun shacks that three lone fisher families eked out a living from the sea and here that Ranjit's mother lived with her daughters. Fibrous coconut husks were collected in piles for firing. Clean laundry lay spread on the ground drying in colourful bands. In the fruiting season, there was oil, juice and milk. The palms gave copra for ropes or mattresses and leaves and ribs for weaving into wind-breakers or roof thatch. The families kept a goat or two. That was how the beach kids got by.

Feeling mean for not having given them a pen, Sandy decided she might drop in on them sometime during the day. Back at the guesthouse breakfast had been laid out but she didn't feel up to one. It was the after effects of the alcohol of the day before. She made up her mind not to touch another drop on that holiday. She was just going to sit in the palm grove at the front of the guesthouse and nurse a throbbing head. She wandered around the premises looking for a deck-chair. There was a store-room behind the house at the far end of the grounds

and she peeped in at the window. Yes, she could see a pile of deck-chairs there. She tried the door but it was locked. Damn it! As she turned away a glint of something caught her eye. Something silver shone on the sand. She knelt down to pick it up brushing away the sand grains. And then she drew her breath in with a sharp surge of surprise! In her palm shone a small silver sea horse. A net deftly caught and spun her, hauled her in while she wriggled like a small and helpless fish. Her heart began to race.

Sandy was a jewellery designer. She worked as a silversmith in Covent Garden. It was a trinket she had made herself and delivered to a very special destination on that mysterious visit to the island six years back.

The white diamonds that were his eyes glittered and she heard a whimper from inside the shack! A sound of hurt. She slipped the trinket into a pocket. A stray kitten? A squirrel? She fiddled with the flimsy lock until she worked it loose. Inside the room she saw a tiny girl with huge frightened eyes. She couldn't have been much more than five or six. She was bundled in a corner bound and gagged. Her small face was streaked with dirt and fresh blood was seeping through the gag from a cut above the mouth. Sandy stood dumbstruck before she managed to pull herself together and free the weeping child. As she lifted her up and turned to the doorway a soft voice said: *»Put her down.«*

There stood a man, eyes a glitter, face of smoothest ebony and the silver blade of a knife glinting in his left hand. Sandy set the child down and she scampered behind the skirts of her long beach dress. *»Let's go,«* he said. A three-wheeler was parked in a leafy lane nearby. She stumbled out dazed, the tiny hand of the child desperately clutching hers as they scrambled into the small vehicle which disappeared in a puff of dust.

– THE HISSTORY CHANNEL –

Some hours later Sandy struggled with the knots binding her hands. Her kidnapper had used the ropes that had been used on the child to bind her instead. She was steeped in remorse. Why, oh why had she come back? Dreaming dreams of what? Nameless things lost along life's sad road? The door opened. He came in. Not so old. Pretty young in fact. Twenty two, twenty three maybe. Sinhalese she concluded. He wore a very loose white shirt over a brightly coloured batik sarong. He lifted a cigarette to his lips. It rang a bell somehow. Had she not seen him somewhere before? Was it not the loner who had sat near the American on the previous evening?

»*You can't keep us here indefinitely,*« she said insecurely.

»*You sure about that?*« he asked. His tone was somehow sarcastic. She was afraid. Flee she could not. But then through the mounting panic a huge tired wave of quiet engulfed her. She heard her mother's voice: *Someone's lost their senses*, it told her ... *so don't you lose yours* ... The hot blood subsided and her heartbeat slowed to its usual steady rhythm.

Truth to tell Sandy knew full well that tourists didn't always return from a holiday in this particular part of paradise. VIP treatment laid on was fake, a show staged by a land on the verge of economic ruin. But there were few who lingered long enough to comprehend. She knew the dread stories doing the rounds about this *'Island of Paradise'*. Dogs feeding on unburied human remains in the cemetery, heads in plastic bags brought by midnight visitors – that kind of thing. Most were connected to the unrest but when a government is on the verge of collapse,

non political crime also comes into its own. There'd been the Australian girls who'd watched too many coconut chocolate bar TV advertisements – they'd been tricked, violated and left for dead. A man from Stuttgart never returned from changing his currency at the back of a shop. A drunken back-packer had lost all her toes on a motorbike riding around with one of the touts. And as for the curfew, everybody knew that that was when things really got swinging! The sand-bags around the remote village police stations were for the protection of the police themselves who had to hide their own families among the tourists in the hotels.

»You'd better tell me who you are,« he said.

»Who wants to know?« she asked succeeding in keeping her voice steady. A long pause followed and then an answer: »Subash.«

She indicated where her bag lay fallen. »My documents are in there. Why don't you take a look?« He didn't seem to want to touch it.

»What did he tell you to do with her?« He indicated to the child.

»Who?«

»Don't play games with me! You're working for Lalith.«

»No,« she replied puzzled. »I don't know him. I just changed some money with him.«

»You were lucky!« he snorted unconvinced. »The last person he did that for got a lot more than he bargained for!«

A shiver traversed her spinal column.

»You think I don't know you're working with Siri?« he persisted.

»Siri?« She pulled herself together and replied calmly: »No, I'm not.«

After a few moments she stated: »It's you who was sitting near Lalith at the resort bar a couple of nights ago, with the American ...«

»Long John? He sits with everyone. So?«

»Long John? I don't know – the legless man who sits at the bar resort terrace all day watching the sea through his binoculars. Wears a black eye-patch.«

»He's ex-U.S. Army. Lost an eye and both his legs in Vietnam.«

»Oh. And his thin friend?«

»Gay English guy. He's a musician. Plays electric violin. They call him Skelton.« He smiled at the nickname.

»That's not so funny,« she said. »He's in a bad way.«

Her captor didn't say anything.

»What are they doing here?« she asked him.

»You sure you want to know?«

»They're watching for ships, aren't they?«

»Same as everyone else,« he said.

»What's coming in?«

»What if I said contraband cigarettes?« he asked with a sarcastic smile.

»I wouldn't believe you,« she answered.

He was silent then. She looked around her. They were in a back room of what seemed to be a sparsely furnished bungalow. From where she was she could see into to the next room. There was a broken shaving mirror on the wall, a rickety table, several empty cigarette packets, loaded ash-trays ... and some other more particular objects... a small camping stove with a couple of pans, gas cartridges, teaspoons, sealed packets of ... she couldn't see that far. What was in them?

»You guys running drugs?« she asked.

»No,« he said looking at her steadily. She broke off eye contact with him immediately then. She'd just noticed with astonishment the tiny pin points that were the pupils in his

irises. He wasn't a drug runner. He was a heroin user. And those boxes contained hypodermic needles.

»*Dying seems to be a kind of hobby here,*« she said igniting.

»*Nice of you to notice.*«

»*I've noticed a couple of things. Like Skelton's sick as a dog.*«

»*The doc keeps him alive.*«

»*If one of those junkies is a doctor, then I feel sorry for you all,*« she said.

»*We're the walking dead, lady,*« he said with a grimace.

Her kidnapper leaned against the wall now, he was getting kind of restless. He'd untied the little girl. So why had he tied her up instead? Did he really think she was part of the gang? If he thought that, then he couldn't be one of them!

»*C'mon don't waste my time ... you'd tell me if you were working with Siri, wouldn't you?*« he said impatiently.

»*Look, you don't seriously think I'm a child trafficker, do you?*« she asked, incredulous.

»*Maybe not, but you think I am, don't you?*« He looked equally offended. But shadows moved behind his eyes.

»*You've killed a lot of men. It kind of shows,*« she said.

»*I was in the army. We don't count.*«

»*Don't you? You turned into some kind of vigilante now? Part of this insurgency?*«

»*I go my own way. I hate the way things are. We're being looted again. Soft takeover. Publicity, entertainment, TV dinner, Pizza Hut.*«

»*Don't forget the dope and human trafficking,*« she needled him.

»*Nice to know you're conscious,*« he said. »*It's just us, the destitute and the invisible overseas management. And they'll bust us.*«

»Lot of pickings here friend, crops, raw materials, cheap labour – it's called opening up markets,« she pointed out.

»They've privatized reality,« he said.

»Sure they have, so what's your problem?«

»Well, you get to stand outside a train window these days if you're lucky. No place for more than one foot at a time though. It's up to you to hoist yourself up onto someone until they stop breathing, long as it's not you. That's the idea, see?«

»I know,« Sandy said, »But for all the discomfort people are still kind to each other on the buses. I've seen it. They give up their seats, carry other peoples babies on their laps, talk to strangers. You wouldn't see much of that where I live now!«

»Public transport's deliberately being run down. Like they want everyone on the roads burning gasoline. Even the day of the catamarans is over. Motor boats burning petrol are what the aid agencies provide. Folks don't understand.«

It was true. The bright boys never slept. It was a slow insidious takeover.

»Who's behind it all?« she asked him.

»Barracuda. Moving with the greed. Always feeding.«

Sandy shrugged her shoulders helplessly.

»We're not free,« he said with passion. »They never leave us in peace to go about our affairs in our way.«

»Peace?« she exclaimed. »Are you kidding? They keep the world pirouetting. It's sabotage.«

»And lands like ours get to play the 'Third World' – ?«

»That's the one for ransacking. In debt for life like a prison term.«

»The question is – when did we borrow the money we owe and what did we buy with it?«

Sandy knew the answer to that one. Sweet Nothing.

»*Funny thing is, seems it's only us who have still got resources to tap,*« he was saying ...

»*Yep, that's a real funny thing,*« she agreed. »*Hilarious that the buyers don't want to pay for the goods.*«

»*So when will the feeding stop?*« he asked her.

»*It's parasite behaviour – they'll keep going until its all consumed and there's no host left. It's not about sense, it's about a frenzy,*« she replied. With that he slumped down on the chair in a fit of despondency.

»*You Sinhalese?*« she asked him, regretting the effect on him of her damning comments.

»*I suppose so,*« he said carving with tip of his knife deep into the doorpost. »*And your country? Where is it?*«

»*I don't claim a country,*« she stated bluntly.

»*Ah, a girl from Nowhere? What's life like there?*«

»*The air's good. Clears the cobwebs from your brain. Makes it easy to recognize things.*«

»*Law of the jungle?*«

»*Concentration camp guard and inmate.*«

Their eyes met head on. He dropped his gaze.

The wind was rising outside. The dogs of the shanty town began to bark. He was beginning to shake slightly, to look feverish. Cold turkey. Sandy concluded that he needed a fix.

»*Untie my hands, theses ropes really hurt me ...* « she said quietly. He hesitated for a moment and then undid the knots. The rope fell softly to the floor.

»*Where are we?*« she asked rubbing her wrists. He turned away, a little unsteady on his feet. »*Who knows?*« he replied tersely and left the room.

– THE MOUNTS OF VENUS –

The child was sobbing quietly. She looked awful. Sandy had forgotten her in the discussion. She hurried to soothe the girl holding her gently, brushing the stormy tendrils of hair away from the small, hurt face. Wet eyelashes like lustrous strands of silk lay against the flawless skin. There were rough bruises on the lips. A tooth seemed to have been knocked out. Luckily six year olds grow new ones. »*What's your name?*« she asked in Sinhalese, glad to have done a language course when she'd been there a while back. »*Shantini*« said a little voice with a tremor and a sob in it. The cadence fell on the first syllable. There was dried blood clotted in her hair. »*That's a pretty name,*« she said holding the child close, stroking a soft cheek, examining her head for a wound. Thank the stars there wasn't one.

A patch of sky darkened in the small window. They sat on the floor for a long time in a stillness of their own, lulled by the peace of the evening sea outside. The wind was singing in its dark brown voice:

*'Sweet and low, sweet and low
Wind of the western sea,
Low, low, breathe and blow,
Wind of the western sea!
Over the rolling waters go,
Come from the dying moon, and blow,
Blow him again to me,
While my little one, while my pretty one, sleeps.'*

It was Tennyson. Alfred, Lord. Set to music. One of her old pianoforte tunes ... She sang the pretty verse to soothe herself but luckily its spell worked on the child too. The sobbing stopped and the child sank into a tired sleep. It seemed to Sandy that the waves of the sea were lapping against the walls. But where was the kidnapper? There'd been no sound from him a long while now. Subash with his fine taut skin, hollow cheeks, the voids that were his eyes. Perhaps he lay no further than the next room in a rush of morphine. She couldn't think about that. She looked around her surroundings more attentively. True there was no glass in the windows but there were iron bars across them. Escape lay past him and out through the front door.

Her eyes drifted to the floppy thing soft a-sleep in its child's innocence. Shantini. A golden eyed little girl. Where did she come from? Whose was she? She positioned the floppy limbs carefully, balancing the lithe body so that it did not slip away from her. She smoothed open the tight fists which loosened under a pressure from her warm fingers. In the small hand lay a piece of jewellery – a bracelet. A charm bracelet. Sandy knew that it was the one she'd made herself. Six years old? She studied the child's palm like a soothsayer. The skin of the perfect tiny fingers was printed with whorls. Faint lines criss-crossed in stars below the mount of Venus. *Like mine*, thought Sandy. And froze as a terrifying thought occurred to her.

Seconds later she tried the door. It wasn't locked! It creaked open on shaky hinges. An oil lamp burned dull in the empty next room. Wooden floor boards, sand piled in drifts in the corners, a few used syringes on a broken table. The front door was wide open but there was no sign of Subash. What mysterious turn of fortune was this? She didn't stop to wonder.

Her bag was still in the corner where he'd flung it when they first came in. She retrieved it and was relieved to find its contents still intact with her passport, documents and money. She hustled the protesting child awake, hushed her and lifted her stepping out into a dark night. Something had come alive inside her independent of her conscious will. An occult feminine instinct. A powerful energy was now flowing through her. The child seemed a featherweight as she made her way along the beach to the cover of a grove of palms. Suddenly a full moon sailed up and she saw in the distance a cove with a straggle of fisher shacks. They were on the north side of the lagoon of Unuwatuna where she'd spend a lot of time on that secretive journey of hers some years ago.

Her steps quickened as she hurried nearer remembering that she'd once had a friend there, a retired Tamil seaman who went by the nickname of Noah. Having just been pensioned by the merchant navy at the time he had opened a tree-top restaurant on the beach. If she could only remember where the blessed thing was! If he were still there, they might be safe!

When she was near the settlement, she placed the sleepy child down among the sand dunes. Not a sound around but the rush of surf, the dry leaves of palms rustling. Shantini made a little whimper. *»Now you stay right there, Shantini!«* Sandy whispered. *»I'll be back in a second, so don't run away!«* The child falling back into its dreams, curled up tighter.

She found the clump of low trees she was searching for and looked up. The tree-top restaurant was still there nesting among them! She climbed up a sturdy rope ladder and knocked uncertainly upon the entrance door to the small bar area. Someone stirred inside.

»Not now!« a grumpy voice said, »Why don't you people go to sleep sometimes? We're not all on holiday!«

She recognized the gruff voice and it brought a smile of relief to her lips. She knocked again more insistently.

»The bar's closed! Can't you hear me? We open at 7!« She couldn't help smiling. It was indeed him, the Tamil sailor.

»Noah!« she cried. »Please, I'm an old friend of yours, you know me. I'm in trouble! Please!«

»Who's there?« the voice asked more cautiously.

There was a rustle of matches, a candle was lit and the door opened. In its glow Sandy saw the sailor. He didn't recognize her but he was exactly as she remembered him, burnt so dark by sunlight that he seemed part of the night itself. But when he spoke it seemed to her, his teeth caught shafts of white light. Then recognition flooded in on him. He was incredulous. »Sandy Rodriguez?« Then taking in the odd circumstances he pulled her inside roughly, asking »Trouble? What kind of trouble?«

»I'll show you,« she said opening the door again. He wound his sarong tight and followed her wordlessly down the rope ladder. They made for the sand dunes and Sandy breathed a sigh of relief to find the child still there fast asleep.

»That's the child who was sent to the German yesterday.«

»How do you know?« she asked with a shudder.

»I see them come and go. You must both get away from here immediately,« he said.

»I know. But how? It's curfew and the people who are after us are about.«

»We try to keep our options open here on paradise island – wait right here!« the sailor ordered vanishing in the night.

Earth's moon pursued its relentless orbit. Sandy troubled and watchful, counted the slow passing of the minutes as the starry constellations moved overhead in their millions. A deep anxiety was settling in on her together with a chilling sense of impotence. But the child beside her slept on hardly stirring. After what seemed like hours the man returned.

»*They'll take you out with the boats at dawn,*« he informed her, speaking in a low tone.

»*Who?*« she asked anxiously. He squatted down. »*The fishermen – Liutha and Gunna. They'll put you ashore some place safe so you can get to one of the towns. The gang won't know where you've disappeared to. You should be able to pick up some public transport during the day.*«

He reached into a plastic bag and pulled out some clothes. »*Here, disguise yourselves. Use these!*« he urged handing over a threadbare sari and some colourful rags for the child. »*And remember that walls have eyes here. It's best you wait in the boat.*« She nodded in agreement and he lifted the child like a toy and carried her to where the catamarans were landed like a great shoal of dark fish and settled her in the hull of one of them. Sandy followed stealthily and climbed in too. The sailor threw a canvas oilcloth, some rope and fishing nets about them both and left.

– A FINE KETTLE OF FISH –

Waiting for dawn. She lay back looking into the night sky. The stars glistened softly. A memory awakened of an evening in June. It was years ago. She'd been sitting with the Tamil seaman at an outcrop of stone at an edge of the lagoon. It was a favourite spot for conversation. He'd just been telling her about a monk who'd been seen there every morning for a month, motionless at dawn, incanting upon the rock as the streaming waves flowed by. The Sannyasi had gone his way the day before Sandy arrived. They'd named the spot the 'Sadhu's rock'.

Sandy had stayed a long while ... It was in those difficult months when she'd had all that time on her hands and she'd spent it on a slow tour around the island. She'd been waiting someone's arrival. And only Noah the seaman knew for whom she waited.

He was a widower and his little tree-top restaurant was doing well with the new tourist industry. Sandy had often spent an evening there chilling out. »*You know,*« he had begun that evening, when he'd closed a little bit earlier than usual because there were no customers.

»*It was the cheap bargain that got the twentieth century. Now we're any dealer's. A red Ferrari, a pair of trainers, a set of false eye-lashes and we sell our souls.*«

She had been a little surprised at his outburst. »*That's a hard one,*« she'd said sitting down carefully on the rock so as not to ruin her clothes, »*It's the feelgood factor. We're always worrying about our public performance score.*«

»Yes, there's something fearful, grasping, and cowardly in mankind,« he said. He sent a pebble skimming across the water. »It's the implications of all the things we're entangled in. We permit terrific injustice. And that gives us nightmares. We're at A for Atomic warfare, B for Bubonic plague and C for Climate catastrophe.«

Nightmares? *Day-mares* he meant. Give us this day our daily bloodshed? Everybody knew *that* was true.

He gazed up at Alpha Centauri. »Yes, praise be to all the good shepherds in the sky,« he'd said, »The great profiteers and instructors, who beam down upon us now instead of the benign evening stars. Their programming has been very effective. We insist on being told what to do. So they tell us. It's our insecurity that puts them up there in the first place.«

Sandy experienced a debilitating attack of angst. It must have shown.

»I didn't mean to defeat you,« he said kindly. »My question is simply: 'Will the mass of people ever move to protect itself?«

»Not before it sights extinction. And it will be too late then,« she confirmed. »We refuse to take our adversaries on, that's all.«

»And you know where that leads to?« He sent a pebble skimming across the water.

»Yes. To the patenting of a grain of rice.«

»Exactly. They really claim they invented it.«

»The only thing they ever invented is the patenting law.«

»So are we going to sleep through to the end of the known world?« he asked. Silences in tangled water.

»You know what the world's militaries are defending, Sandy?« he asked some time after.

»I don't think they know,« she said.

»They're defending their false belief in themselves. No one has the courage to face up to the errors of past generations. So, we're playing out some kind of fatalistic tragedy instead.«

»We don't get to challenge the history books, Noah. And we're awful scared of making fools of ourselves. The people who try to control the world know that. The social climate is tilted to steer us into losing emotional control collectively.«

»What we don't do Sandy, is guard ourselves in any efficient way from those who want to see the universe contained in an imploding centralized cage. We're being herded into an open prison, convenient to fathom, easy for 'governance' – As you know, there is no such thing. It's a word invented purely for trickery. And folks are into sport and team spirit and have learned that it's best to look the other way when punishment is being meted out on innocent targets. Who owns this system? Why does no one ask?«

»People like their lies gift-wrapped,« she answered.

»Those lies make the will pliant, and replace independence of judgement with nonsense.«

»I don't think that bothers most people. Lots insist that God's on his way through space right now and will save the world at the last minute. He's just waiting for an opportune moment.«

»Chief Executive Officer in the sky? There'll be no hostile takeover of our sphere. Whether we accept it or not we've been left a legacy.«

»And what's that?« she asked him.

»A Will. It's up to us what we do here with all we now know. We are the causes. And the creators. We start the chain reactions off.«

»Since we don't seem to want to steer, Noah, we're glad to go with the flow of the thing.«

»And bang goes the brain!« he rumbled.

He climbed onto the rocks. That bee in his bonnet sure was buzzing! His baritone lilted above the booming of the ocean waves. She could imagine it resounding deep underwater in the steamy engine rooms of ships he'd served on as they propelled their route onward. Was there anyone out there, anywhere who would listen?

»*Our exit from meaninglessness hinges on duality. In polar ideas that can embrace opposites,*« he said.

»*You've lost me now.*«

»*We must never think we know what freedom is until we are free,*« he finished.

They fell quiet, conscious of a common plight. It had become clear to many that in the twentieth century, humankind seemed to have given up on humanity. It was a race on the run. If not after the carrot in front, from the fear of the acts behind. But was that not because they had lost consciousness? A ship of fools adrift on an ocean of unknowing, maintaining a constant state of quarrel. How to explain to them that they were under attack from their own ideas? Who could tell them that the wealth that was used to fleece them – *was their own*? That they'd all gone missing in the world of Paypal.

That is: "*You pay!*" (pal).

– JOHN, MY BROTHER –

»Hi Liutha. How're you doing? Been out today?« The Danish tourist was out and about. The fisherman recognized the voice. He did not look up, seated on the edge of his boat, nursing a cut above his eye lightly rubbing salt over it.

»Yes, very early. But maybe not go out in boats again today. Must wait and see. Fishing is problem - «

»Hey! How did you get that cut?« The fisherman mumbled something incoherent in reply and stared at the sand. A few seconds later he turned to the Dane, »You want a kattu maram ride?«

»Kattu what?« Liutha pointed to the boat.

»Oh, catamaran!« It was actually the original Tamil word the fisherman had used, meaning bound, two hulled wooden raft.

»Only 500 rupees one hour. I take you to coral reef. Over there! Then you see many fish. Maybe sharks ...«

»OK, maybe later. But remember I can swim there anytime – I don't need a boat!«

The lanky Dane sprinted into the waves and broke into a butterfly stroke. He'd been holed up all night with a lone Italian tourist. They had been the disbelievers who had not listened to the warnings from the embassies. And now, they'd moved into the same hotel room scared out of their minds. You couldn't leave right now, the main roads were under siege. And no taxi-drivers were willing to undertake the drive to Colombo with the insurgency underway.

As he swam out Sven thought about the previous evening. He'd been sitting with the Italian, Fabio.

»I used to think Thai girls were sexy ...« he'd been saying. »Now, I hate them! They're users!«

The flashy young Roman had looked nervously around visibly unnerved.

»You think we're safe here tonight?« he asked, not listening to Sven. »They say things happen.«

»Sure things happen,« was the cheering reply from the Dane.

»What things?«

»Things.«

»Like what, Sven?«

»You know, I don't know if the danger is on the inside of the hotel or on the outside,« he expanded.

»I think maybe both. Let's stick together,« Fabio pleaded.

»You seen the posters up everywhere?«

»Posters?«

»Not the army ones, the ones put up by the insurgents. They were everywhere this morning. They tell you what they are going to do to you if you obey the government. And the army's posters say what they're going to do to you if you fall in with the insurgents. They'll kill twenty insurgents for every dead soldier – that's from all the people they've rounded up into custody.«

Fabio's brown skin seemed to turn pale. Almost enjoying the effect of his words, Sven went on:

»You seen the sandbags round the police station? The cops are even more scared than us, they've got their families hidden at the tourist resorts. Think they're safer with us foreigners. Three dead bodies at the crossroads this morning outside the Robinson,« he added grimly.

»Three guys?«

»No, two women and a kid.«

»Ammazzate!«

»Could have been army wives at the cross-roads for all I know. The gloves are off, anything goes. The banners across the road over there say that they'll kill twenty for every one of theirs ambushed. The fisher guy translated it for me,« he repeated.

»I heard you before! I want a flight out.«

»Cool it, Fabio! A flight! There aren't even any taxis. But don't worry, we'll get out. I've been in these messes before. The east's full of shit. You know what they say happens at the road block after curfew.«

»No, I don't. I don't want to know. Don't tell me. I won't be able to sleep. Ti prego!«

»The soldiers stands there with a guy beaten bloody. He's masked. You can't know who he is. He's got a black bandana or something covering his head . But he can see.«

»So?«

»So the soldiers make all the villagers march past him. He sees his friends, the ones who've joined the underground. One slight nod as your pals pass by. That's all.«

»And they're hauled in?«

»Yes, that's it. Then they get beaten bloody and have to wear masks and stand at roadblocks and nod when their friends pass by...«

A swarm of bright fish suddenly encircled Sven and put the previous evening's conversation right out of his mind. He dived deeper underwater and forgot all about it.

Back on the beach Liutha the fisherman had watched the Dane swim out. He'd laid out his fishing nets and began to untangle some of the knots in them. A timeless sight. The flight of gulls above. He let his nets drop and sat there looking at the sea, at the waves that came and went in the sunlit bay. On the horizon, the lobster-catchers drifted, as the salt and sand. Returned time and time again to the shore if the sea willed, grains in its momentum. They cast out again, unsure of its ways, wary of its

hidden currents. Like dark leaves floating on the white water. From time to time caught up and tossed playfully in a spray, lifted to the coral reef and back again to the sands. Shifting particles.

He dragged the nets back to his shack. The village women were spreading clean laundry to bleach dry on flat rocks nearby. Inside his house the three youngest of his brothers were in a playful wrestling match, a litter of hungry children scattered on the damp copra mattress. The tiniest was squealing, tired of being squeezed. As Liutha entered, their eyes shone upon him, their lips sundered in smiles of greeting. In apology for the ruckus they scrambled away. He looked ruefully up at the roof that was in need of repair before the monsoon. Was there anything at all that he could do to make good? Would there ever be a way? He returned despondently to his boat on the beach hoping the tourist, Sven, would take up his offer of a ride out to the reef. It would earn him some rupees, but the man was nowhere to be seen. He lit a reed pipe and sat there for a long time just staring out with unseeing eyes at the mass of water. Exhaling wreaths of smoke into the passing of words, of worlds, expiring into the gently pulsing heart of life.

Sometime later he heard the approach of someone and looked up. The Dane had been back to his luxury hotel to collect his expensive scuba gear.

»OK Liutha. Let's go! I'm ready – Where'd you get this fine catamaran?« The fisherman thought a moment and answered

»John, my brother.«

»Your brother's name's John?«

»No. My friend is John. From Australia. He gave me money for my boat. So the boat's name is 'John My Brother'. I painted the name because of John.«

»Nice guy.«

»Yeah, nice guy. Now – Gunna comes with us to the reef. If we find fish, you can eat with us this evening. No fish, then we eat together another time.« Sven was not sure whether to accept. »My mother will cook for you, my friend. And I will buy butter later and a bit of pepper. She cooks fine.«

»Sounds good,« Sven said courteously. »Thanks.«

»Remember my friend, you must not go out after dark. Many bad people are about. The police also go crazy. Yesterday they beat me up.« Sven looked again at the cut above his eye. Ah, so that was the explanation!

»Why?«

»They're looking for boys selling boys. Selling heroin too. Many boys here in the buying/selling business. Tourists want hashish. Much Ganja too.«

»You smoke dope, Liutha?«

»No, my brother is our family problem.«

»Gunna?«

»No, I have six brothers. My oldest brother is the problem. He smokes opium. Then he cries and fights. I cannot speak with him now.«

»And Gunna?«

»Gunna is a fine boy. He helps our family very much. He's coming now. Look!«

A strong, young lad was walking confidently toward them with a fishing rod. He called out cheerfully as he approached. The Dane was feeling sociable.

»So what do you guys do here man, when the holiday season's over? Who do you sell your dope to?«

»I told you before, Sven, I not sell dope.«

An unbelieving look. The villagers were forever making him offers ...

»No, really!« the fisherman insisted. »Sometimes the village girls making bangles. I go buy embroidery silks and organize business.«

»Ah, the famous 'friendship' bangles!« That meant a flock of persistent kids trailing each tourist hassling them to buy 'bangles', pretty bands plaited together from coloured embroidery silks. A ring of flowers, a garland of shells, a pretty souvenir. Trouble was they thought you should buy at least a few bangles every day.

»Sven maybe you can take some bangles when you go, sell them in Copenhagen and send me money back after?«

»Import/Export Liutha? You know how much stamps cost? It'll take you a month to earn the postage.«

»Yes. But, you will try for me, please!«

»Oh, man. Where should I send the money to you? You gotta bank account now, or what? You know you won't get it!«

That was true enough. Liutha brushed something that glistened from his eyes. The sun was heating up the clear blue water.

»Next year I will buy a better net. There are good nets from Norway in our Government Fisheries store. Very expensive.«

»Where will you get the money from?«

»My wife will be back with lot of money.«

»You have a wife? I thought the women always fetched your water for you because you are single?«

»No, it's the custom. It's because my wife is away working in Kuwait. Many Sri Lankan people go work in the Gulf region. When they come back, they can buy a TV.«

»What's her name?«

»Mano.«

»So when's she coming back?« Sven asked.

»I don't know. She went six months ago. She's got lots of troubles there.«

»Yeah? Like what?«

»She has to work all the time for the Kuwaitis. She doesn't have much time for sleeping. Sometimes she's washing cars at 3 o'clock in the morning. Sometimes she gets a beating.«

»They beat your wife? Why don't you get her back?«

»I can't. Her employer took her passport on the first day she arrived. She'll only get it back after one year contract finish.«

»They can't do that! She must report it to her Embassy.«

»Embassy? She can't leave house! Also can't write. Her friend write a letter for me. Here ...«

He pulled a piece of paper out of his pouch. *»Mano want me to speak to employment agency here. I speak but they say it's none of their business. First she must work 3 months to pay back their commission. And they say to tell her that she's lucky to have job. Many girls want to go Kuwait to work. One year will pass quickly. No good crying, she must work hard. After she can have a TV. Maybe fix the roof too.«*

Sven read the letter which was written in English.

»Man o man!«

»My wife is a very beautiful girl.«

»Then why did you send her, you dummy? Couldn't you have gone and she stay and look after your kid?«

»I'm a sick man, Sven. I have diabetes. With the war now it's a problem for me to get medicine.«

»You're very young to have diabetes, aren't you?«

»I had many problems before. I drank some toilet cleaner one time. The chlorine burned me up inside.«

»Why on earth did you do that?«

»I loved my German wife very much but she's a bad woman.«

»Whoa! Just a minute. How many wives you got?«

»Only one. The story with my German wife is finished. We are divorced.«

»You're divorced from a German woman?«

»Sure. We married here, we had a native wedding and I went to live Germany for two years.«

»You Are Kidding Me!«

»No, it's true.«

»So why didn't you stay there?«

»I couldn't. She still lived with her ex-husband. Sometimes they still slept together. So it was a marriage for three.«

Sven was now shocked. *»So you drank the chlorine?«* He asked, incredulous.

»Yes, afterward I was in hospital in Frankfurt. Then they deported me. I was so happy, because otherwise I had no money to return home.«

»OK Liutha,« Sven said standing up, *»I'm sorry but I'll have to take that kattu maram ride another time, ok? You've completely done my head in. I'm going underwater for a while!«*

»OK Sven. Sorry. No problem. Ride tomorrow.« He indicated toward the far end of the bay. *»Dive over there. You can see many fish. Maybe Angelfish.«*

Sven ran off into the water with a loud whoop. Liutha's thoughts went to two others he'd taken out that morning at the sailor's request – Sandy and Shantini. He and his younger brother Gunna had made the slow sweep across the bay at daybreak, heading into the cool wind leaving a delicate trail of white surf behind them. At least that's what anyone watching

from the shore would have seen. But of course there had been four people on board. They had gone ashore a short while later in a quiet bay and set their two passengers down. The two brothers had cracked open a couple of king coconuts for them to drink and given them the bunch of rupees the sailor had provided for a private taxi-cab. They indicated the way up the dried out riverbed which led to the beach lane that ended up in a town where buses stopped. Sandy and the child were waving happily as they rowed away toward the coral reef for their return trip.

– THE DAY’S CATCH –

Sandy’s hair was knotted in the acid green headscarf she’d bought from Kumar on the beach at the Triton. The ragged sari wound around her waist was soaked with salt water, it’s faded flowers clinging onto her slight hips. She left a wet film behind in each of her footsteps, secreted instantly away as the sun climbed inexorably to its zenith. She felt its dazzling intensity and stopped. It was not an hour for movement. She felt herself overpowered by exhausting forces beyond her command.

»*Why are we stopping?*« Shantini wanted to know.

»*I can’t go on just yet.*« The child stared puzzled. Then she turned away with a little hop.

»*OK, you rest then. I’m going to play on the beach then till you finish! Is that alright?*«

»*Sure. You go play a bit. But don’t go in the water, ok?*«

»*Not even a bit?*«

»*You can get your toes wet, but not your ankles, deal?*«

»*Yes.*« Shantini skipped off happily. She seemed to have recovered!

Sandy’s head was going around and around. Her thoughts were in a pickle! Subash! He’d let them go! Why? Had he believed her then? Or maybe he couldn’t be bothered with them. That was it. What else? He seemed so sick. Was he or wasn’t he in some sort of a gang? What would happen to him?

She glanced at the child in the sunshine, bright and somehow rested. The tears were gone. Children could get over things quickly. The kid looked up with a smile that almost broke her

heart. But she was getting thirsty again although they'd drunk the tepid juice and eaten the crunchy flesh of the fresh coconuts the fishermen had cracked open for them. It was approaching noon. The hour when cold-blooded lizards crept out to soak in the heat from stones and turtles paddled upstream to river estuaries where they had hidden their eggs. The sun rose higher, Sandy burrowed her feet deep into the sand, up to her old Sphinx tricks, not knowing what to do. Shantini laughed from faraway. She was scooping water up in a coconut shell and letting it run over her thin brown legs.

»*So that's why they called you Sandy!*« she cried out.

»*I do that when I'm scared!*« Sandy explained, with a weak smile.

The girl looked at her with the understanding eyes of a child. She was fiddling with her precious charm bracelet and talking to herself. Sandy rummaged around in her bag and fished something out.

»*I've got something for you here!*« she said. She held it out to her.

»*Close your eyes and open your hand.*« The little kid came running fast, shut her eyes tight and stuck her hand out. Sandy placed the silver sea horse in Shantini's small palm.

»*Open them now!*« The child's eyes widened and lit up with relief.

»*Oh thank you. Thank you so much. I thought he was lost.*«

»*Where did you get him?*« Sandy asked gently.

»*My mummy of course! Who else finds such lovely things for me?*«

»*Oh. Where did she get him?*« asked Sandy.

»*Oh, I don't know that!*« the child replied laughing. »*Look!*«

A fragile circle of silver dangled on a thin wrist hung with tiny animals, birds, symbols. You could clip the lucky charms on and off it.

»*This one's a peacock,*« Shantini was explaining. »*And here's the sea-horse's place!*« She clipped him into his position. »*This one looks like a cat to me, a strong cat,*« she then said fingering one of the attachments. »*It's funny, a bit like a lion but it's got no mane.*«
»*That's because it's a lioness, silly,*« Sandy said. »*A fierce lioness.*«
»*How do you know?*« asked the child, intrigued.
»*I just know,*« she replied mysteriously.

»*Well, I've got a crow and a seagull too. But I don't like the crow much.*«

»*No? Why not? I like them! The crow's a forager but it's one smart bird.*«

»*Yes, but it's so-oo black. So scary.*«

»*Scary? Cos he's black?*«

»*No, not really. But, the peacock's the pretty one,*« the child said.

»*Look at all his eyes! A tail full of eyes.*«

»*Beautiful eyes,*« thought Sandy. The eyes of Serendib.

»*The peacock's our bird,*« said Shantini. »*A bird from our jungles.*«

»*Almost extinct,*« Sandy thought licking her parched lips. If only they had some water!

She felt suddenly old, wizened, dried out by salts, by winds, by life itself. Where was she? How was she going to get this child to safety? The worries crowded in. Subash was on her mind too. He'd let them go. She was convinced of that. But why? She felt her strength leaving her. And this time she really was losing consciousness.

– THE TALE OF THE BANGLE BOY –

»*Vijay! Vijay come here!*« It sounded urgent, so the bangle boy came running.

»*Subash?*«

»*You been up all night?*«

»*No, not so late. I was up till around 4 a.m. – why do you want to know?*«

»*You been watching the bay?*«

»*Sure. You know what I do!*« he said a bit defensively.

»*That's your business. I didn't come to preach to you.*«

»*I make my living...* « Vijay blabbered on convinced he was in for a ticking off. »*They'd buy the stuff somewhere else anyway! Why shouldn't they buy it from me?*«

»*Dope and bangles? Solid business enterprise. OK. I'm not interested! Just shut up! Did you see anyone moving around last night?*«

»*Hoo! That's a joke. The place is crawling at night. There's no one around in daytime. Who do you want to know about? The Pirate? Lalith?*«

»*Young woman and a girl.*«

»*Young woman and a girl?*«

»*Yes, late twenties. A foreigner. Child around six.*«

»*No, no one like that.*«

Confounded! Then it went on:

»*Did you see anything unusual last night?*«

»*No, nothing really. Liutha went out a bit earlier than usual. Why don't you ask him? Maybe he saw them.*«

»*What time did he go out?*«

»*Just before I went to bed. Around four, I guess.*«

»*What time does he usually go out?*«

»*Around six.*«

»*Funny. Thanks Vijay.*«

»*Can you take some bangles up to Beruwela when you drive up there next, Subash? Please?*«

»*Sure. Later.*« Skelton's dog ran up to them yipping wildly and running around them. Subash nearly fell over.

»*What's the matter with that dog?*«

»*Rajah? Hasn't been fed again. Skelton's knocked out for a change.*«

»*Where is he?*«

»*Sleeping in the sailor's bar.*«

»*They all in there?*«

»*Sure, Business as Usual.*«

– SAILOR’S LOGBOOK –

Sven swam deep moving among a shoal of tropical fish that darted quickly from place to place. *‘This world is packed with seriously insane people, and this place is no exception,’* he thought. *‘The locals, the cops and the foreign tourists too! Out of their tiny boxes, every single one of them!’*

Back home in Copenhagen, he’d smoked hookahs on Berber rugs and floated through a thousand and one nights with the hard core drop-outs. Seen slabs of Lebanese black as thick as an encyclopaedia. One midsummer night they’d set up a totem pole beside a massive log fire and let it blaze all night. Someone played a silver trumpet in the smoke while an electric guitar sobbed and wailed till dawn. Chillums passed from hand to hand and women bare-breasted stamped and danced like Indian squaws. Vikings, Hottentots what was the difference anyhow? *‘We’* was stoned immaculate alright. Well so be it. He submerged himself into deeper waters and busied himself for a while collecting clams for supper.

As he prized the little animals off the rocks he carried on with his analysis. Out of order? You bet! Every one was running. He ticked them off on his mental list as he steered himself among the coloured fish. Number one: Me, Sven. Can’t take any of it! Then there was Fabio the Roman – completely out to lunch. Out of his tiny Italiano mind with fear. But who could blame him? It was a grisly scene. But the guy was a wreck all the same! Then there were people like Long John – collateral damage of the war machine. Four: Skelton. A psychotic disorder. Skelton’s heavy metal band had gone to pieces and so had he after he lost a

friend in a late night car crash. He'd lain in a coma himself for ten days in intensive care and when he came to there were a lot of things he didn't want to remember any more. That was when he'd hit the Goa trail and the way he told it you'd think he'd walked the whole route! Trouble was he'd picked up an expensive 'habit' on the way. Nowadays he fell asleep for days to get over things but somehow he never did. Skip was gone too. Skip – the ex-girlfriend. She'd wanted him to look in mirrors. But Skelton didn't look in mirrors. He could not relate to the thing that looked back at him from his wasted face. Now he was just a silver shadow on this phantasmagorical beach, blown about like the fronds of the palm trees. He helped Long John out sometimes. The pirate helped Lal who helped the fishers who helped the Doc who in turn helped him, Skelton. Full circle. They all got by.

Sven chased after a sparkling fish that was swimming fast along the coral reef until suddenly he lost sight of it. Oh, woe! But there were indeed some *very* slippery fish around! Like Lalith – and Doc Mendez too come to think of it. They'd been at school together and a while in jail together. He could well imagine what that must have been like! Lalith had real talent, he was the prototype for a con man – ruthless, courteous and very predatory. Too bad for you if he wasn't sweet on you. The guy spoke five languages: Urdu, Tamil, Sinhala, Arabic and fluent English. Well, good for him! He had a gift for timing – he was always in the right place at the right time. And that was coordination not coincidence! Sven also knew a bit about Doc Mendez – the hotel doctor. He'd had to pay him a visit one time when he cut open his foot on the rocks. This particular doctor of medicine was medicated himself more often than not, sunken in lethargy. He surfaced from time to time to run a private Ayurvedic clinic targeting the blossoming tourist industry.

There were dealers and dealers. Some sold alcohol openly, others smuggled contraband while the more astute simply passed the narcotics openly over a polished desk in a surgery. He was a practising medical doctor with access to morphine, opiates, uppers, downers. So when the tourists started arriving he handed them out to those who asked nicely – for a price. The boats brought stuff in at night, thrown overboard from passing mercantile vessels. The fishers hauled it in. The police accepted their pay-offs. Tourists passed like ships in the night. No risk involved. Long John, Skelton, Lalith, the Doc – that was the hard core. Deckhands came and went. Siri, Vijay – they played the game a while and moved on. Oh, and Rajah, Skelton’s mangy dog. Barking on the beach as if he were pumped full of pills! That’s because he was! He saw the dog on the beach jumping up and down, springing ever higher for a morsel held in the hand of the Tamil seaman as he swam back toward the two.

Rajah ran away as the Dane wandered over to the Tamil sailor.
»Nice swim?« Noah asked politely without looking up. He seemed to be avoiding Sven’s friendly smile.
»Yeah, I’ve been over to the other side of the reef,« the swimmer said wondering what he’d done wrong. »There are a lot of shellfish.« He’d collected a whole bagful and showed them to the older guy. Then seeing the seaman so glum, he held them out to him generously. »Here! It’s a present! Give your diners a treat!«

Noah accepted the gift graciously but he didn’t seem to be his usual perky self and sat there looking moodily out to sea. Sven drew off his goggles and peeled off his wetsuit. He was as brown as a berry. He passed a comb through his long fair hair, tied it into a pony tail and stretched out lazily. »So what’s the matter?« he asked the older man. Noah stayed silent for a while.

Then he said: *»There's people around me being treated very badly and I feel like a worm for allowing it. Only I don't know how I can take on the world by myself.«*

»I don't exactly know either, sailor – but I know the feeling. So who do you mean exactly?«

»I can't explain,« he said. *»There's rot everywhere I look.«*

Hmm... he sounded seriously depressed. Sven liked the sailor a whole lot so he said: *»That's a pretty universal experience, you know! You shouldn't let it get you down!«*

They were quiet a while longer and every now and then the sailor let out a long and weary sigh. Finally Sven asked *»Don't you want to talk about it?«*

»I can't,« the sailor said. *»Too many people I know are involved.«*

Sven considered: He'd been hanging out around the bay area quite a while and he knew pretty well what was going on at the beach. *»You mean the drugs scene?«* he asked.

»No, not just that. Tell me how we all get out of this huge mess!«

»What mess?«

»The mess with the money. It seems people will sell their own mothers to get it!«

»Maybe not everyone, Noah. But it's true enough that most of us are supporting a pretty evil way of living.«

»So what's to do about it, Sven?«

»Now, how should I know? It's called making a profit. The top profiteers have got the rest of us all lying and cheating each other and thinking ourselves highly respectable.«

The sailor looked up, his curiosity aroused by the comment.

»It's the devil's henchmen you see holding the guns against the people,« the Dane said with aplomb.

»You know, you saying that, really makes me wonder, Sven. I guess it even makes me suspicious. You're so rich! What have you got to complain about?«

»Aw, Noah, money's relative. You should know that! I'm not rich, I'm on welfare back home. Things don't work out well for a lot of people. It's no secret.«

»But we get to vote for governments that act in everyone's best interests!«

»Yeah, really? Well, that's kind of funny because I read somewhere that 50% of people share 5% of the world's wealth. So what exactly are these 'governments' up to?« the Dane asked.

»If you watch TV, it seems that the fittest people in the world are working night and day on the hottest solutions.«

»Like hell they are! They make sure they stay on the right side of the kind of people who have succeeded in keeping the rest in check.«

»Aren't we enjoying a higher standard of living than ever?«

»The hell we are! They take away all your freedom for it!«

He was quiet for a few moments, looking at the glittering lights tossed around by the moving water.

»And you know what's happening all the time, every day, Noah?«

The sailor shook his head. *»Tell me.«*

»It's not just the elephants and snow tigers that are disappearing. The aboriginal Australians, the Tasmanians, native American nations, Bantu, Zulu, Maori, first nations have all been gradually phased out. It's a kind of ongoing pogrom. They'll try to get rid of us non conventional thinkers too sooner or later.«

»Sven, you seem to think this mess is deliberate?«

»In a way. I guess once you kick your way up to the top of the pile, humanity just goes out the window. We're part of a system where only the children of some kind of crime syndicate have got anything going for them. The rest of are destined for offshore dumping.«

The seaman fell quiet then at the mention of the word 'children'. It was what had been troubling him the whole morning. Other people's children, at that! he had brought none into the world himself. That pesky bee was buzzing again! But he couldn't talk about it to the Dane. He fished out his cigarette papers from the windings of his sarong and started to prepare a fat joint. Noah passed his tongue along the gummed edges of three Rizla cigarette papers and stuck them together. Then he heated the dope in silver foil until whiffs of a very distinct odour began to escape. He crumbled the dry brown powder together with tobacco taken from a cigarette, rolled up a little curl of card and neatly tucked it into one end as a filter. He handed the reefer to the Dane to light up. Sven took a long draw on it, holding his breath for a moment, then he let the smoke creep out through his wide nostrils and continued his rant:

»First nations are only allowed to live on as the names of products, you know – like Indian Tonic Water and Cherokee Beer. Of the myriad birds in the sky –there'll be just the One: The cuckoo. A bird that moves into the nests of others. One day there will be no other type left alive,« Sven said. *»The orioles, the cockatoos and the birds of paradise, the puffins, the kookaburra the pelicans and the albatross will all be extinct. There'll just remain the spiteful fat cuckoo – that thinks it's a falcon.«*

»Well, it's going to be a long wait till the cuckoo notices, my friend,« the old sea-farer said.

»Yeah, sure, Noah. Like Never. Looks like they're going to end up eating their own bellies. This continual claiming of possession of territory, of earth, of space is unhealthy.«

»Yeah, sure, the diarrhoea's breaking out.«

»You use a chillum sometimes?« the sailor asked the Dane. »Yeah, sure, but only indoors. You know what the authorities are like – If you touch drugs that they aren't pushing, they're down on you like vultures.« The Viking smiled grimly. »But you know what, I've got the strangest feeling that something's going to erupt soon. They think their underground bunkers are going to save them! Problem is the volcano about to blow up inside their own heads!«

»May the day soon come!« the sailor smiled with true benevolence.

»You know I picture them with horns?« Sven grinned.

»And tails?« enquired the sailor with a wicked look in his eye.

»Yeah, sure. And tails.«

Two big grins spread over their faces. They sat there puffing away. After a while Sven closed his eyes and was just about to fall asleep when the sailor said, »Oh, by the way! I almost forgot – there was a girl asking after you,« the sailor added. »A most hermosa senorita.«

There was a long pause and then:

»I guess you've seen plenty of those in your day, man? Girl in every port? Name any names?«

»Eliza, I think.«

»Ah, she's Argentine.«

»Well, most beautiful she was. I told her you were leaving. She seemed most upset.«

»She leave me an address?«

»Yes, I've got it at the bar.«

»OK, I'll pick it up later. Thanks, man.«

– A FISHY STORY –

The following conversation in Sinhalese was overheard by a passing bird:

»*Liutha?*«

»*Subash?*«

The fisherman was untying knots in his nets. The surf was sizzling, but he looked so world weary.

»*Nice day,*« Subash said. »*You going out or coming in?*«

»*Coming in. There's no need for fishing. No one wants to buy any fish.*«

»*Huh? Since when?*«

»*You not hear the news on the radio? Many dead bodies floating in the Kelani river last night and they were carried down to the sea. So no one wants to eat fish. They say that it's the fish that are eating people nowadays.*«

Subash let the information sink in.

»*Everyone's afraid. Even the police. They've been hiding their families in the tourist hotels for safety – Ranjit told me.*«

»*Plenty of thieves around too,*« the fisherman said, getting his twine and needles out and going to work on a long rent in the net. »*It's not just the insurgents we have to worry about ...*«

»*See a young foreign woman here with a young girl yesterday?*« Subash asked kind of casually. Liutha looked up a little bit startled.

»*A youngish woman with a child around six years old?*« Subash persisted.

»*So who wants to know?*« the fisherman asked carefully and not particularly communicative.

»*Just me Liutha. You know I'm not one of them!*«

»*Yeah. You think you're the 'Lone Ranger', I know everything – Noah told me.*«

»*So did you see them?*« Subash asked impatiently. Liutha kept mum.

»*Why don't you go talk to sailor? He's the chatter-box around here. I don't feel like talking.*«

»*You didn't throw them overboard so where'd you put them down?*«

»*Please, Subash, no more questions. Speak with sailor, OK?*«

The silence of the dead settled in.

Subash was getting into both a frizz and a bee's tizzy. He stormed off to search out the sailor at his restaurant and found him busy preparing lunches. The young man dragged him aside all the same saying, »*I've just got to talk to you. It's about that tourist girl and the child she had with her yesterday.*«

»*Aah ... so what's it to you?*« the old seaman asked.

»*I was looking after them!*«

»*Oh, they were with you? Why did they run away then?*«

»*She takes me for a killer. She didn't know what I was doing.*«

»*Did you?*«

»*No,*« he admitted, »*I thought she was working for Siri's gang.*«

»*Sandy?*« The sailor asked taken aback. »*Her father was in the diplomatic service, her mother's from the hill country estates. I don't think she needs to do that!*«

Subash was silenced for a few moments taking in the new information, then he said »*Come on man, stop messing with me, where are they?*« The seaman looked directly into the tiny pupils of his eyes.

»*You should stay off that stuff, Subash,*« he said.

»*Look I'm going to stop soon. Everyone keeps on at me!*«

»*Then – Stop!*«

»*Please, where are they?*« the young man pleaded. Noah felt sorry for him just then. He knew Subash's sad story. He wasn't a bad sort.

»*The fishers dropped them off somewhere near Beruwela. They're going to try get on a Colombo bus,*« he told him.

»*Sailor, you telling me Liutha put them down somewhere and just left them there?*« Subash was becoming visibly unhappy.

»*Yes. Now don't do anything silly! They've got money and Sandy's got a sensible head on her shoulders.*«

»*Yes, but you can't just let them traipse about like holiday-makers! The country's a walking cemetery.*«

The sailor shrugged. »*I can't take responsibility for what other people want to do.*«

They eyed each other coolly.

»*Point taken. So where exactly did he put them down?*«

»*I don't know. You'd better ask him.*«

»*You ask him please. He won't tell me anything.*«

»*OK. But you'll have to wait a minute. I have to finish preparing these salads first.*«

He picked up a bowl of crispy lettuces that had already been washed and spun and arranged them carefully onto six big china plates. Then he cut up the scarlet tomatoes into lotus flower shapes, using a small and sharp canelle. It was taking forever! On went white onion rings and a flourish of fresh herbs while the younger man hopped impatiently from one foot to another. The seaman took no notice and serenely completed his task. Then he carefully dried his hands on his apron, like any good housewife, untied it and said he was ready.

»*I guess I owe you a favour,*« Subash said as they hurried along to find Liutha.

»*A favour? How's that?*«

Subash laughed his hard laugh. The sailor looked a bit suspicious.

»*You developing a soft spot somewhere, Subash?*«

»*Don't be funny,*« the well-built young man said almost tripping over. The sailor followed slowly – the years were catching up on him.

»*Liutha!*« Subash yelled out, seeing him pulling out with his boat. »*Liutha! Please, one moment - wait!*«

The catamaran was just heading off for a couple of hours at the coral reef with three tourists onboard fully rigged out in wetsuits. Liutha folded his batik sarong, knotted it around his upper legs and dived off the boat. He swam a few strokes and then waded towards Subash. He stood knee deep in the lagoon among the silver fishes, looking a bit grumpy.

»*You speak to sailor?*« he asked him.

»*Here he comes!*« Subash said indicating the older man picking his way over shells and driftwood.

»*Yes, here I am,*« said the sailor addressing himself to the tall fisherman in the waves. »*Tell him where you left them! He wants to pick them up and drive them to Colombo before curfew.*« Liutha flashed a puzzled look at the sailor who stated dryly »*I think he's in love!*«

Subash seemed a bit shocked by the explanation but kept his mouth shut. Liutha smiled benignly then and explained to Subash in detail where he'd dropped the pair ashore saying,

»*It's the second bay, after the rocky one. You'll reach it from the lane near the old school house. Ends up in the fifth shanty town going up*

the coast, by a dried out river bed. From then it's not long to the main road. They can't get lost, there's no where else they can head for.«

»*Has Lalith been back this morning?*« Subash wanted to know looking a bit uncertain.

»*Sure. With Siri and some more tourists,*« Liutha replied.

»*Great. Seen Ranjit?*« he asked next.

»*No. Not today. I saw him the day before yesterday. He brought some guests back too. Some Swiss people.*« The answers were all flowing now!

Skelton's mongrel came running up to them just then, yapping wildly.

»*That Skelton's dog?*« Subash asked the sailor.

»*Sure. Don't you know Rajah?*«

»*So why's he so fond of that mongrel?*«

»*Why don't I tell you another time, Subash? Go find the girl.*«

»*Sure, but why's he always barking like that?*«

»*The dog's on uppers,*« the sailor said dryly and went back to his tree-top work-top.

– THE BREAKERS –

She found herself dreaming. Dreaming of a burning house. Was it her own? Someone was screaming for water. Who was it? The dream went on ... She stirred herself. Not sure where she was. *»Won't you drink some water? Come on. Try!«* a voice was urging. *»See, I've got fresh water.«* She half opened her eyes and a dark face swam before her. She slowly regained consciousness. *»You fainted,«* the face said. It was a face she knew: Subash. He urged her to take down some more liquid. *»I fainted?«* she asked after a while.

»It's sunstroke. You're not used to the heat here, you know. I guess you haven't drunk any water today! You're dehydrated.«

The water revived her slowly. She'd grazed her ankle scrambling out of the boat earlier that morning and it stung slightly. Had she really passed out? It seemed so.

And where was the little girl? The child had been by the water's edge, mumbling, talking to herself as children do, while building herself a sand fortress. The water had seeped right through it, flooded the moat and washed it all away. So she'd started building a new one! Sandy remembered having called her out of the sun. But it seemed she'd gone back to the water's edge. She looked around anxiously. A cow was wandering about grazing on the soft scattered grasses. And Shantini was there stroking it!

She'd told Shantini that she was going to rest a while. But what had happened then? She closed her eyes.

»Come on, now ... drink some more water!« he pressed her. So she took a few more sips. After a while she said »You know – I was sitting here thinking about you. Suddenly everything went black.«

»I'm flattered,« he said with those talking eyes of his, but guarding his words.

»Don't be. I was just trying to puzzle things out.«

»Well, that makes two of us.«

»Why? Tell me, why did you let us go?«

»I don't do kids,« he said tersely.

»Well, why were you keeping me tied up at that place?«

»Thought you were someone else.«

»Like who?«

»Like you ask too many questions.«

»Tell me, Subash. I'm tired of secrets.«

»That's not all you're tired of.«

A little pause and then:

»No, it's not all I'm tired of. So, why don't you tell me?«

»You tell me your secret first. What are you doing here? It's not a holiday.«

She looked at him. White gleam of small teeth. An expression of something indefinable. They were playing a subtle game. »No, it's not a holiday, not really – « she said in an exhausted voice and hesitated. He was watching her attentively and she wished he wouldn't!

»What's it to you?« she demanded in exasperation.

»Don't know yet,« he answered throwing her off guard with a sudden reckless smile that made her smile back.

»I'm looking someone up,« she explained.

»Oh. An old flame?«

»No. So why'd you let us go?«

»Now you guess.«

»I can't.«

»Maybe I was going a bit soft on you,« he taunted, »the girl with the golden eyes?« Sandy snorted with scorn.

»You know,« he continued in a teasing tone, »They've got green lights in them, like the sun in fields of paddy. Like the way things could have been.«

She was silent. Because she realized that the teasing was just a shield. »I didn't realize you were a fan,« she said with a touch of sadness. He laughed mockingly.

»Now, you do,« he replied softly. Very softly. It was if there had been a kiss. A soft and treacherous kiss.

They were getting caught up in each other. Another entanglement. Sandy extricated herself fast. Sandy of the shadows. Sandy of the ashes. She wriggled away from him and he let her go. Subash was after all a young man who had already learned that you can hold on to nothing. The two young adults made a sorry picture. They sat there on the shore like two weary lovers whom love could no longer ensnare. Those for whom she called too late.

Shantini had now unclipped all the charms off her bracelet and was arranging them in a circle on the shore in a game all her own. »This one's you Subash ... the water snake,« she called out.

»The sailor's the crow 'cos he's so bla-ack... «

»So which one are you?« he asked.

»I'm the seahorse of course.«

»Oh yes, Of Course! Bet you can't even swim!«

»I could if I tried!«

»Well, let's make Sandy the peacock then. She's gorgeous,« he mocked.

»*She can't be the peacock! This one's Sandy.*« There was a question he could not understand in Shantini's eyes.

He looked at the feline form. »*It's big for a cat,*« he said.

»*Sandy says that's because it's a lioness. A fierce lioness.*«

»*Well, she should know,*« he said quietly. He was looking at them both in a curious way. The little girl stood up suddenly and ran along the shore laughing. Running in the breeze, wisps of soft hair flying. He watched Sandy until she was forced to meet his eye.

»*That your kid?*« he asked softly.

That was dynamite!

So there was a detonation. »*What are you talking about? How can she be my kid?*« she almost screamed!

»*OK, have it your way. She's not your kid! Maybe she looks like me then!*« He'd played a wildcard. The words had slipped out with a kind of careless assurance. Sandy was thrown into confusion.

»*It's also kind of obvious, you see,*« he said.

A long and loaded pause followed. Then they were off again!

»*So why don't you tell me?*« he said. »*I mean, what's it to me?*« She wasn't too sure but she was infected by his recklessness and responded to something traumatized within two deeply dangerous jet black irises.

»*Well, I guess it doesn't matter if I do tell you! The fact is I left her here when she was new born ... I gave her up for adoption. I didn't want her known about in Europe. I couldn't live here either. I was a student at the time.*«

»*Holiday romance?*« he asked.

»*Not for me.*«

He didn't insist so she continued: *»It all happened in Cyprus. I met him at a congress my father was attending. He was the son of some big shot. Married – said he wasn't.«*

»Oh, now that was silly. Does he know he's a father?«

»Yes. He knew,« she replied quietly.

»You come here looking for her or him?«

»No! Not for him,« she protested. *»Maybe I would have. Thing is you see, I can't. Anyway, he wasn't from here. I came to find the child. I don't think they ever met. I have no idea. I haven't asked her that.«*

»Well, don't ask her, lady. Wait a while, she's just a little kid,« he said. *»So why don't you ask him?«* he persisted.

»I'll tell you in another lifetime. You know enough of my secrets. How about spilling some of yours? And don't tell me about your modest habit – it's not what I want to hear about.«

»Look lady, I can kick the habit whenever I want to.«

He was angry – she'd drawn attention to what he didn't want to think about.

»That's what they all say, you know. Now who's being silly? What are you running away from? Corpses?«

»No, you get used to corpses. It's the living you have to run from.«

»Tough school you went to,« she said taking a big swig directly from the PET plastic bottle.

»I learn my lessons. I even do my homework sometimes. I know who you are now. Noah told me. You're father was in the diplomatic service until recently. I guess he had no idea about Shantini. What would they all have said at those slick tea-parties?«

»Get lost Subash.« It was like he'd shot an artery. An anger reared in her head and subsided, but her curiosity mounted all the greater. Where was he coming at her from? She tried again.

»So who are you after, Subash?«

»You,« he dodged her yet again. She glared at him. »Don't you think I'm a bit wrecked for you?«

»Not really.« His skin was very fine almost translucent. He'd decided that the time for jousting was over. A veil passed over his sculpted features.

»I'm looking for the ones who did it,« he said finally.

She could see dark blue veins begin to throb beneath the transparent tissue stretched over his face.

»Who did what?« she asked. The minutes stretched out, curled into a twist and unravelled. Words slipped out.

»Kerosene. Rags. And a match. That's all it takes. Hungry dogs dug up their corpses in the cemetery later.«

Sandy froze.

»I didn't mean to hurt you,« she said, realizing that she'd been acting like an elephant in a china shop.

»You don't. Things don't matter.«

»What was it about?« she asked. His voice seemed to travel to reach her over eons of time. A shudder went through him. »It was about harming the harmless,« he said. »My wife. My children. My parents.«

She closed her eyes. There was silence between them for a long time after that. On the waterline danced the horses of the surf, prancing higher and higher in the white light. The child ran in and out chased by the curling foam, shrieking in delight. Slipped, fell down in a big wave, was tossed around in it.

»Shantini!« Sandy yelled. »Come out of the water! NOW!« She got up herself and hauled the protesting kid out soaked to the skin and plonked her down on the sand. She returned to Subash, not taking her eyes off the child.

Subash had been sitting quietly during the interlude. Then he started speaking bitterly: *»They hanged a few people,«* he said. *»The wrong people. We were duped. The judges, the police, the neighbours – they all lied. There was more to it than there seemed. This is a country of many races, it always was. People come, stay, settle, move on. The area we lived in had always been a mixed region but we knew all our neighbours and they knew us. Someone started torching houses to upset us all.«*

»So your home was torched by outsiders stirring things up for their own reasons?« she enquired. He nodded affirmatively. Sandy let a handful of sand escape slowly through her fingers. *»Poor dead people,«* she said. *»No one to vindicate them.«*

»No. No one at all. Victims are really bad at that.«

»When it gets reported in the press it doesn't mean a lot – just one more hard luck story,« she said.

»The press! They ring the lies loud, and throw the truth in the pulp machine.«

»Truth is not their business,« Sandy said. *»They're in there for more selfish reasons.«*

Shantini was getting restless ready to go play in the waves again. Sandy strode off, gripped her by her wet clothes and stood her up.

»Come on, Subash we have to move! Have you forgotten that there's a curfew here later?«

»Oh, woman, now who takes that seriously?«

– BACK TO THOSE WAVE WATCHERS –

The Dane had been out for an afternoon swim and had just changed back into dry clothes. He looked around for the fisherman and saw him, sitting on the sand with his nets, threading strings through and through with a wire hook. His needle had broken.

»Hi, Liutha, I'm back!«

»Hey, man. I see you.«

»Did you guys find some fish?«

»Yes... so, you will eat with us this evening?«

»You said your mother was cooking?«

»Yes, I will go to the store soon and buy some butter.«

»You going to roast the fish?«

»I'll cook it on charcoal.«

»Wow, that sounds pretty exotic!«

»Exotic? Why?« Liutha didn't have a clue.

»I'll go collect some driftwood, shall I?«

»No. The women collect firewood and water every day. Everything's ready for cooking.«

»Well, what shall I bring? A bottle of toddy? Some arrack?«

»If you like. But I don't drink. Too much expensive. And it's also very bad for my liver.«

»Who told you that? Come on, let's go shopping!«

They wandered down to the small boutique on the main road and purchased one packet of Anchor New Zealand butter and a little pack of local black peppercorns.

»Is that all we need? You sure? Want me to come back later when it's all ready?«

»Huh? No. you can come with me right now – I have invited you to my home.«

»OK, let's go. Do you mind if I pick up another packet of cigarettes at the hotel first? They're in my room.«

»No problem.«

Liutha waited patiently as the Dane entered the spruce hotel precinct, not able to pass the gate himself. There were old wars here between the Brahmins and the fisher caste.

»Sven! Remember you promised me a T-shirt.«

»T-shirt? Ah, yes!«

He returned a few moments later with his cigarettes and an almost new T-shirt for the fisherman. *»It needs a wash but it's in good condition. They haven't even got a washing machine in the hotel!«*

Liutha examined the fine piece of quality clothing. It would last years he thought.

»Why you don't want it?« he asked mystified.

»Oh, I've got too much luggage. I want to thin down a bit so I don't have so much to carry onto the plane. I can buy clothes there if I need any.«

»Ah. And where you are going?« Liutha asked.

»Up to Goa for a few weeks.«

»What does it say on this T-shirt?« he asked, curious. There was an icon of Jesus and words in Danish: 'Jeg også røg'

»It says 'I smoked too'.«

»Who? Jesus Christ?«

»Sure. Jesus Christ! Didn't you know that?«

»Er ... Jesus Christ smoked dope? Um ... I don't know, Sven.« He paused uncertain what to understand, following with a safer question »Why you not going by boat?«

»I'm flying to Delhi first. Fabio's coming too,« Sven explained.

»Where is he now?«

»In his room.«

»He's always in his room, every time I ask you. Doesn't he like this place?«

»He's scared shitless.«

»Scared of what?«

»All the trouble here at night.« The fisherman fell silent then, hearing nothing but the rush of the wave.

»C'mon, man! Wake up!« Sven shook him and began to walk away limping slightly – he'd hurt his foot diving. They reached a palm-thatched house on the beach and entered it. Liutha's family were all lined up waiting to meet him. They proudly showed him around their dwelling. The fisherman gave the butter to his mother and explained to her how she had to cook the fish. She was to make slits all over its sides with a sharp blade and press the cold butter into it. Then she was to wrap the fish in a piece of aluminium foil he'd brought and roast it at the kitchen hearth. There wasn't much furniture apart from a table and two chairs. So Sven sat on a pile of tarpaulin on the floor. It was someone's bed. The fisherman brought a couple of glasses and squatted on his haunches by him. He poured the reddish liquid carefully and passed it to Sven. They clinked and downed the toddy in one go.

»Cigarette?« Sven offered. Liutha shook his head.

»Better not, I think. Makes you sick.« Sven lit up with a flashy cigarette lighter. The whole family was gathered around watching the pre-dinner performance. *»Malli! Bring me a stool,«* Liutha ordered. The littlest kid scampered promptly to get one from somewhere at the back of the residence and dragged it forward not allowing anyone to help him. Independence!

They offered the seat to Sven who sat down on it. In the background hovered two of Liutha's brothers keeping politely out of the way but unable to resist a peep every now and then at the blond stranger. A European in their shack?

In the dingy scullery, Sven could see their mother wrestling with the fish. One fish! She was muttering under her breath. Apart from that she didn't seem familiar with the cooking method and called out to her son from time to time for clarification. She didn't seem to have a knife. Someone moved a big tin kettle from the hearth and got the fire going, blowing on it in the smoke darkened room. Once the fish was finally dressed and roasting the woman perched on a low stool that had a saw-toothed gadget attached to its front and used it to scrape coconut flesh from the open shell. A heap of wet white flakes piled up in the husk of a coconut.

»She is making a sambol for us,« Liutha explained.

»How do you do that?«

»You add some lime juice and chillies to the grated coconut. I asked my brother to climb up and get another coconut but he refused saying they're too high up.«

Done with the scraping, the old woman went out into the yard to pound the red chillies. She placed them into a hollowed out tree trunk and pounded them inside it using a strong rounded wooden pole. It took her a lot of effort to grind them fine.

Then she tempered them with cumin in a low black pan. In the meantime the small boy had chopped up the Bombay onions and was now cutting open a small green lime. They were out of salt, he said. On the table was a small heap of dried Maldiver fish. Done with the pounding, the woman placed all the ingredients together onto a stone tablet and began to blend them using a cylindrically shaped stone. Sven could see there was a worn hollow in the tablet produced by years of grinding. The milk was squeezed out from the coconut flesh and the whole mix took on a delicate coral shade. With the addition of dried chips of Maldiver fish and several drops of lime juice, the sambol was ready!

It was placed in an enamel plate, set onto the table, covered with a wire guard to protect it from the busy swarms of flies that now began to invade the room, descending like small puffs of ferocious cloud. The fresh fish was roasting slowly and beginning to smell just fine. Sven licked his lips but he could see that things were moving slowly. He took a few more shots of toddy and puffed a bit more on a couple of cigarettes. Gunna came in at one point, smiled hello and disappeared quick into the back of the house. Sven could hear him arguing with someone but he never saw with whom. Maybe it was the doped up brother. He turned to Liutha and asked:

»You haven't got a father now, have you?«

»No, it's many years now since he died.«

»Was he sick?«

»Yes, T.B.«

»So your mother's brought you all up?«

»My older brother is the head of our family now. But he's no help.«

He nodded toward the back room where the discussion was still going on. *»My mother has two sisters who come to help her.«*

»Where do they live?«

»*In the village, over there*« he indicated a group of shacks in the distance. »*Lucky they never married,*« he said.

»*So why didn't they marry?*«

»*No dowry. A woman must bring something into a marriage. Malli, bring us some water!*«

The youngest of the brothers had been sitting cross-legged by them watching Sven's every move. He scuttled off for the water. There was a ceramic filter in the room with a tiny rusty tap. The old woman lifted its lid and topped it up with well water she had previously boiled in the big kettle. The child opened the tap and a slender jet of water trickled through. Two glasses appeared on the table.

Liutha kept having to get up to blow on the fire. It didn't seem to burn well but after an hour and a half the fish was pronounced done and placed on the table. The little kid then shyly brought two tin plates and a couple of bent forks. The Dane was rather hungry by now. Two rickety chairs at the table, one fish and the dish of sambol.

»*Are we ready?*« the Dane asked unsure. Liutha gave him the best of the two plates. »*Start, please!*«

The baked fish was tender and succulent, fragrant with the citrus. The butter had seeped through its firm white flesh, and imparted a pale gold tint onto the plate. The sharp and tangy sambol was served as an accompaniment. Sven had to be careful with that! But he took another shot of alcohol and another two big gulps of water.

Before the two men finished the meal, it did cross Sven's mind at one point that the others had not eaten but he dismissed it assuming they'd already dined before he came. He had no idea of the great honour that had been bequeathed him. Ah, the native cuisine! And even more scuba diving tomorrow!

It was pretty late by now. Liutha stood up to move the dishes away.

»I'm going to have to go to sleep, Sven. I must get up soon like the fish and birds,« he said. already heading for the next room.

»OK Liutha. Sleep well!«

The night was young! No fun hanging around with fishermen who had to be up at the crack of dawn! Sven wandered back along the shore hoping for some action. And whom should he meet? The night watcher supreme: Noah.

»Hi, Sailor? You planning on sitting on that rock all night?«

»Hey! Lord, no, I just got here. I'm just sorting out the takings before I clear the drunks out of the Ark. You on your way to bed?«

»Nope. No girl. You haven't given me her address yet!« The Dane grinned in the starlight and walked on.

– ERIN’S RETURN –

Sandy got through finally to the hotel number. *»Oh Erin! You can't believe how happy I am to hear your voice!«*

»You feeling all right, Sandy? I thought you couldn't wait to see the back of me. What are you on?«

»Nothing, I really can't tell you on the phone. When are you coming back?«

»Soon-ish.« She teased, withholding the information ... and then *'Probably Friday. Where are you staying?«*

»Hole in the wall but it's safe.«

»Safe from whom?« There was no satisfactory answer coming.

»I'll be back Friday afternoon,« Erin said quickly sensing trouble.

»Fix us up with a super comfortable place and reserve two rooms, will you? I don't care what they cost! I've had enough of roughing it! Tell me you're not in a fix!«

Still no reassuring noises from Sandy.

»You should have come! I've been everywhere. Seen yogis, ruins, temples, elephants.«

Sandy smiled. *»Yes, long memories,«* she mumbled.

»Yeah, like yours for sure! Have you confirmed our flights back?«

»Oops, I forgot completely. I'll do it today.

Promise and hope not to ... «

»Featherhead! Book us in at the Galle Face Green Hotel will you, please? A room with a sea view. That's one of the destinations on my personal hit list! I'll meet you there and then we can decide the rest.«

»OK, I'll leave a message for you at the reception desk if there are any hassles. Come as soon as you can, Erin!«

»Alright, alright. Don't worry so much.« The familiar voice of her friend faded away.

Sandy hung up. But Shantini had been listening to it all and now there was pathos in the small voice: »*You going to leave me, Sandy?*« Sandy picked up the little kid and hugged her close. »*Come on let's get you cleaned up! You've got to get ready to meet your mummy tomorrow, remember?*«

They went off to the bathroom. There was lots of soap, clean towels and a couple of shampoo sachets too. Lucky she'd kept her handbag with her when she went looking for those deckchairs at Ranjit's! She had everything she needed in it. So she put Shantini under the shower and soaped the salt and sand out of her fine hair. Then she cleaned below the tiny fingernails and toenails with a pair of nail scissors. The child did not say a word but just watched her all the while. She finished things off with a dab of antiseptic cream on the cut on the upper lip. Shantini was indignant! »*Ow! That really stings!*« Then she tucked the small girl into her bed with a kiss.

»*Night night now. Sweet dreams,*« she said.

»*Goodnight. But I love you now, you know, Sandy,*« Shantini said.

»*What? Why?*«

»*I just do.*«

»*Well, don't!*« she said roughly.

The child's face fell. Life hurt. Sandy knew. Shantini should know too!

»*What's your mummy like?*« she asked softly regretting her harsh words.

The child's fine featured face lit up like a tiny moon. »*Mummy. Mummy. Oh, Mummy. She's the loveliest person ever made,*« she said. »*Will you really take me home to her? I thought I would never see her again!*« The sweetest eyes pleaded, the small hand clenched cramped again. A painful shudder went through the

frail frame of her body. Lost in love for a parent. 'Well, I guess that's how things should be' Sandy thought.

»Yes, soon. You'll be home tomorrow. I promise. Cross my heart and hope not to die. Don't you worry. And then we'll have to talk about everything that's happened.« The child was studying her intently.

»You mean those people?«

»Yes. Those bad people.«

»They should leave children alone! I didn't do anything!«

»Yes, they should. Of course you didn't. Shame on them!«

A doctor would probably have to check the child too at some point. But to all appearances and judging from her behaviour, apart from a few minor bruises, she didn't seem to have been molested.

»C'mon I'll tell you a little story then you can think about it and it'll make you go all sleepy headed and then you'll leave me in peace.«

»Do you know the one about Chikken Likken?«

»When the sky fell down one day into the chick's eye?«

»Yes, that's the one.«

»All right. I think I remember it!« She related it, spinning out the yarn with all the appropriate flourishes. It didn't work, she was still wide awake! So she made up another one, about two cousins one of whom stole some fruit from the other. That didn't work too well either.

»So why did he do it?« Shantini demanded.

»He thought he was being clever,« Sandy replied weakly.

»He was a greedy guts. He didn't even like himself in the end,« the child said.

»But he was happy anyway, wasn't he? Because he'd eaten it all?«

»Well ... er ...I don't think so. Because he hadn't got a friend any more. AND he had a tummy upset. He'd spoiled Everything!« Sandy laughed outright – it was the way she said 'Everything!' with a tragic sigh and the two small hands laid flat back on the sheet helplessly.

Well it seemed that she had most definitely *not* managed to put *that* child to sleep but made her most irately awake instead! Obvious lack of experience in that field!

»Well you just think about it for now OK, and we'll talk about it tomorrow,« said a weary young mum.

»Alright then,« said a wise and tolerant child. »Good night.« A sleepy little yawn did escape then. Sandy rose to go saying, »We'll take a bus in the morning if they're running. But the roadblocks, the soldiers, it might take us ages. I hope it doesn't turn out like one of Del's stories: 'I walked all the way and did the rest by foot!'«

She'd told Shantini a couple of things like that on their ride too. Shantini giggled.

»Del said this, Del said that. Who's Del? Is he your boyfriend?«

»Maybe – my very first.« The child saw a look of sadness pass across a soft face.

»You're always talking about him. I wish I knew him.«

»Am I really? He was my father. I don't have a boyfriend,« she replied and bit her tongue ... she'd almost started to explain: 'He was your grandpa, you see.' But luckily the words had choked up all by themselves. 'Don't take everything away from her all at once, she's just a tiny kid,' was what Subash had told her.

»You can't, you see. He's dead now,« she explained after a while.

»What about Subash? Isn't he your boyfriend then?« Shantini wanted to know.

»No, I don't think so,« Sandy whispered.

»Well I'm going to marry him when I grow up if you don't want to!«
Shantini affirmed most decidedly.

»Well, that's just fine by me,« Sandy said, *»But you'd better tell him! Now, Good Night!«*

– GOOD SHEPHERDESSES –

It was about ten. The telephone rang through the spruce convent gardens. Pitter-patter of bare feet as a servant ran to answer it. A little confusion and then a nun was summoned with the explanation *»Sister, some English lady is on the phone – something about a pupil... ?«*

Sister Mary Immaculate picked up the receiver gingerly. *»If you want to enlist your child at the moment I'm sorry, we are full up this term ...«* she cautiously informed the caller.

»No. No. Nothing like that!« It was Sandy – all at sea. *»It's about something else, a rather difficult story ... «*Ah, now Sr. Mary Immaculate knew so many of those! *»Please come at 11,«* she said kindly, expecting yet another runaway mother or an expecting one. *»Mother Superior will surely receive you.«*

At eleven o'clock, a young woman and a little girl were standing at the entrance gates of the convent school staring round-eyed at the security guard lodged in a little kiosk next to a statue of the Queen of Heaven, crowned among her angels, her cloak wide open to give refuge to the planet's offspring. Sandy told him of her appointment. His eyes passed over her, quickly taking in the anxiety, the torn sari and the face on the verge of tears. A bikini bomber? Slightly suspicious he phoned through for confirmation of the appointment and a servant was sent to escort the visitors to the school admin office. Gardeners tended the grounds, servants bustled about polishing window glass, dusting panelling in cool dark interiors and the two were ushered into a waiting room. An ordered world removed from the confusion of the busy main road on the other side of the

high walls. Well, wait she must, so Sandy seated herself down. The child crept stealthily behind her chair ready to run.

»*Good morning,*« said an apparition, a crusty old nun materialized from the office area. »*Can we help you?*« Her kind old eyes travelled over the dress of the young Eurasian. She wore a sari but not quite in native style! Those folds! Never seen the like! Burgher riff-raff perhaps. Gone off the rails. Drink?

»*My name's Rodriguez, Sandy Rodriguez, I have an arrangement here with you,*« the riff-raff blurted out. The old eyes widened. A Rodriguez certainly sent money transfers from England every month for school fees for one of their school girls – in fact for the little one who had been absent for some days now. Why, just the other day, she'd registered the international transfer into the school records.

She bent close to Sandy's ear and whispered, »*Mother Superior wants to see you right away. It's best I take the child to the canteen so you can speak in private.*« Shantini's ears were burning! The nun gripped Sandy by the arm, knocked briskly on a door at the other end of the room and ushered her into the school office. She disappeared with Shantini.

An ancient bespectacled woman tut-tutted, buried amid piles of papers. She looked up, suddenly businesslike, peering owl like over her glasses. »*Please take a seat,*« she said, looking rather severely at Sandy. »*The child has been missing for days,*« she began in a strict tone. »*You are not supposed to do things like this or ever see her! Her foster parents are out of their minds with worry. You have broken your promise!*« Sandy gasped in horror. More dreadful accusations!

»I didn't take her away! I stumbled across her gagged and bound at one of the resorts!« she stammered. The nun's face became drawn. A thousand lines seemed to criss cross across it all of a sudden and the skin on her forehead went into tight folds as she lifted scarce eyebrows in surprise. Child trafficking? This couldn't have happened to one of the girls in her care? The school was always so very careful!

»Was she taken at the gates here?« she enquired deeply worried.
»I don't know. It seems her servant boy escort didn't turn up so she wandered home on her own,« Sandy explained, with a sudden flashback to the Sannyasi Bunyip!
»Oh, I see! I'm so very, very sorry,« the poor nun said looking shame-faced. »I seem to have completely misunderstood. Is the child well?« she asked anxiously.
Sandy shrugged her shoulders. »She won't talk about it. I don't know anything about what happened.«
»I'll call her mother immediately!« the old nun said picking up the phone distractedly. »Surely she'll talk to her... You know, we have been channelling the money we receive from you and the child has been making real progress in school ... hello! ... hello!« She lost the connection and re-dialled.

»I've brought her back to you, haven't I?« Sandy said with an injured air.
»You wish to return her to the adoptive parents?« An affirmative after a moment's hesitation. The adoptive parent seemed to be on the other end of the now ... »Yes, yes, Oh dear, Mrs Wijeratne ...«, the nun was saying ... »Certainly! Come immediately.« And she put the phone down pensively.

»Will she leave you now?« she asked Sandy, a note of doubt in her voice.

»*She doesn't know who I am. I haven't told her. She's too young. Too frail,*« was the answer.

Oh! She'd so often seen that sad, stoic expression on their faces. Distraught young women foundering in their own helplessness and the shame of unlawful motherhood. »*She's not the only one!*« the old woman said softly, under her breath.

»*I'll be contacting the police station. They'll be requiring a statement from you. Why don't you go down the corridor to the refectory and join the others for some refreshment until they arrive? You are both welcome to have lunch here with us if you like.*«

»*Thanks. I'm sure we'd be glad to do that.*«

»*Please leave news of your whereabouts with the police,*« she said dialling the local station.

Sandy left the office and wandered down a long airy corridor. One or two classroom doors were open and she saw neat rows of small desks where the page leaves of books fluttered, a little England outside with its trim netball courts, playing fields and razed lawns, glorious in the sunshine. She found Shantini on a high, a shocking pink soft drink in one hand and a crumbly coconut fudge cake falling apart in the other. And the little busted lip. She was in the company of two nuns and a cleaner. Could be that when you are six you think you rule the world. They looked up as Sandy entered.

»*Sandy! Mummy's coming to get me right now!*« she cried out, beaming. »*They said so!*«

But Sandy's heart suddenly sank. Garumph! It positively ground to a halt. She felt so strangely mixed up. Feelings she had buried were rising up in shockwaves inside her. She sat down and accepted the Elephant house brand fizzy soft drink

she was offered. *No ice not nice!* Jem's baby voice shrieked somewhere in the back of her head!

»*So, so – your mummy's coming to get you, is she?*« she managed to fizz up.

»*Yes, they phoned her. She must be already at the bus-stop! Sunil's coming too!*«

»*Oh. Sunil? I suppose that's your dad, is it?*«

»*No silly, it's my little brother! Daddy's at work! He's not allowed to leave. But they'll tell him I'm back! I'll see him later!*«

Her family. Her thoughts orbited quite dizzily around it like a small moon.

»*So how old is your little brother?*«

»*Three.*«

»*Oh! That's old. But he must be awfully sweet – like you.*« The child's enchanting face looked up rippling with smiles. »*So, you really like him then?*« she went on blindly ...

»*Yes, when he doesn't cry. But he cries for every thing and then doesn't stop until you do what he wants! Even when he's got no tears left, he just sits for hours making a crying noise! It's horrible.*«

Now that reminded Sandy of someone! And she remembered her famous 4711 tear bottle.

»*Oh-oh. Those are crocodile tears.*«

»*Yes. But he's a darling little croc and I can't wait any longer to hug him!*«

The police arrived soon and talked to the child who ended up in stubborn tears, refusing to speak retreating sullenly to a corner of the room with her back to them all. Sandy too was questioned but she had so little to tell. She mentioned Siri's manoeuvres, that he'd been working for Ranjit and got fired. She mentioned Lalith and the foreigners who seemed to be

involved in some odd operations. The police asked for descriptions. Did she know of any other members in the gang of traffickers? She thought of Subash. Was he involved? She wouldn't say. The Pirate? Skelton? She couldn't say.

Superintendent Wijekoon said. *»The child seems to have had a narrow escape – mishandled physically but not molested?«* Sandy shuddered at the thought. She nodded feebly.

»A doctor will have to check. If it is so – she'll have been extremely lucky – we seem to be having a lot of these cases nowadays,« the police officer said. *»Sister says you will be lunching here.«* Sandy nodded her head again. *»Then perhaps you will be good enough to pass by the station later and help us put some identikits together?«* She nodded again, he shook her hand and left. Sandy went to try to bring round the little girl and took her out into the school gardens. They were both in subdued spirits. Birds sang, hibiscus flowered and bougainvillea bloomed but Sandy and Shantini could not smile. Three butterflies fluttered hypnotically around a shrub and four sad eyes were being drawn to them when there was a sudden cry and another gauze winged thing came flying down the garden steps seemingly defying all known laws of gravity. Streaming colours of a sari and a woman wrapped in it – enough to baffle any lepidopterist! Shantini sprang up and raced toward the insect colliding into her violently. They almost hurt themselves and burst into tears in an outbreak of relief and shock. Sandy held back her treacherous feelings. It was hard to see what was before her eyes. She watched the two as they clung onto each other. Through the blur of her tears she noticed an older man standing in the background with a small boy. It was the little brother. *»Sunil's here too, Shantini,«* he softly said.

»Grappa!« screamed a radiant Shantini. The woman came to her senses, released herself and approached Sandy. The child ran off and collided into the other two.

Mrs. Wijeratne had no idea of whom she addressed. She had no idea that Shantini's school fees were paid by a donor. Only wise old Mother Superior knew who that donor was.

»I don't know how I can thank you – Mother Superior says you saved her life!« she said shyly, hardly daring to raise her eyes. »You can't know what she means to me.«

»I can imagine. She's a cute kid.«

»Yes, she is!« replied the doting step-mother. »But then that's what all mothers say!«

Sandy flushed and her hands turned ice cold. She was speaking to a woman in her late thirties. Not too affluent but prettily groomed with a self dismissing way about her which made her most comfortably unthreatening. Imagine! Five seconds before she had been clinging onto the child as if her life depended on it. Mothers! thought Sandy remembering the follies of her own.

»What does your husband do?« she enquired half out of politeness. (The other half of the reason was to camouflage herself discreetly). »He's a clerk at the Treasury« came the reply. »Ah.« Can't take any more déjà vu thought Sandy. Words stuck in her throat. Luckily lunch was served right then and the canteen soon filled up with noisy red-ribboned hordes of schoolgirls and inquisitive eyes scanned the strangers. Sandy sat warily to one side with the children's grandfather while Sunil and Shantini each clung possessively onto their mother who could hardly move her elbows to use the cutlery! There were a few kicks going on under the table too.

»You scared she's going to vanish?« Sandy asked them knowing full well that they most certainly were! A scarcely discernible tinge of jealousy hovered in those few words. She hoped they hadn't picked it up.

»They're just babies,« Grappa Joey said. »You know, as soon as they're just a bit bigger they won't be letting us come anywhere near them! They'll be demanding their privacy!« He spoke in a low tone and the children did not hear him. »You only have them for so long, you know,« he said. »Do you come from a large family?« he asked Sandy.

»Oh, yes, I suppose so – « she answered. »There were quite a few of us! And you?« Sandy asked him, deflecting the enquiries skilfully. »Just the one son – their pop,« he said nodding towards the little trinity.

»Um ... and your wife?«

»T.B. She passed away long ago, shortly after my son was born.«

»Oh! I see, I'm sorry to hear that.« He smiled at her. She smiled back feebly.

»Does she know she is adopted?« Sandy asked the old man. »Ah, no – No, she doesn't know it. The nuns advised us not to say anything for the moment.«

»Won't it be too much of a shock to learn it later?« Sandy asked hoping his reply would be negative.

»I wouldn't know,« said the old man. »It's impossible to say. But some people think the child might suffer now if she feels she has been rejected by her real parents. I mean to say, it is hard to understand how a mother can give away her own, isn't it?« Sandy swallowed.

»People can get themselves deep into trouble, you know,« she said hesitating. He nodded, non judgementally.

»Yes, anything's possible. We're keeping quiet for the moment. It has to be that way, you see – conflicts might arise with the real mother. What if she changed her mind and regretted her decision to give her away? Maternal feelings are unpredictable! You can't imagine how distressed Lakshmi was when she thought she couldn't have children! She was a different person once they'd adopted Shantini. Then afterwards Sunil arrived the natural way!«

»Lakshmi?«

»Yes, didn't she even introduce herself in the excitement? Yes, Lakshmi – my daughter-in-law.«

It was getting on towards 2 p.m. Sandy had to go to the police station and began to excuse herself.

»In case we don't see you again. Please, you must write. I'll leave you our address.« Grappa Joey said, standing up and fishing out a notebook from a pocket. He wrote his home number down carefully. It seemed to take him about half an hour. Shantini looked at Sandy with big eyes. *»Give me a kiss!«* she demanded and she began to cry.

»I'll try to keep in touch through the convent,« Sandy said, popped a seemingly unconcerned kiss on her cheek and escaped. She'd made her decisions long ago. She didn't turn back even once as they watched her walk away toward the school office where the old nun waited for her.

»I've arranged a taxi for you, my dear. It just arrived at the gate.«

»Thanks so much. We've said our goodbyes. I'm going on to the police station now... « Doused by a sense of defeat, she turned to go.

»Don't take it so badly, my child,« the old nun said kindly, knowing it all only too well. The stern eyes peered over the steel rimmed specs again. *»Do you practise your religion?«*

Sandy shuddered in horror. *»Yes,«* she replied.

»Which faith are you? Protestant? Anglican?« the nun queried. She thought of Erin, Subash, Liutha »I have faith in people.« she said slowly.

The old woman was at first a little put out by the reply, then softening she said, »It is the way of the Christ. Go in peace.«

When she was done at the police station, Sandy walked back to her room in the darkening city. The sky seemed a mass of moving wings. Birds winging home in the twilight to their nests. But Shantini was gone.

– WEIGHTS AND MEASURES –

She returned to the little hotel, turned the key and entered the musty room they'd spent the night in. It was indeed a forsaken place. The child's voice still seemed to linger in the air. She drew back the floppy sashes of the window curtains and let the darkness in, turning to the bed to ease the creases from the sheets. *Ouch!* What was this now? *But what else could it be?* Curling among the folds of cotton textile lay a sparkling silver creature. It was the little seahorse from the charmed bracelet! Forgotten? Run off by himself? Or was it just a bit of child magic at work? She closed her hand tightly around it. It belonged on the bracelet of a little girl and now once more it would have to be returned to its rightful owner. *But when?* What might Lakshmi think if she turned up again in so short a while? The situation might become as transparent to her as it had become to Subash. Kind of *obvious*, like he said? She stretched out on the damp bed and let her mind run over the events of the day before up to the return of Shantini to her foster parents. How long ago it all seemed!

On that morning in Beruwela, when the fishermen had put them ashore, the trek inland had begun. But they didn't get far. She'd felt faint and lost consciousness. Subash (of all people!) had appeared from nowhere and helped them up the dried up riverbed to where he'd parked his three wheeler. Then they'd driven together up the coast to the capital, Colombo. He'd helped them find this room for the night and disappeared. She guessed he'd had his hungry habit to feed.

But they'd done some talking during the journey and certain things had come to light. The first clues had come as they approached a military roadblock. Subash started to shake uncontrollably and the vehicle they were travelling in nearly left the road. She'd reached over and caught the handle bar just in time. The tuk-tuk steadied and came to a jerky stop right below the noses of two soldiers. They peeked into the three wheeler and demanded papers. She had handed over her passport. Subash mumbled something incoherent about tourists he was driving to the airport handing over the vehicle's documentation. The road guards saw a young woman and little kid clinging to her dressed in native clothes! Oh, these tiresome western hippies! Why didn't they just stay home? They dismissed them with a superior wave.

Sandy managed to contain her emotions until they had left the army check point behind but she could see that their driver was out of synchronization, both unnerving and unnerved.

»*You're shaking like a jellyfish, Subash! Why?*« she demanded.
»*Didn't you just get yourself fixed up? What's going on?*«

He pulled off the main road into a path and stopped the vehicle. She sat quietly with Shantini on the backseat watching his dark eyes from the rear mirror. They had that strange glitter in them. Then his eyelids slipped close and his head flopped onto the windscreen. »*Look, let me drive,*« she'd said and they'd changed seats. She turned the ignition key and as she drove, she began to assemble the pieces of the puzzle together.

Why did he freak out in that way as they approached the soldiers? Surely he was used to the road checks? There were security controls all over the place. And hadn't he said something about being in the army himself ... and then something about going it alone? So, had he bought himself out?

Surely not. He'd been panicking at the road check. Why? The answer came to her after a while. Why he's hiding from the army itself! Could that be it? *A deserter?*

Shantini's voice had broken in on her thoughts just then *»I'm so hungry, Sand!«* she complained. They had hardly eaten all day. So then they had made a brief stop at a wayside stand for some food and a 'I love Lanka' T-shirt for Shantini to change into. A while later, after mulling it all around in her head Sandy asked him.

»Subash, why did you join the army?« The usual loaded silence. *»I thought it was the right thing to do,«* he said when he had to. There was such a weariness in the voice.

»And wasn't it?«

»No. You become a machine. They programme you. You don't ask questions. They tell you who they want you to kill. Once you've signed the contract, you sign away everything. You don't belong to yourself any more.«

»So you left?« He fell into one of those brooding silences.

»I didn't return from leave one time. That's all,« he eventually explained.

»So what would that mean if they get hold of you?«

»Court martial.«

She couldn't get a peep out of him after that.

He'd helped her out, she knew that. Maybe she could haul him out of the fix he was in. Del had had influential friends. She had said nothing about it to Subash but she knew that if you moved in the right circles, there were ways around technical problems of this sort. And she was going to try to find one.

Sandy had driven the little vehicle as fast as it could go but the journey dragged on and it was very late when she stopped. Shantini had been so glad to get out after sitting still for so long and hopped out chirpy as a cricket. Subash on the other hand had been growing increasingly restless, keen to do one of his disappearing acts and had driven off as soon as he could. She'd concluded that he was afraid of being seen with them, since the police might well be on the look out for Shantini. She knew she looked as if she had been dragged through a hedge backwards - so they'd had to give the flashier hotels a miss and seek out a more run down place.

Sandy went to clean her teeth. That was what had happened yesterday. There had been so many unidentifiable forces at work. What lay ahead tomorrow?

She'd go see one of Del's old contacts - maybe she could get some new ID for Subash. In a determined mood, she fell into a sound sleep. If she hadn't rescued Shantini - *Would any one have?*

– A STATUE BY THE SEA –

It was a zippy day and the morning sun found Sandy out and about and somewhat revived. It was mainly because she now knew that the kid was in safe hands, in a happy home. The sea breeze seemed to charge her head with new energies. On the horizon far ships sailed out. She hoped that it was a new cycle that was beginning for herself too.

She'd checked out of the little guesthouse early and now wandered around the old area of the Fort waiting for the shops to open. A sprawl of urban poor stirred from sleep on the pavement as she sipped a cup of hot black tea at a roadside kiosk. She passed plush residential quarters and the old Parliament buildings to the green at Galle Face and found herself standing before a statue. It was the statesman Solomon Bandaranaike, his feet planted stolidly in the grasses. A touch of verdi-gris decked his shoulders, a crow perched on his head and his eyes of granite rested on the dazzling Indian Ocean. It seemed to her she'd come full circle. *Had she ever really left?*

As soon as the shops opened, she bought some clothes and put them on. The salt soaked sari went into the nearest dustbin. Then she checked in at the big hotel on the green and booked rooms for Erin and herself. She knew she'd earned herself brunch, a cool shower and a break. But first she made that phone call to Del's old friend and was invited to dine at his smart residence in Cinnamon Gardens that evening. On the way there she'd confirm those darned return flights! But first a long siesta in the graceful rooms of the old hotel.

That evening, a servant opened the door to her and showed her into an airy room where her hostess was waiting. Gold bangles moved with a jingle as she moved her hands saying *»I'm so sorry Cyril isn't here yet! He shouldn't be too long –. We saw the obituary in the 'Times of Ceylon'. It was such a shock to us all ... «* She said sympathetically, *»He wasn't old!«* She was talking about Del's recent decease.

»No,« Sandy agreed. *»Fifty-nine is hardly old. But he'd had a demanding job, spent a lot of time on planes. These things catch up with you. It was a myocardial infarction. Suddenly out of the blue.«*

»How has your family been able to bear it?« she asked kindly.

»Oh, one copes if one must.« There was no need to mention the unofficial facts. The truth was that Del and Lilian had gone their separate ways long ago but no one was talking. Whose business could it be but theirs? Sandy sipped a cool drink of fresh-pressed passion fruit while the woman slipped away to organize the meal.

Del's dapper former colleague arrived at nine in a well cut, lightweight cotton suit. He strode genially towards her and they shook hands, evidently pleased to meet her. She was somewhat charmed by the warmth of the reception and chatted happily away until dinner. Devilled seafood with chilled avocado was served by an elegant servant in national dress. Towards the end of the meal the diplomat raised a napkin to his lips. *»So what can I do for you?«* he inquired having already decided to indulge any caprice – for old times sake. She explained what she needed.

»Friend of yours?« It was a discreet query.

»An acquaintance. He's done me an immense favour. I'd very much like to say thank you.«

The diplomat asked no awkward questions simply saying.
»That should present no problem. Are you staying at the Lanka Oberoi?«

»No, I'm at the Galle Face Green.«

»Well, I'll have a document for him sent to you there before you leave. He can use it to get new papers. You'll be able to pick it up in reception. And that's a promise,« he emphasized.

– DARK HORSES –

Erin arrived late on Friday afternoon as prearranged and was soon to be seen sipping a Piña Colada accompanied by a reformed Sandy who was dipping into a Pêche Melba with a long spoon. They were in the sun lounge of the picturesque old hotel, posing like a pair of film starlets, showing off no end.

»*She was an Australian soprano, you know,* « Sandy was saying, waving her spoon.

»*Who?*« Erin looked befuddled.

»*Dame Nellie Melba.*« The dessert spoon did a theatrical twirl.

»*You're an absolute mine of useless information, Sandy! Who wants to know?*«

»*Dunno. Thought you might!*«

A very practical question followed »*What I do want to know is how you are going to find the boyfriend to give him his new ID.*«

»*What boyfriend?*« She looked up innocently but Erin wasn't buying!

»*Have to go back where we were,*« Sandy gulped, leaving out the First Person Plural pronoun fearing the reaction and splashing her new clothes at the same time. Damn! The sticky peach juice was soaking in insistently.

»*Unuwatuna? No way!*« Erin was positively bristling! You could feel all the prickly horrors coming out of her skin. Sandy was tempted to back down instantly in pure cowardice. Only she knew she couldn't! She went into a fluster. »*Please, I promise, I don't even have to see him. I'll just leave it there, then we can do whatever you want from then on for the rest of the holiday.*«

She tagged on the words *»He doesn't matter a bit to me!«* to see how they sounded but Erin's eyebrows raised in a challenging *'Oh, really? Pull the other one'* response.

»Don't fall off your high heels,« Sandy then replied a little brusquely. *»You know I can leave the document with the Tamil sailor or Ranjit if Subash is not around. He'll get to pick it up sometime. Walls have ears there.«*

Erin took a sip on her long drink and veered dangerously backwards on her chair nearly tipping it.

»So that means we're making another trip down south to where all those nice people are?«

»Please, Erin. We can travel on any where you like after.«

»Oh, alright, I'm not bothered really. I grant you ONE day. But you know what? I think you should go pay your visit to your folks up country first like you wanted to, before we go look up the boyfriend. In case you're not around later – «

Sandy was suitably subdued. Then Erin indicated to the comforting surroundings *»I think I could get used to this! So why, don't I just hang out here for a few days while you're away, hmm?«*

»Hmmm ... OK. Suits me. I'll go.«

»I'll just get myself waited on hand and foot as I deserve,« Erin was saying, *»And it will give the gang time to forget all about you.«*

Sandy nodded, hopeful but a bit unconvinced. *»So now tell me – what's the big favour he did for you?«* she asked.

It was getting to be a jumpy ride with Erin! Sandy had run out of excuses ... one way or another she was going to have to clear things up. Erin had been patient long enough! The big waves were coming in to the shore. As they watched them she told

Erin about Shantini and who she really was. She even told Erin a little about Mr. No Name himself – Shantini’s father that is.

The words hung in the air. It had taken all of an hour to relate the story. Erin had been a very quiet listener and the terrace of the bar had emptied as guests went to their rooms to dress for a revival empire dinner. She sipped serenely on a second long drink in which curls of lime peel floated.

»*You are a dark horse, Sandy,*« she reproached. »*I knew you’d been out in Cyprus and then vanished for a year but as for the rest ... it just knocks me out! Why so secretive?*«

»*My parents,*« she answered simply.

»*So you and Mr. Mystery didn’t split up friends?*«

»*No. Deadly enemies. I told you! He was married. Said he wasn’t. He dropped me all the way down.*«

»*It’s a long time to have kept it all barred up! It’s no good living in a fortress you know, especially if your allies are on the outside!*« Erin softened when the head hung crestfallen.

»*Well anyway, at least it’s all spilled out, finally,*« she said kindly.

»*And you know what – I’m really glad it’s me you’ve told!*«

There was silence for a few moments and then the hunt for more information was on.

»*So what did you do all those months you were here on your own?*«

»*I just hung out. Blew here, blew there with the wind.*«

»*No one you talked to?*«

»*I stayed a while at Unuwatuna and made friends with an old man, a retired sailor. He knew.*«

»*And then where did you go?*«

»*Then I went out east where you’re not supposed to go, where they say all the troubles are. But there was nothing doing and no one about. Protected areas. Surf. Seagulls.*«

»*Nobody at all?*«

»*A little village, a lighthouse, a white temple.*«

»*So, so. No Thomson tours?*«

»*Lord forbid!*«

»*Why is it tourists refuse to be tagged as tourists?*«

»*We like to pretend to ourselves that we're not sheep and we've got all these original ideas.*« They giggled like adolescents. »*Come on, let's get rigged up for dinner. I'm ravenous! I'll race you upstairs!*«

Two skinny tourists scampered up to their rooms laughing hysterically and only one was just a little tipsy from the rum. The other's hysteria was quite, quite real.

Sandy woke up with a start on Sunday morning. She was taking the train up to the hill country that afternoon – but the sea horse had to go back first! No, there were no two ways about it. Two hours later she was stepping out of a taxi-cab to the sounds of a commotion. She stood at the open gate of Grappa Joey’s house where they all lived. A barking puppy was running round and round in a high state of excitement, a sandal in its mouth. The two kids were giving plucky chase. A few hens joined in too but were forced to fly away in a squawk of indignant feathers. No one had noticed her arrival. Sunil did a little leap and landed on the dog. He got hold of him and they wrestled there a little while breathless. Shantini, thrilled with the results decided to help matters along and pounced on top of both of them. The scene of hilarity caused old Joe to appear anxiously on the verandah, his ‘Daily News’ newspaper clutched in his hand. Sandy pulled the gate close with a rather loud clicking noise and they looked up. They scrambled over in an impetuous rush. She backed off to fend off the impact as the two children sprang onto her. The smaller one she managed to lift up. She couldn’t resist it! Sunil’s elastic body locked its feet about her waist, a small bottom settled itself comfortably in her hands and the little one pushed her hair out of her eyes. »Sandy!!!« screamed Shantini. »Why didn’t you tell me you were coming! Get down Sunil!« she roared. »She’s MY friend!«

»He’s just a baby!« Sandy reproached. »No, I’m not!« denied Sunil vehemently.

The older girl turned away a little moodily. But the rowdy mirth could not be held back. She tweaked Sunil’s ear just a

teeny bit and with a squeak, he gave up the battle for possession of Sandy who consequently flopped onto the grass under the weight of the heavy children. Their grandfather managed to get a word in, scolding them, flapping his paper at their heads and telling them that they were worse than the puppy! The two looked a bit sorry and his wrinkled face settled back into its customary serenity. A very cute someone else sat panting on the grass, looking from face to face with great appeal, a sweet pink tongue hanging out.

»*That's a pretty smart dog. What's its name?*«

»*Boo,*« said Shantini. »*No, it isn't!*« Sunil contradicted. »*It's Woof!*«

»*Boo!*«

»*Woof!*« They were off again!

»*Oh, I see,*« said Sandy. »*Boowoof. Pleased to meet you. You're the only polite one here,*« she said, shaking the dog's paw courteously. They stopped squabbling then looking a little repentant. Sandy turned to Grappa Joey to explain why she'd come, holding the sea horse out to Shantini. The child looked at the trinket somewhat sadly. Then she looked up, trying to explain something she didn't quite understand herself. »*I left it for you on purpose, Sandy. It's your present,*« she said.

»*But it belongs on the bracelet! See? Else there'll be an empty place.*«

»*Doesn't matter. It'll make me think of you when I see it's not there.*«

»*You going to forget me otherwise?*« Sandy asked without thinking. Now that was silly! Of course she would!

Whyever had she said that? Luckily Lakshmi came through the gate right then with a basket of vegetables and a bunch of blue flowers. Seemed she'd just been to the market.

»*I'm not stopping,*« Sandy said apologetically, rising to go.

»*Shantini left a trinket behind but it turns out she did it deliberately.*«

Lakshmi put her basket down and took her warmly by the arm.
»*What nonsense! Of course you are stopping. We won't let you go and that's all! Right children?*«
»*Ye-ess! You're NOT going!!!*«

»*I left it for you, you know...*« Shantini was explaining » ... *I've got so many others. Look!*« The bracelet glistened on the child's thin wrist.

»*Nine star constellations of the southern hemisphere,*« Sandy said and instantly bit her lip. Yet, there they were, the nine she'd picked out in her whimsical way: *Apus*, the bird of paradise, *Chameleon* self explanatory (!), *Eridanus* the river, *Hydrus* the water snake, *Pavo* the peacock, *Leo* the (fierce) lioness, *Corvus* the crow, *Vela* the ship's sails and ... well, she'd cheated with the flying fish and chosen a seahorse instead.

»*What's a consternation?*«

»*Oh, Shantini,*« her step-mother said, casting a puzzled look at Sandy. How on earth could the young stranger have known that now? To Shantini she said »*A consternation is what you always cause! You know what a constellation is! Grappa showed you one – that great big question mark in the sky!*«

It was Sandy's turn to give Lakshmi a puzzled look.

»*It's my father-in-law,*« she explained, »*Ursa Major. He says it's not a plough at all! When he joins the dots he comes up with an interrogation mark!*«

»*Can you show those other whatsits to us, please?*« Shantini wanted to see.

»*Yes, Pleeease! Tonight!*« Sunil wanted to stargaze.

»*You show them to me sometime,*« Sandy said, »*I stopped looking at the stars in the sky a long time ago.*«

Four small eyes looked baffled.

»*We always look up at the twinkles,*« they affirmed rather shocked.

»*Really?*« she raised an eyebrow toward Lakshmi.

»*Yes, they do. It all started with the fire-flies. They are all over the place in June. We used to tell them they were bits of stars. Then they caught one in a bottle and the light wouldn't go out. So ever since then we all became devoted star-watchers – It's partly an excuse for avoiding bedtime of course,*« she added.

»*Oh, I see! I know what you need!*«

»*What?*« Two voices asked in chorus.

»*A telescope.*«

»*A what?*«

»*You'll see. I'll try to send you one.*« They looked at each other mystified. Then Sunil assembled his thoughts with a great effort. »*Is the sea-horse a consternation, too?*«

»*No,*« Sandy confessed. »*But you do know about the sea-horse babies of course?*«

»*No, what?*« They looked a bit worried then.

»*That it's the daddy horse who hatches the baby one?*«

»*Ha? What do you mean?*«

»*It's true. He carries it around with him in his brood pouch until it's ready to come out.*«

»*Like a kangaroo?*«

»*Well, yes, sort of.*«

»*It's not so jumpy in there 'cos the seahorse swims, Sunil,*« Shantini clarified to her little brother.

»*Oh, that's true.*« A small judge nodded convinced.

They snuggled down on the cane seats for what seemed split seconds. Then they all sat down on the grass to have a serious discussion about all the poor animals caged in the Colombo zoo while Grappa Joey and his daughter-in-law went inside to make a nice hot teapot of Brooke Bonds for everybody. The tea

arrived and Lakshmi sent the children off to search for the hostage sandal which the dog had dropped. The puppy snoozed innocently in the shade and the two women found themselves alone.

»You know, Sandy I wanted to talk to you anyway. Just the two of us – about things.«

Sandy felt herself flush. Things? She tossed her hair away from her eyes. She'd worn it loose that day. What was coming? Had Lakshmi guessed? Of course not. She didn't have to guess. She just Knew. The two women's eyes met.

»I never meant to cause harm coming here to search for her, you know,« Sandy said. *»I just felt bad about it all and thought I should at least check that things were alright.«*

Lakshmi was quiet, plaiting the silky fringe that bordered her sari a little nervously. Then she seemed to pull herself together.

»Well, she wasn't as it turned out. I dread to think what might have happened if you hadn't shown up when you did.«

»I'll be leaving soon so you don't have to worry ... «

»I wasn't worrying ... and then ... I guess she might be a very lucky little girl, if she's really got two of us. Don't you think?« Her eyes were shining. And another pair of eyes shone back at her. The two women hugged each other and not just the one of them was in tears.

»Why is Sandy crying?« Shantini was back with the shoe.

»Because she doesn't want to leave you,« Lakshmi said simply and the women let go of each other. Just for once Shantini did not ask 'Why'? Just the truth, the whole truth and nothing ... but it was just not the moment for it. Not for the whole of it. Somewhere in her child's heart she knew Why. Sandy mopped

up her tears, bid goodbye and made her way to the central railway station. There were other lost things still to be retrieved. Soon a smoky diesel locomotive burrowed upward and inland, like a giant worm as she peeped fearfully out of the window while the slow train of her thoughts returned Sandy to an estate in the hill country, where she had spent many days of her childhood, all those long years ago.

PART THREE

– THE HIGH COUNTRY –

A magpie darted, streak of midnight blue, passing in the sky of time searching some shining thing to take home to its nest. Foraging, like Sandy in her lost child's memory. For what? Ephemera? The gold of Fairnilee perhaps. For all that vanishes without trace. A monogram peeped from below a thin layer of dust on a suitcase. Her hand gently wiped it away to reveal three initials neatly painted in white: L.S.D. For a fleeting moment time seemed suspended. It was Lilian's sweet signature. Sandy almost felt she could touch her right then and there, bring her alive. But the sensation subsided and her mother's presence faded, forever gone, as ever.

An 'L', an 'S' and a 'D' – that was Lilian Simone Delft. Lilian _ a name bequeathed in childhood that suited well that sweet dweller in hearts. Yes, the soft suitcase was locked, but a story still lived. Earlier that day, Sandy had asked Aunt Esther if there were any possessions of her mother still around. The old aunt had rummaged in her rooms and a little tool had appeared: a tiny ornate key across which fiery specks of rust scattered. It lay in Sandy's open palm. And a suitcase of a long ago was ready to be opened. A hand-made suitcase from light fawn skin that bore a label: Millers, Kandy, Ceylon. She took a deep breath and placed the key into its recess. The frail lock ceded as if it had never meant to put up any resistance. Up and open swung the lid!

And out it crept: The *fragrance*. The unmistakable fragrance of the Ceylon hill country. A scent not to be confused with that of any other place in this wide world. It lingered deep in paper

fibre, that most magical medium, a compound of leaves which had the power to capture words, to absorb the colour and the odour of a location and to act as an emissary between the living and the dead. The smell was of rain-drenched red earth, of cinnamon and of leaves sizzling dry, only to be moistened again in long cycles of the sun's slow journeying. A swirl of cloud, a gust of wind from an open window ... and with a drum roll, in leapt the rain god Varuna Bagawan!

And up and away flew a sheet of paper rising steadily in a current, landing softly in a corner of the room. A thousand memories flooded in.

Sandy looked at the careful collection, feeling like a bird that flies by tombstones, a wanderer in sacred groves never meant for entering. Letters were stacked neatly in sheaves, ringed with frail curls of pastel ribbon. A babe's lone pink shoe lay there, the tissue fragmenting. Silver wedding sandals for a faerie dancer buried deep in confetti, pressed flowers falling asunder, a tress of infant hair, a biscuit tin. The suitcase lay like an open book where all was sorted carefully, minutes before departure to regions unknown. But it housed a realm of neat order, a world her mother had yearned for and belonged in. Sandy never could forget what Lilian had endured on the steel grey factory belts of England, impoverished of time, chained to a lustreless drudge, vaguely conscious of having committed some grave error.

The little batches of letters, held together with their brave flourishes of baby ribbon, seemed to be calling out, sweetly, politely even, asking to be opened, as pretty and as tempting as the iced pastel sweets and candies of an endless birthday party. *'Won't you eat me?'* Was there a reason why they had been so neatly sorted and left so invitingly? An act that went beyond

mortality, speech to be voiced without a tongue? Did the dead still have things to say? *To whom?* She didn't know. Her energy ebbed. She felt like Pandora. She closed the trunk and sank back upon her heels, needing time to reflect. She turned the little key in its lock and put it into her pocket. Picking up the sheet of paper that had flown out earlier she exited from the room into the rose garden, looking down into the deep valley before her with eyes that could not see.

New trees had been planted filling the remoteness of the hilly terrain. A hard-baked dirt road trekked down to the stores, torn open by powerful roots of unearthed trees that forced their way through exposing the topsoil evermore to the onslaught of the monsoons. Winding downward past the mounds of termites, bees and humming-birds. Far, ghostly, slipping into the heady insect buzz, snaking past the trees swollen with nectar, sliding brittle away over the flaking silver quartz. There, now she glimpsed it, and then suddenly it was gone like her gentle mother's world. A woman's voice wild in the scream of the parakeets, in the very saps, in the juicy hillsides full of green orange and passion fruit. She slipped into a reel of memory:

»*So why did they scream?*« a six-year old Sandy was asking.«

»*So why do You?*« asked a fast growing eight year old, who was swinging upside down in a tree at the time, squinting his eyes. Was he trying to look up his nose?

»*I don't!*« she'd almost forgotten to say, distracted by the strange sighting.

»*You know you do!*« It was Kit she was speaking to all those years ago. Her brother – Kit! »*You should never scream,*« he said earnestly. »*Especially if it really hurts you.*«

»*Why not?*«

»*Because that's when you lose.*«

»*Lose what?*«

»*That's when you've got to go away in your head.*«
»*And if it doesn't stop hurting? If it kills you?*«
»*Well, then it doesn't matter because then you can never lose.*«
»*Why do people have to hurt other people so?*«
»*Because they don't know any better.*«

Well, that was about as far as the other child's explanation could go. Either you understood him – or you didn't. Among the big leaves outside, the doves were cooing and the breeze danced gay in the high mango trees.

Kit had meant all the world to her when she was a little kid. They'd spent most of their waking hours together and what they talked about no one knew but them. Lilian said Sandy had first been introduced to her brother as his very own personal gift. And for a while she in turn felt he entirely belonged to her too. But then the cars and bikes brum-brummed into his life and stole her thoughtful playmate away. As the years passed the siblings grew increasingly further apart like two teeth going in the wrong direction. It required the attention of an artful dentist or a stiff unyielding brace. Who else could put things right?

She still had the loose leaf of paper in her hand. It bore no author's name but had been faithfully copied out in Lilian's clear hand:

*I'll walk beside you thro' the world today
While dreams and songs and flowers bless your way.
I'll look into your fears and guide your hand,
I'll walk beside you to a golden land ...
I'll walk beside you through the passing years
Thro' days of clouds and sunshine, joy and tears
And when the Great Day comes and sunset beams,
I'll walk beside you to a land of dreams'*

Now who had put those pretty words down?
And why did they make a body cry?

For truly Kit had never screamed as they picked him up after the fight. He'd been tossed like a flat ball, battered by a cricket bat and left on a pavement for half an hour before he crawled up. He had been suffering internal bleeding at the time. The Harley smashed into smithereens shortly after and the body flew in the air, landing 100 feet away. Kit had been with the Holmes boy in the hours before, downing pints in an East End pub. Iain was an Australian Swede searching for a clue about his origins the way people sometimes did. The sullen Cockney lads didn't like the strangers in their ambit. Pick-a-fight comments flicked here and there like darts heading for a bulls eye. '*Pommie bastards,*' Iain had muttered grimly under his breath. They'd left 'The Ship and Anchor' followed by a troop of potential teenage recruits for the territorial army. A fight broke out ten minutes later at a fish 'n' chips' shop. A case of friendly fire, unaware where the roots of their resentment lay. Iain was cut up but ran far. The pack went after him. Kit lay injured in an alley for too long. He got to his feet not knowing how hurt he was and mounted his bike and rode it fast homeward. The helmet couldn't be removed after the crash for fear the head would fall apart. He never recovered consciousness but lay in a coma where everyone who loved him hoped a sad and joyless while. A Friday purge as sullen disinherited young men broke out of the London factories on the peripheries of sanity. Sandy blocked it out. Kit should have been born a girl. Then maybe he'd still be here. R.I.P. went her heart.

An estate worker passed by a window, walking tall, a basket of pineapples balanced on a folded cloth pad upon his head.

Above him, birds chased displaying bright flashes of underwing colour. A flock of bold blue magpies perched in the nut tree. She counted them: Seven. Then for a while there seemed to be no sounds at all. In the sun-drenched stretch of morning, warmth steadily charged the blue air. You could count each second's passing and if you must know, these were moments known to voyants alone.

When she felt quieted inside once more, Sandy turned back to the house entering through another door, remembering someone else she had wanted to say hello to. There he stood waiting patiently in the lounge: *Clavi cembalo col piano e forte*. The family pianoforte. *Piano: slow. Forte: loud*. She touched with regret, or was it remorse, the yellowing keys of the ageing Bechstein across which so many generations of small fingers had stretched and contorted to practise all those disobedient A sharp major and G flat minor scales and somehow come to terms with the arabesque intricacies of the treble clef. A delicate scent of rosewood lingered around it. But the tiny felt hammers had not struck any steel strings at speed in a long time because no one seemed to feel musical any more. Relations with hemidemisemiquavers were temporarily suspended, dampers and rollers retired in quiet repose.

Far in the depths of the house kitchen, it was another tune that played. A cooking vessel fell to the floor with the clang of a cymbal settling with a tremendous rattle. A tympana of forks, pots and enamel jugs rang out. Aunt Esther moved in sluggish disorder like a bulky turtle, organizing the midday menu with one of the cooks. A sound of clicking typewriter keys came from the secretary in the office. The servant boy was away on a supervisory inspection of the produce of the vegetable garden, ordered to bring back ripe lady's fingers and bitter yellow gourds. On the veranda a servant maid tossed rice grains,

blowing away the chaff. And over the hills, Uncle Marius manned the books in the dark town agrarian agency, three miles distant.

A steady drone of crickets pulsed through the house, a whirring sound, labour of many wings, making the air hum and the flaking plaster tremble on the walls. All seemed tuned to some magical system that woke in daytime. Right now, in the build-up to noon, nature's manufacturing processes were all on *Go!* And as night fell the force died down, reduced the urges it had fed its creations with and they sank down lifeless, at peace.

Sandy wandered to where long ago Aunt Céleste had picked the tiny, gluey nits out of her hair and crushed them between Cutex-coated fingernails while she and Kit were drowsily parked upon the afternoon steps. Her eyes were drawn to the other side of the valley. Was *he* still there? The blue range of mountains curled obligingly into the shape of a sleeping man. He lay so still: R.I.P. Van Winkle. Old Man Mountain. Asleep among the ferns and shed snake-skins.

It was the new red road that had lain him low, stolen his old stone things from underneath him as he lay. It crept up among the pomegranates and took his breath away. And gave back in return oily jeeps and trucks that puffed the dust up into yellow clouds just to annoy him, to choke the mellow butterflies that circled about his dozy head. But it didn't seem to bother him, he lay as still as ever. It slipped stealthily by the flowering pepper vines, and away. If you looked hard you'd see it higher up climbing the far hillside past the old Na tree, then winding drunkenly down in a sudden dip to the storehouse where the rubber lay drying out in thick white slabs. Too bad about the red road.

Something crawled on the skin of her leg disturbing the fine hairs that grew from the manifold follicles of her epidermis. She brushed the tiresome creature away. Ah, so they were still there too, were they? Endless trails along the salmon tinted walls, in the cracks of the steps, embedded in the fractured path, crawling into doorposts, up lintels into the very rafters of the roof that the typhoon had once lifted. (But only just a fraction, you understand). She looked closer: Worker ants, winding as one long moving chain in a flurry of activity. To and fro from the labyrinths of the termite hill, across canyons, tunnels and caves, like the slow train as it chugged upcountry. Like slow winding thoughts of a troubled mind that probed into a yesterday, burrowing among the tombs and monuments. Thoughts found ways in and out, vanished or perished in the steady processes of logic. Sometimes, way below the water table in the rocky caverns of a cephalic landscape, amid the drumming of subterranean falls, there formed a stalactite, a long and sculpted shaft of intelligence.

She had made up an uncertain mind. She retrieved the key from her pocket and turned back to the old storeroom. The ancestors had gone on ahead to reconnoitre. What role did secrets play now? *'Turn Me.'* insisted the little key. She felt like Alice and obeyed.

– HIAWATHA AND THE NEEDLES –

She picked up what had been a school report. Oh-Oh. Kit's. That had always spelt trouble: '*More time should be devoted to studies ...*' she read. Who needed a time machine? She was transported!

Sandy had been relating her troubles to Grand-mamma Maeve. She was doused by a feeling of betrayal and wasn't even on speaking terms to treacherous Lilian any more! Why? Well, just two days before old Cathaiya the coolie woman, had been called up from the rubber stores to – *pierce her ears!* They'd used ice-cubes and a sharp lime-thorn and Sandy had screamed and screamed although it hadn't really hurt. It was just the idea of it that had struck horror into the soul of the child. Now she was just angry, angry, angry with her mother's sisters, Céleste and Esther AND ... most of all with Lilian for doing THAT to her without her consent. How could she!

The child had kicked and struggled but she hadn't managed to stop them. (Because you never could). And so, the pierced holes were there to stay. Whose ears were they anyway??? The adults were never to be trusted again or forgiven for the way they'd overpowered her so mercilessly. Old Cathaiya scared her too with her teeth stained red from chewing beetle leaves. She wore heavy cubes of gold in her ears as did many of the tea-pickers and the skin of their earlobes dangled, weighted perilously as they stooped among the tea-bushes. It was a way of keeping their valuables on their persons. A dowry for a daughter, an education for a son. Well, where else could they keep it safe? It was the reason why they suffered as they did.

That day Cathaiya had come up especially to do that simple favour. But the trouble was that Sandy didn't want the sleepers nor the tiny gipsy earrings, two glistening reddish gold crescents, that they'd had made for her!

Lilian had been left unspoken to since the incident the previous day. And Sandy had been practising somersaults on Granny Maeve's bed just to be annoying and now lay exhausted among a pile of 'Women's Weeklies'.

»*You see, I don't want any holes in my ears,*« she explained to Granny Maeve picking up her reading book defensively. (She'd been reading *'Hiawatha's Fasting: The stories tell how he (Hiawatha) did great things for his people: invented the bow and arrow, built the first canoe and so on.'* The book went on to explain: *'This is their (the natives') fanciful story of how he learned to grow corn, as a food for the winter – to save his people from starving. It is the custom in many savage tribes to make the young men bear a time of fasting, to test their strength and courage. It is at this time that Hiawatha wins for his people the victory over starvation'*.)

»*You always think you're right! You're just a little grandmother, like your mother says. A Little Nokomis.*«

»*No, you're the grandma, Grandma,*« she told Granny Maeve quite firmly. Her grandmother looked up from her knitting peering over the half-rimmed specs, just slightly surprised for the stern chiding of the six-year old.

»*Well, you be a good girl. Your Mummy knows best.*«

»*No, she doesn't,*« argued the little bird vexed. »*Kit doesn't have to have earrings – why do I?*«

»*He's a boy.*«

»*So what? I'm a girl.*«

»Now come on, don't be naughty. You just run along and play and don't scratch your ears, or they'll start bleeding again.«

»I don't care!« she said the tears brimming. Seeing all that upset Granny Maeve relented a bit.

»Come here. I'll put a drop of medicine on them again.«

»My ears are alright. It's my knees.« The child was sobbing softly now.

»Well, I've told you to be more careful when you run! Let me have a look. OOOh! That looks horrid!« The scrape was beginning to fester a bit with oozy yellow pus. »Let me put some mercury-chrome on the wound. It'll soon dry it up.« She dabbed the red stuff on.

Sandy examined her knees and watched the medicine dry. Then she twisted to study her rough elbows. Would the scars ever go away like the grown-ups said they would? It was hard to believe.

After a while:

»I can run faster than Kit,« she said with a look of triumph.

»Well, that's why you fall over every other day,« the old lady said.

»He's more than a year older than you!«

»Eighteen months and three days, Gran!«

»See? See, Little Miss know-it-all? What a stubborn little girl you are! Why do you have to run faster than your brother when he's older than you?«

»I don't know. I just do!«

The elderly lady picked up her needles again and they started to click away steadily. The clever stitches were being firmly knotted into place. The child was drawn to the work.

»Show me how to knit!« she demanded.

»Aah ... now that's an idea. Why don't we make something for mummy? I've got a pattern for a lovely dolly pin-cushion I saw the other day, with a knitted skirt with such pretty field flowers and a headscarf. We could do that. I'll help you. Look!«

She looked at the illustration her grandmother held out. It really was the prettiest thing! With heavy coloured glass beads hung all round the edge to weigh it down. She could even sit upon a tea-pot too as a cosy to keep the tea warm. The child's heart was won over. Sweet Gran! With her shawl in her blue bedroom. She acquiesced.

Perhaps Lilian had been partially pardoned. The score was 1-0. Sandy's face tilted into a smile as the incident came back to her vividly.

Then she found a letter she and Kit had written home to Colombo one time. It said:

*Corneliusz Delft County Estates,
7.5.1961*

Dear Dadda,

Thank you for the letter which I recived on the 3rd. We were very glad to know what is going on at the flats and the information about the ship. On Tuesday Uncle Titus took us for a walk all over the estate, but it was spoiled by S and J who fought all the way. They should be boxers! (Especially Sandy). Wednesday was May Day and the feast of St. Joseph the Worker. No one celebrated May day, because most of the people who live here aren't Christians.

They had many masses for St. Joseph's feast and they had tools for any people who wanted them or any other worker's things they use in their work. The carpenters brought saws, hammers, and a few other carryable tools, the office workers brought files and books and so on.

We are quite happy here in the estate. On Sunday we went to Trincomalee. On the way we shot a wild cock (P.T.O.)

which was eating on the road. When we reached Trinco we went to fort Fredric and saw Swami rock, the natural harbour and had a swim in the bay. The water was nice and calm because there was a reef coming out of the water. We all enjoyed the bath but Granny Maeve who had never before gone in knee high was fosed to go up to neck height. Even I could go about 5.0 feet inward walking. After the sea bath we picked up some sea shells and started for home. We had a small hunt in which Uncle Abe spotted a spotted deer. He shot it dead but Uncle Titus was shaking the torch and lost the place where it was shot and could not find it. Later a huge machine came up the hill and after that we spotted something on the side of the road which looked like a hare. Uncle Dodo would have shot it dead this time but unfortunately it was a small grey kitten. Later we started hunting hare at Habarana. Uncle Abe took the wheel and Uncle Dodo searched at first. Aunt Céleste and I spotted a huge red eye.

At first Auntie told us that she had spotted a red eye but unfortunately it was a honey-sucker, again Uncle Dodo spotted a hare but as we were hunting off season when a lorry came in sight we had to drive off! We let them overtake us – so we could start searching again. The next hare we saw escaped from us. The third pug we got looked like an elephant but it turned out to be an ox. So we came the rest of the way without stopping. When we reached the estate we had some Gothamba-rotis and went to bed.

That is all I have to tell you today,

*Cheerio, God bless you,
Your loving son
Kit*

And then a letter from Sandy, dated 28.12.1962 addressed to Lilian:

My darling Mamma,

We reached here safely last evening at 8.30. The train was a little bit late. We met two small babies in the train and we were playing with them. We had a fine trip although you forgot to put a cup in the basket. I looked into the box and did not see many things so please bring some when you are coming especially some knickers and dresses and the pair of red shorts. Please don't forget to ask Antoinette for the book called Fireworks with the Peewits. Jem wants the presents which Mr. Amarawardena gave when you are coming on Sunday. They are in a brown paper bag on the shelf just over the water filter.

Love and lots of kisses,

Sandy

(There was a scribbled note on the back of it):

'Dearest Lilian,

The children have given you the news overleaf. Jem was not very well yesterday so he was taken to Dr. Samaraja who gave him an injection. He is better today. Santa Claus had come this way too and filled up their bags, but Jem only wants the toys that Mr. Amarawardena gave him, so you'd better bring them when you come. Sandy is loafing about all over the place in Titus's Wellingtons just like Puss in Boots. Thinks she's the cat's whiskers.

Hope all goes well there and you and Baby are not feeling too lonely. Everyone is longing to see you both on Sunday.

Please bring one of the pairs of green longs for me, as well as a banyan.

Love to All,

Del

An unused birthday card never sent: 'To my Sweetheart'. Who had that been meant for?

Then things got more interesting: There was an airmail communication from a much earlier date.

Royal Mail, February 1941. It came from London and was stamped *post haste*. It read:

Dear Lilian,

I'm writing to thank you so much for all the kind support you have given us. Glen and I got split up almost as soon as we got here and I'm not sure where he's ended up. I last saw him at York Minster – the French pub in Soho. I hate to tell you this after your letter telling how sad you felt as you watched us sail off, but you know the ship you watched disappear on the horizon from Galle Face Promenade wasn't ours! As we were about to leave, the Army was deliberately sending out a lot of misinformation to disguise troops movements. That's the reason why you were all called to Colombo to 'see our ship off' so many times! Four times I think it was!

Anyway, when you all left us that last time at Fort Station, we were convinced we'd be sailing on the "Gothic" at midnight. In fact we never did! Our batch first went to Bombay, mostly by train and it was there that we finally boarded the ship. After that we were trying to avoid German U-boats all along and so, believe it or not, we very slowly shipped to South Africa. The first time we actually touched port was at Port of Spain in the West Indies after three months at sea! Can you imagine? Then it was another thirty days before we actually reached London – in time to hear the Christmas mass at midnight in one of our Polish churches. I can't describe how I felt hearing all those Christmas carols and my heart was breaking thinking of home and all of you there anxiously waiting for news and for us to come home again.

They are a mixed bunch of lads here from all over the world. I very much enjoy the flying instruction and will tell you more about some emergency landing escapades next time I put pen to paper. Don't forget to write to me and give me all the news of home.

Victor

(P.S. Before leaving for England, we - the new R.A.F. recruits – posed for a photograph with the Governor General Andrew Caldicott at Queen's House in Colombo. Maybe you saw it when it appeared in the 'Times'?).

A clip from a different newspaper cutting lay with it, showing a devastated city, somewhere in Europe. What mischief had this young Christian got himself caught up in?

'Operation Gomorrah':

It had targeted not the docks and industrial areas, but the housing and semi-commercial districts where 14,000 civilians – men, women and children lay sleeping in their beds. The aim was the destruction of fighting morale. 403 bombers worked on it, destroying 823 houses, damaging 5,000, starting off 800 fires of which 523 consumed wide areas of the city. They got 337 people killed, 1,027 injured and lost 29 aircraft – that is 7.2% of the force. And that was just what they did on *one* single night: the 27/28 July 1943. *Gomorrah?* Someone on the squad had got it all wrong. It wasn't Gomorrah – it was the major port city on the North Sea: Hamburg.

Then there was a scrapbook containing short texts copied out in a dainty hand. With a fountain pen, a river of blue squiggles, flowing.

She glanced at one – a Victorian poem by an author unknown to her:

*'The hour has come when I must leave you
for fresh faces, other eyes;
Yet 'neath the ring of laughter I shall grieve,
that you are not among them.
Sighs and subdued sobs will tremble, as I muse
on saddened hours made glad by you.
And dreaming that tomorrow's soft adieu,
must hold the test of friendship true.*

*How oft do I recall when chords unstrung,
the storm had raged in frenzied mood.
Speech forbidden by a parched tongue,
You clasped my hand and understood.
You entered sanctuaries where none may tread,
and found therein regret
For past was love of life, though burning faith, lay dead.
We tied the bonds of friendship fast.*

*The morning of today is spent at will,
Mid lost ideals an unborn day;
Tomorrow's eve will find me yearning still
For vanished dreams! I cannot say ...'*

A fresh spray of tears glistened in Sandy's eyes. Then there was a knock on the door: The time had flown. A servant came to tell her that lunch was served. She left things as they were and went out pulling the door to. Hidden in a tree, the musical outpouring of a shy, inquisitive bird, the spot-winged thrush.

Lunch was served at one for two. Sandy listlessly watched the dishes being laid out.

»*I once promised Lilian I'd put some flowers on Granny Maeve's grave,*« she said quietly.

Aunt Esther looked up sharply, but carried on serving the curries: saffron tinted dahl cooked *al dente*, ladies' fingers and a jungle green mallung. (The yellow bitter gourd were not yet ripe). She'd picked and shredded the greens herself. She was a little puzzled.

»*Oh? When was that?*« she asked. No answer came.

»*Do you know where the family graves are?*« Esther enquired after a poignant pause. Yes, she did. Five miles away on the other side of the valley, on a low hill top was a church and in the churchyard lay the Dutch cemetery where the Delfts were interred. Sandy nodded her head. She knew she hadn't answered the first question. Aunt Esther sailed on bravely nevertheless.

»*Pass me your plate. We've got Wattalappan for dessert – it used to be your favourite!*«

That was a confection made with coconut milk and jaggery, a coarse dark sugar from palm sap. *Jiggery jaggery*, Jem piped up in her head and Sandy passed the plate mechanically.

»*There's no one around today with transport but there is my old blue Raleigh bike stacked away somewhere. If I could dust it down a bit we could get the boy to pump up the tyres.*

Sandy thought about it for a moment and then took up the offer. It might be a fine idea to take a ride. And keep her promise to her mother. They finished lunch in quietness.

After the meal, Sandy followed the bulky tortoise back to the old depot room to find the bike. »*The garden's bursting with flowers. Why don't you fill a basket?*« Aunt Esther said. »*You'll find some of Lilian's old favourites too.*« Quietness from Sandy. »*You know which her favourite flowers were?*« Of course she did. Roses, red, red roses – what other flowers were there? But what she didn't appreciate was the *tense* of the verb.

Sandy pushed the bike all the way down to the bottom of the hill over the glassy flakes of quartz to where the red road met the tarred one and cycled slowly along the hot asphalt. Through the sleepy daze of afternoon she rode alongside a sparkling brook, and came to a stop by a rickety bridge:

*'Where the pools are bright and deep,
Where the gray trout lies asleep,
Up the river and o'er the lea,
That's the way for Billy (that meant Kit) and me.'*

A verse from her school reader. The road continued uphill where it met a minor junction. A little way on, the lightly strung-on canvases of a bullock-cart flapped loosely about a moist load of timber. Wagon train rolling along ... her heart sang. The horns of a pair of sleepy white bulls peeped out ahead like slender wisps of moon. Up here in the hills the pace of life was slow. Cool breezes called to revive a person as they trudged along their weary course. Light-hearted talk reached her ears. A burst of mirth. Three woodcutters were enjoying a joke with a cart-wright who walked beside them. A goat tripped lightly across her path. She swerved and sped up, pedalling hard to overtake them all. In the mud fields faint shoots of rice were pushing upward. A wading bird perched on the broad back of a water buffalo, resigned to the torment of the flies.

She arrived at the cemetery a good bit of pedalling later. The sun rippled among big leaves as she left the bicycle and wandered through long grasses to a neat plan of the various burial sections. But that did not mean she could work out her bearings at all. Well-tended plots lay to all sides. How much like a dormitory a graveyard was! Or a little citadel with domiciles and callers. The lately buried weighed down below mountains of dying flowers. Cows grazed on obsolete plots and cats played their watchful games darting here and there with the lizards. How ever should she find the sleepers in their unmarked graves?

Surly faced, adolescent Tamil boys refused to speak to her as they tried to get a luminous orange kite off the ground. The breeze in the trees in turn refused to lift it. Was that what made them angry? No. Or was it her presence in their playground? No, again. *It was the news on a transistor radio playing that caused the surliness.* There had been extensive bombing of the Tamil homeland that morning. They threw little stones at the gravestones then and one of the lads pointed her sulkily in the direction of a keeper's office.

A white butterfly danced before her as she made her way to it. It was an orderly place filled with ledgers, lists and an overview of the plots. The selective index finger of a clerk steadily travelled down the roll of names and came to rest at the one in question. She was directed to the graves she was seeking and stood before a green mound. Could she ever explain to anyone *who* they were who lay there in the blue mountains? Sandy sat in stillness for a long, long while listening to the wild song of nature around her. And then a little smile finally crept upon her lips. Because she had remembered then that things just went on and on. She laid the red roses down upon the graves.

As she stood to leave something unusual caught her attention.
A single gravestone that was set slightly to a side yet as if it
belonged among the family graves:

'Estella Deirdre Fergusson, 1883–1927

May she rest in Eternal Peace'

Estella? Who in the world was Estella? And why was a stranger
buried here, among them?

'Thea Sinensis' – leaves, buds, shoots. First flush. It was time for tea. Two place-mats were set with scenes of fox-hunts and the smoky leaves ready brewing inside a silky pink hand-embroidered tea cosy. Sugar cubes and a dainty jug of milk waited dutifully by the teapot. It was gone four o'clock, but there was not a soul to be seen about the place on her return.

It was only when the clock chimed out at five in muffled tones that she heard a stir of movement and the squeak of rubber flip-flops from feet that shuffled because they were not being picked up. The sound came nearer and Aunt Esther puffed in like a train. She suffered from a form of elephantiasis that swelled her legs up like great balloons. She'd been putting her balloons up for a rest. Now a pair of clever golden eyes travelled and met Sandy's across the chink of teacups.

»*Find it?*« She picked up the pot clumsily and set the little teacups shivering.

»*Yes,*« Sandy mumbled as her aunt poured. They steadily sipped their lukewarm teas, sticking up their littlest fingers.

»*We thought you might want to make some arrangement to bring the ashes...?*« Esther began to enquire quietly and was stopped short.

»*No. She's fine. Just fine where she is,*« mumbled Sandy. They drank on, nibbling their Maliban biscuits as genteel as the finest ladies of the empire, aware of a slight tension hovering between them.

So the chat shifted to other topics, to changes that had come about in the long years that had passed. The rooms grew darker and after many words had been exchanged, Aunt Esther stood up slowly.

»Come on, Sandy. Let's get the lamps prepared before it gets dark,« she said, as in the old days when the velvet night fell, suddenly, like a curtain on a stage. They went to a cupboard and the old aunt drew out two big oil lamps in her arthritic hands and lined them up with several others on a long table. The brass glowed dull as they made them ready. First there was a swift inspection of the docks, followed by replacement of them if necessary. Then the careful trimming and a topping up with spirit followed by Aunt Esther's slow climb onto chairs and tables to hang them up in the rafters among the shadows that were now furtively gathering there.

As she held the lamp waiting to pass it upward, a press release came to Sandy from the memory banks. She saw herself in years before, disobediently carrying a heavy lamp having been told several times to *at least* not swing it around *quite* so much! *As if she was going to listen now!* And then she really had spilt all the oil and the glass shield had broken to boot! During the mopping up action and the consequent scolding, Lilian had appeared and Sandy had run away vexed, to seek refuge in the tobacco room with Sundaresan the cigar roller. All was tranquillity there!

He was seated cross-legged on a palm leaf mat, day in day out, his white moustache floating like candy floss, rolling fat leaves of tobacco and arranging them onto the guillotine for trimming. He usually stopped around seven. But when she got there Jem was rolling around in the pile of unrolled leaves having a fit. A younger version of Uncle Marius was nonchalantly smoking one of the most pungent cheroots in town. »*Let me have a try!*« Puff. Puff. »*Oh!!*« Sandy started choking. Lilian came running from nowhere. Mothers did that!

»*What are you thinking of Marius!*«

He looked sheepish. The child looked rebellious and started fidgeting with the cellophane wrappers strewn around the cigar press. When the holidaying Rodriguez kids were at a loss for something to do, they sometimes had to be allowed to *help* pack cigars to keep the peace. That meant teasing them into hand-made cellophane tubes, sticking shiny red and gold labels onto the fronts and stacking them into wooden boxes. Pasting the labels onto the boxes themselves with home-cooked flour and water paste required real concentration and kept many a naughty hand out of mischief. *Cigarros Superiores. Balboa brand.* Running her little finger along the edge just to see if the guillotine really was sharp or only looked so! She got a sharp smack on the wrist for that! Lilian picked Jem out of the tobacco leaves and took him out kicking, slamming the door behind her.

Then there had been other simple tasks that kept Sandy's small fingers busy. Making plastic sheeting into bags for packing the dried seed of vegetables, gourds, pumpkins and so on ... The edges of the film held together between two wooden rulers and quickly seared over a candle flame just enough to melt and dry it just right so there was no burnt plastic that had turned black and wavy.

»*How are you three getting on now without your precious mother?*« Sandy nearly fell of the stool which she had climbed onto to hang the lamp. It stunned her back to the present day with a jolt! What did Esther mean bursting in on her thoughts like that for goodness' sake?

»*All right,*« she mumbled. She could feel Aunt Esther's dim old eyes gently caress her.

»*You know we all have to pass on some day, Sandy, dear. You mustn't take it so badly.*«

That was it! Sandy climbed carefully down from the chair, left the room and went outside into the evening. Aunt Esther did not follow her. She too must have known about the Emptiness.

Mercury reveals that temperature drops a half a degree Celsius for every 100 metres of altitude above sea level. Outside in the rose garden, the dew began to condense. Sandy stood in the faintly unravelling moonlight for a long time not seeing the stars revolve. Up above her the nine constellations of her choosing floated. What did they matter anyhow?

A long while later, low down in the valley a car's floodlights lit up in a travelling tube of trees. It was Uncle Marius's car beginning its laborious ascent. As the car door slammed Sandy fled into her rooms. The reading light in her bedroom went out. Tears soaked into a pillow that night. For they'd been talking about the decease of a great queen: A Queen Most Venerated. And most Dead: *Lilian*.

– THE SLEEPING WARRIOR –

Roses exhaled in wet fragrance while morning crept about the sleeping house and two sturdy feet slipped into a an enormous pair of house slippers. It was Uncle Marius who woke with the birds before dawn to wash the night away with the rainwater that arrived in moist channels of green bamboo from the spring. Rain or shine, his shaving things lived outside on a rickety table behind the old bathroom with its gurgling drains and cisterns. It was the open air washroom he preferred. Above the great foaming shaving brushes and soaps hung a shaving mirror upon a rusty nail and stationed below a furtive army of grey razor blades, ready on standby. A black tin kettle, ashy from the hearth, a worn enamel bowl that was so egg-shell thin you'd think it would crack upon touch. But you know, the soap suds and the lather gathered gladly there for years.

Sandy sat down to breakfast in the darkness of the northeast monsoon. It blew clean through the house from December until February. '*And what do You want here?*' it seemed to ask her, grumbling wilfully outside. The servants brought warm *pittu* piled high in pyramids into the dark dining hall while the storm gathered force and the first big raindrops fell. Pittu was made from kernels of rice grounded into white flour, concocted into a dough into which tender coconut flakes were folded. Formed into conical shapes with the tops lopped off, flattened and steamed. And as the alternative dish on the breakfast menu, the *non plus ultra*: String-Hoppers. Once more a treat from a rice flour mix, this time first pressed through tiny perforations in the base of a special kitchen utensil. Out streamed fine strings reminiscent of Vermicelli, but these were

twirled onto cane rings, piled in towers and once more cooked in hot vapour. You could eat them with a savoury or a sweet accompaniment. The long forgotten dish seemed utterly exquisite.

Streaks of silver on a sexagenarian head and her mother's younger brother entered the dining room glowing from his scrupulous morning wash. Two characters who had once had a whole lot of reality in common felt as distanced as two lighthouses right then. Sandy's two day stay had been arranged by phone. Well, the first one had already passed with next to no contact. They'd briefly said hello when he picked her up at the train station the evening she arrived. Forty-eight hours – sixteen for sleeping leaves twenty-two. Sixteen of those he'd be at work so it left circa six hours over. Pitter-patter drummed the raindrops.

»I hope you're going to serve me egg-hoppers tomorrow!« she said to break up the icebergs that drifted between them. He dwelt among his tree nurseries and his seed beds now, ruminating on planting schedules, new moons and crop rotation. The materialization of a long lost niece from nowhere? What was there to say? That little hint of humour smashed their shyness to smithereens! Hoppers were the utmost breakfast heavyweights! He laughed like a boy. The real 'boy' came in discreetly with the jug of coconut milk, placed it on the table and went away. *»Yes, I see we're going to have to feed you up a bit!«* And his eyes twinkled mischievously as in the old days. Hers wandered over the wall, found a remembered picture hung upon a nail – a charging bull elephant.

»Things don't seem to have changed much here except I can't find many of the people who used to be about«, she said.

»No, it's all been left too long. We are ever less it seems.« He fell quiet then. What was she talking about? The spirits of the hearth were still around. They hid behind the curtains and fled from sight among the rose bushes. They gathered in the rain and prayed. Everyone was still there. Only Sandy couldn't see. If she stayed longer she would know why No One, but no one ever sat on Granny Maeve's chair.

Right then to Sandy, it really was some kind of an icon who sat opposite, an inviolate king who reigned in a palace of memory. Uncle Marius, her very own *Godfather*. A spruce man of meditative energies whose humour bubbled up from subterranean wells below, eroding the volcanic crusts of his commerce oriented being. What he'd said had been one of his little jests – since eating or not eating one's meals has always been one of the traditional parent management levers for seriously independent kiddies. She smiled. He seemed to have survived the loneliness, she suspected.

But a new broom needs to sweep clean! She'd been seven the last time she saw him! Hungry for a history, she now wanted this formal breed of gentleman planter to break out of his reservation and speak up just a little bit! Rare letters had bridged the gaps through the years, and '*Happy Birthday*' cards had sometimes voyaged sea mail via Suez. But there were *black holes*. She had a thousand and one questions for him! And what she wanted someone on earth to talk about anyway, was about Life itself. And maybe he could tell ... about Kit ... about her mother. And answer that really important question she'd never come to terms with: '*Why ever did we have to go?*'

Things being contrary, she asked him instead about Solomon Bandaranaike. And somehow it all came out at once!

»Why was he really killed? Who organized his death?«

Marius put the jug of coconut milk down and looked up mildly surprised.

»Well, now you really are asking! You know, you were very young to understand then, but he came into power just eight years after Independence! It was a time of big change. The British overseas empire seemed to have just caved in on itself. The atomic bomb had recently been dropped not so far away. And we were in a country that had been told what to do by faraway foreigners for a very, long time. What happened was something like a revolution!«

A revolution, eh? Or a convulsion? Vengeance or justice? It was hard to tell. Bandaranaike's rise in 1956 had signified the toppling of the landed Burgher aristocracy, formerly instrumental to the Britannic global mission. Loss of life worldwide forced the corporations set up by the East India Company into retreat. They could no longer man their distant trading outposts. But all that happened was a simple reshuffling of power. A 'well born' indigenous Kandyan caste had risen to fill the power vacuum. And the backlash was that the plantations – the prize tea and rubber estates carefully nurtured for centuries – stood in direct line of fire, in danger of being nationalized.

»Well, you know, I guess he should never have gone anywhere near the idea of an elite,« Sandy stated with uncertainty. She had to be careful, she was speaking to one of an elite after all!

»He was from a privileged background himself, you understand? He'd been sent to Oxford like all the sons of the well to do. He was not the magician the poorer folk were hoping for, sowing seeds among the fields in springtime. He threw the Tamils and the Burghers into the dustbin of history.«

Like a painter who threw away two of his primary colours, Sandy thought - and his paintbrush along with them! Had the times called for a magician? Or would not a cosmetic surgeon have been better? What had been needed was a skin graft all round to remove collective branding as beings of racially inferior quality - *in each others' eyes*.

A surgical operation that would leave faint scar tissue, true, but that could fade away in time. If there were to be a guider, well, he would need to bring a land back into tune with an ancient relationship, the one synchronized by the sun whose rays shone through it all, fixing the indolent rhythms of the land and lulling its peoples with a lazy haze, a lack of urgency and unreasonable anxiety. A retro evolution was needed to reverse the dreadful misfortunes that had befallen them.

Marius was speaking ...

»You know, things had been building up for a move away from the past – instead we got ourselves ensnared by it. The populace split into hostile factions in next to no time.«

»I can imagine how a new Prime Minister might have felt when the powers that be left,« Sandy said seeing in her mind the engineer Dawson's column, towering phallic over the road near Kandy.

»Maybe, but now you have one of your answers. The Burghers were the first casualty who felt forced to leave,« he said.

»Shouldn't they have?« she asked.

»No, you know what is expected of a sea captain as opposed to a poppadom captain,« he smiled mischievously, trying to conjure up the child she had been once again.

»A captain's duty lies by his ship, not in saving his skin,« he said. But it all went over Sandy's head. Only the rats leave a sinking ship, she thought grimly. Luckily, he for one, had not left but stayed onboard.

»So what do you think he should have done on the language issue? One official language or three?« Had she posed a multiple choice question?

»It wasn't a problem. Many were analphabetic. He should have worried about that!« Marius replied.

Clever Marius! No, it need not have been an issue, she thought. There were over seven hundred languages spoken on the Indian sub-continent. Three codes for speech in Lanka. Like three living trees – ebony, mahogany, sandalwood. Which one was for the chop? And why?

»Who should stay and who be given their marching orders?« Marius was asking. »The Ceylon Kaffirs for example, were brought in from South Africa in 1444 by 16th century Portuguese slave traders who were settled in our maritime provinces. They adopted Roman Catholicism and started speaking Ceylonese Portuguese Creole.«

»Roman Catholic Sri Lankans speaking Portuguese Creole?« she asked a little incredulous.

»Certainly. Where should they be returned to?«

»Why, that's even worse than Dutch Portuguese English Ceylonese!« she said in a burst of laughter.

Ostro Goths and Vandals, Windhoeks, Brahminic Dravidians, chimps or Mesozoic Hippopotami – what did it matter? Multitudes had been displaced or shipped, driven out or sold around the globe as livestock through all ages. Now there was a pool of mixed genes. It was just ludicrous – but why make an issue of it? How on earth could it all be reversed?

How indeed? The roving genes had been hot on the heels of Opportunity, out to indulge those atrocious desires. All that pushing around of people, from land to land, from field to city,

happened under the guise of civilisation. But there'd been the colonisation of perception too, Sandy thought. How did it all go so wrong? And how come there were so many who were absolutely convinced that things had gone right?

»The free rice episode in Solomon Bandaranaike's time, was a grand idea,« Sandy said. *»It drew attention to the plight of the poor and proved that in reality there's no shortage. No one need go without food. Scarcity is a pretence, to make people dependent. Then the bargaining can begin in earnest. The 'I promise to pay the bearer on demand the sum of one pound of human flesh ... '«*

»You're of the rebel bloodline, I see!« Marius said with a laugh.

Yes. She most certainly was! Those the civilizers had called barbarians were those they had demoralized. Since the Sinhala of Lanka wouldn't accept servility, the imperial powers of the time had brought in settlers from Tamil Nadu to work the tea estates, not totally unaware that large groups of favoured outsiders would create resentment, rivalry and arouse sexual jealousy. It guaranteed a split into competing factions. Kept a time bomb ticking over nicely. When the oppressors vacated their positions of privilege, they left behind a dry carcass. It was the death rattle of the world's people that had allowed the air to rush inside into the lumbar cavities in great blue gulps. That was the surge of the nation states for Independence.

»Divide and rule is the most useful tactic in breaking down resistance in a ruled people,« Marius was saying *»There's the added bonus that an alternative labour force means the wages can be lower. The focus is on defending the little world around you, from your neighbour. Rather than hunting down the big operators that set up the problems deliberately. This never ending civil war we're in now is between two blind groups of indigenous peoples.«*

He was right of course. Why had interest been regurgitated in a mythological ancestry? No one could prove anything about the virtues of the dead! But you could argue about it till death did you part! And what relevance could it have anyway, in a land where births normally went very naturally unregistered? It had been a time for sowing not reaping. And the first minister had not had the intelligence to Know that what he held between his hands were not the reins of power but the seeds of equality.

»Well, it's ironic, isn't it!« she said, »As soon as people got free of one set of repressors they ended up with a repeat batch in a different colour that doled out the same bad medicine.«

»Yes, there you have it! You know, what appears to be a drive to control, is just as much a refusal to control. We men have passions, 'appetites' so to say, and we set the outcome and future standards by how we behave in our present time. Because we copy and repeat unconsciously, we can very easily infect each other. An example of gluttony alas, has the power to arouse greed. Looking back on it, the British Empire was the case of a child that had grabbed a lot of cake that was making it feel very sick. But how to persuade him to put it back on the common table for the other guests?«

A good telling off? No. The podgy boy was more likely to hurl his cake down in a temper rather than lose face! And how to admit to having had such a greedy appetite when it was growing greedier by the minute? Yes, it was something to do with control. *Self control.*

Marius was still speaking ... *»You know, the occupiers knew more about our inner workings than we did ourselves! The agents of the Crown had controlled everything from the shipping lanes to social etiquette. When this tiny island reclaimed its independence it was up against a hydra. When power shifted momentarily to the common folk, no one knew it.«*

To seize the moment, to know what to do! To call out the truth-jugglers and card sharks to account. No, they weren't ready! It called for more than 'Declarations of Independence' to become free of the dependency that had been established. It sounded like a drug addiction! What had made men so helpless? Afraid that if we remove the blinkers we'll find we're running with a team of blind horses?

»*What's the price of a day's labour here?*« Sandy asked.

»*It's around 5 dollars for 10 hours for a manual labourer.*«

»*No protective clothing. No works canteen. No paid holidays, no air-conditioning, I presume?*«

»*No, those are luxuries. As you know we are struggling to keep afloat.*«

»*And how is the rate of exchange fixed?*«

»*There we have to place our queries with the bankers. Our rupee is a non-currency. It's lost somewhere in the gulfs between three worlds. One must humbly take one's place at the begging table.*«

A stout breakfast got you off to a good start before a day in the heat. They had finished off their second helping of string-hoppers and curry. A third, perhaps? Fortunately, the servants came in and cleared away the dishes. Sandy's eyes wandered from her uncle's face to the sudden brightness of a doorway outside. There lay the blue warrior sleeping in the bright sunshine breaking through the dismal monsoon cloud. '*Hungry gluttonous hearts*' he seemed to say from deep in his dreams.

It was just after eight. The chauffeur came in, Marius glanced at his watch and pushed his chair back.

»*Time and tide wait for no man. I have to supervise the tapping on the rubber subsidy today, no way round it. We've got a busy schedule*

ahead but I'll pick up Titus on my way back and bring him here as soon as I can!«

Marius was neatly dressed in khaki shorts, an immaculate white laundered shirt, knee length socks and polished black hard heeled shoes. A neat laundry bag was left outside his room for the dhoby. Sandy stood up too, walked to the doorway and watched him driven away.

Uncle Titus!

She was so much looking forward to meeting him. There was a Mrs. Titus too but a meeting was unlikely, since she lived in the historic capital, Kandy. Titus was the local vet and his rounds took him away from base during the week. The Mrs. lived in a town house near schools for the children, while Titus only returned to home at weekends. But their three children had long grown up and moved on. One was out in Oklahoma married to a marine, cousin Dirk had set up in business with Jem in Ontario and an enterprising third son was out mining gems with the de Beers company in South Africa.

A world gone awry, she was thinking.

Strange how folk cashed in on the planet as if they had invented existence. As if they as the latest generation, were the best batch yet! As if brain surgery were unknown to cavemen. As if Sanskrit data on eye surgery such as the Sushruta Samhit, had never been written many moons before. As if there had been no great civilizations in Africa, no Greater Zimbabwe and no Sterkfontein man a million years long gone. There was only the Great Lie about the greatness of mankind that lived on and on ...

A lie, because the system that was in place was not about survival or commerce but about an outlet for violence. About receiving pleasure and giving pain. The whole world was

riding over the fact that huge tracts of the globe were held in serfdom. Overriding the fact that a practice of constant, nagging harassment had called to a halt the creativity of various geographically tempered and culturally unique peoples whose terrestrial domains should never have been tampered with in the first place, but left to the ruses of Time. The gunners and wreckers razed the civic settlements and spread the word that backward savages scavenged in jungles among corpses eating their own excrement. Reality could be so deceptively managed that the robbed nations were seen as robber nations.

But where did men's true loyalties lie? With flags and nations? They competed with one another on every level in order to be allowed to hoard and pay protection money to the men who had mastered them!

Nothing ever ended in the end.

Well, then where did it all begin? Deep in the limbic mind where the weights and balances were. Cunning tactics had been used for a break-in on the mental sphere of each individual. It was the instilling of superficial, transitory ideas that gave access to the interior regions of the psyche and brought down the defences of the mind. Dangerous thought systems had travelled inward, under the brand name: *'Progress'* or *'human nature'*. Woman had for a long time been off the radar, unidentifiable, indefinable and intact. But then a window had opened, a gradation system had been established that could trace and tag her weaknesses and identify what about her nature lent itself to exploitation.

Yet there was Hope. The human body was remote controlled and operated under laws its user had no handle on! According to predefined conditions, after a period of gestation, human reproductions were ejected from the womb timed to the stroke of Destiny. The body of the mother contorted in excruciating

pains. And a baby cried. Yet the event had little to do with the new-comer or its bearer. Did she ask for the release of the placenta? No. It all happened beyond her command. No man could regulate his own bowel functions himself! So why did he need to pretend to himself that he could?

– ‘YE, MARINERS OF ENGLAND!’ –

The rain had just stopped. Sandy wandered onto the wide veranda which surrounded a type of inner court filled with greenery. Hovering above was a square of angry cloud and rainwater dropped from the eaves and swirled around in the guttering drenching a plot of mother-in-law’s tongues.

She was thinking about things Kit had said: *»39 million dead in Europe alone after the last war. Imagine! They let Hitler do it for them. Then they took it from him.«*

»Ah. Is it all so callously done?« she had asked.

»Yes. That’s exactly how it happens and you’d be very silly not to see it. They don’t give a damn for any local populace. Civilians are a nuisance factor to be used or abused – as the moment calls for. The dominators have got their own agendas.«

»So who are they?«

»Oh that’s not so easy to explain! They must be inspired by people like Cecil Rhodes and Benjamin Franklin. Royal people – the kind that like the idea of being above the standard idiot. Beyond natural law – using inherited privileges to create laws for the others that further their own prestige. Outlaws simply said. The imperial ‘I’ mentality.«

Ah, but great wise Kit was gone. Gone to that great bike shop in the sky.

»Power’s not for ordinary people,« he explained. *»Not that there’s anything ordinary about ordinary people. That’s codswallop! It’s about the ego run riot – not democracy. To conquer nature. To master the universe. Big boss man. If you break their rules, which they have the audacity to call ‘The Law’, you go. They make sure it is they who take all decision in a world that can’t answer back.«*

Her brother Kit! He had given up his duties as an altar boy, grown his hair long in the sixties, hung a silver earring in his ear and gone to look for the king of the flowers out in San Francisco – when he was seventeen. He never really came back. Not to triviality anyway.

»It's the reinforced concrete principle, you know, Sand, – that good old bull-dozer mentality. Do It. Then pretend to ask permission from the done to. Apologise profusely as a screen, if necessary – say it just couldn't be helped! Be extremely flowery, decorous, polite – and no one will or can undo the knots they get tied up in! It's mostly done through remote paper-work. That's why they've got Big Pulp Machines.«

»You mean the press?« He nodded. »The press gang,« he corrected. »It's a bit like building an autobahn, you know. Whatever you do, don't inform anyone whose house you're going to raze. Get on with it as fast as you can ... road construction firms will appear from thin air to help you consolidate it, drivers, shoppers, haulers will arrive from nowhere. Write your BS and dumb readers will like reading it. Magic.«

»Make the non re-producible GM patented seeds and the famines will come?« she asked then

»Now you're getting it!«

»We tick along like a time bomb, don't we Kit? They cajole us along with a few unusual looking glass beads, and we drive their bull-dozers for them and bury the bodies together with our humanity. And still we continue to collaborate. Plodding ever on - on the wrong road.«

»Yeah, that's the trouble with the wrong road,« he'd said, »Every step you take on it takes you further away from the exit you by-passed. But those who believe in freeing themselves, should never forget that whatever those robot kings do, it is they who have become stale, like a rotting loaf of bread. They are cowards who stick to their guns because

the alternative is to step down from the pedestals. Since they are blind with guilt, they haven't noticed that the forces in play are not what they think they are. Weights can be tipped by a feather. This place has its own dynamics. And they're exponential. It is a catastrophic system here. And it's doomed to topple. They fool themselves that they can conjure with masses now. But it is they who will have to face the ultimate density weapon.»

Energy fields roll the earth and the mind of man. Not in seas of helplessness but in a great and heaving sense of experimental purpose. Man was made masterful – *but not to master men!* Kit was on track, Sandy thought. She knew how he worked. She'd watched him once upon a time, playing soldiers with imaginary antagonists among the tall old trees. He was full of surprise moves! He wore a paper-crown from a Christmas cracker and he took aim at her through the tiny sights of his make-believe weapon. The sun glinted in his warm brown eyes. *'No, we will never stop seeing'*, the eyes said. The cosmos was failsafe. It was *man proof*. They are pushing us so hard that they will knock themselves out. That's the real ruling principle. And it will all start. *Again*. That great heaving heart will pump and fill all the blue arteries of the world. He squeezed his make play trigger into an explosion of birdsong.

Kit didn't like schools – but his brain worked just fine:

»When the corruptors are phased out – and nature will do it – the organ will transplant and power redistribute in its ancient relationships, separate and autarchic, where the laws have not been hijacked by individual cells that malfunction. A re-evaluation of what is beneficial is inevitable and will take place in human consciousness. As soon as that happens a synergic, self-balancing system, a spinning, balanced flower of life will create itself to replace the dying system that

eats its own tail, sifting hard core, selfish, minimalist personalities to perfect positions.

What we need to be on the lookout for is a governing organ that induces something other than a feeding frenzy. A system based on a wider understanding with ideas that have power and can create themselves the way living energy does. Nature shows us the basis for sanity. It adopts cyclical motion where every cell is automatically tuned to health or destroyed. The heart pumps blood in and out so that oxygen rich blood constantly replaces depleted blood. Purification and elimination are simultaneously achieved through intricate valves and ventricles. A warning system is permanently in operation where signals of pain draw immediate attention to danger or degeneration. A rescue follows, with a calculated balancing of excesses. That's the kind of support we need. An organic system, that is neutral, where purification or nourishment processes automatically support the bodywork of the whole. What is especially important are the hydraulics and a super effective excretory system. Nervous cramp too has to be prevented, circulation of power must be constant to all parts to prevent tension or pressure building up in muscular tissue, organs or limbs. Basically, what is unhealthy has to be identified and flushed out instantly from the governing body before it does any damage at all by infecting or contaminating other parts.

What we have at present is a very faulty pump and it has led to an auto immunity deficiency syndrome. Our political system fails to provide the solutions it was put into power to find. Our political class categorically reject the mandate to service the majority.«

It was true what he said Sandy thought. When politicians got themselves voted into power, they seemed to think they had won some kind of popularity contest. If a government came in from the opposition it was like the run up to a divorce. Disgruntled warring personalities went on the offensive, intent on showing each other up and dividing the children's loyalties.

And why did they behave so badly? Because a politician had his masters. There were feet one had to kiss to get up there onto that pedestal. Feet with bunions, corns, warts and in-growing nails. With crippled toes and fallen insteps. If a man wished to move among the supreme decision-makers, he must rely on being carried up there by sponsors who would pave his path upward and then have ample reasons to keep him comfortably airborne. Trouble was he had to forget about using his own feet. And when they pushed him off the top, well, he should never have forgotten that he was without a parachute.

Deals were struck among dealers.

From the moment he or she ascended the throne, the *payback* began. A dance on upturned sabres to a devil's tune. A politician had to Know *beforehand* that is, long before he made his '*special discount offer*' to the people, that the seduction and the intimidation that he was to encounter, would be irresistible and that he was pre-programmed to mistake the ship for the haven.

No one, but No One seemed to have understood about the sirens, Sandy thought. To do what needed to be done, a captain needed to be blindfolded and tied to the mast. *It was the warning of Ulysses.*

– FOR ALL THE TEA IN CHINA –

It was just after nine-thirty and Aunt Esther was not yet up. Sandy went back into the dining room and collected the breakfast china she had used and took it to the cook in the smoke-blackened kitchen. He bowed respectfully and took the crockery from her hands. She felt ready now to look at the rest of the letters. She thought of them, coiled like small snakes waiting to uncurl, demanding her attention in some mysterious way. Curiosity killed cats, but humans had more than nine lives. Of that she was convinced. She turned slowly back to the old deposit room.

It was going to be another dark morning under a windy sky. She would have to find an oil lamp since the electricity generator was only set up to run at night and so there was no current to switch on. After she had lit one she returned to the store room, pulled out a moth eaten tiger-skin from the shadows and sat down upon it as the rain drummed its formidable tattoo on the roof tiles. The rug was one of hunter Gerhardt's proudest, forbidden trophies. He'd been a friend of Uncle Abe. She settled down upon it and looked apprehensively at the little suitcase. In wind, in shine, the dust settled upon it, was blown away and settled again to be blown away. At times it had been a soft and sun filled suitcase at others the drizzle dried upon it. There it lay as if it waited for somebody. She opened it and reached inside. With a sense of regret she untied the azure curlicues of ribbon that lightly bound the scrolls of paper.

Lilian had wound loose knots. *For whom to undo?* The paper leaves unfurled, opening as if of their own volition like a

bloom. And one of the very bluest inks that ever left a fountain pen started flowing. Words, arteries, bridges over time. They sang out in their forget-me-not tints and crept into her world.

A sheet of blotting paper and a letter in an envelope which had once borne a wax seal. Who was it from? She looked at the back of the envelope: Rafe Sutherland? As unknown to her as the name of the woman in the graveyard, Estella Fergusson. It was to an address in Chester, Great Britain and it was dated All Souls' Day, the second of November 1914. She unfolded the letter.

Rowlands Group, Northcliffe Estate

Dearest Estella,

I'm sorry my correspondence is so erratic but you know the postal situation. Anyway, news might already have reached you through the grapevine that I got an ongoing posting here upcountry as a tea grader. I shipped out with P&O three weeks ago. My contract is for three years and not for the eighteen months I was expecting. It's a long stretch and I can't say that I'm looking forward to it, but there it is. I would love to have some news from you sometime.

The job here is routine and not particularly inspiring and as for the place, well it's remote to say the least! The plantations I supervise are over 800 acres and extensively planted with tea, a few with rubber. There's quite a big labour force I have to manage and apart from them, since we have no Chief Clerk or Conductor as of yet, I keep an eye on the tea factory as a tea-maker. It's quite a responsibility as I'm the man to blame for poor quality leaf! When I'm done, the stuff's all packed off to Agency House in Colombo for shipping to the warehouses in Mincing Lane, in fair London city. As you know, that's where teas from all over the world are minced and mixed, graded and sold to fetch the highest prices for the estate owners. Working with me

is an Estate Dispenser and also a medical doctor. Nice enough chaps. I do most of the office work at night because of the heat, and a clerk finishes off the rest when he comes in the mornings – mostly for correspondence that needs my signature. However, I don't sleep a bit and spend a lot of my time walking from field to field in the early morning hours to wherever the bulk of the land work is being carried out – tea-plucking, weeding, draining, pruning, etc. It's all a bit of a dreamlike existence – if it were not for the heat. I sometimes go on horseback. In any case I'm out in the open air and the country is a beauty.

Still, I seem to have a lot of time on my hands all the same. The town is quite a few miles away, and then it's just a leaking, run down collection of buildings, a small Sinhalese school, a church and a narrow gauge railway station. There's a large sprawling bungalow that comes with my job and I have a gardener and cook – natives of course. The house nests in a comfortable perch half way up the hillside and is far too big for me – I don't even go into some parts of it! The flower gardens are impressive with beds of orange cannas, bougainvillea and orchids and I suspect the place might appeal to you although it seems lonelier than the grave here at times.

A breeze is always such a welcome relief. There's no glass in the windows, they're iron barred to keep bats and animals out and the heat's just bearable if I close the shutters. Hard to keep the mosquitoes at bay however.

I have a couple of aides assisting me in my duties, in particular a pleasant young chap called Stephan Ryder, who is in charge of exports. We fixed him up with a secretary too – one of the local lads – who speaks decent English and types his correspondence for him. He organizes freight and cargo details. Poor chap he does seem to be a bit lonely and I'd say very much in need of female company but as you might guess there is none at all here – unless one of our English

planters throws one of those rare parties! But I'm afraid it's very much a case of lock up your daughters here out east!

After our parting at Southampton I felt so very wretched. My thoughts were mostly with you during that long voyage. Perhaps you are right – we really did make a mistake in getting married. You are so very much younger than I am I realize, and perhaps I thought that did not matter. But I have learned better now. It is with a sense of loss that I put these words to paper. It seems to me that isolation can drive a man mad. I hardly dare to hope for a reply from you.

I would be so relieved if you were to break your silence, re-think your plans and consent to come to live out here with me. I would arrange every thing just the way you wish.

*Your loving husband,
Rafe*

Who were they? The next letter she picked up was one of a little batch of blue air-graphs and was posted from Reading Station, Berkshire. It read:

Dearest Estella,

I'm just dashing this off at the station as my train is due shortly. We're being sent off to northern France. I regret that I had to leave so quickly without warning, but you know how these things are. I reported to the war office as soon as I got here. Your letter was delayed by three weeks! And now you say you have wound down our spread and moved back in with Rafe? I can't believe it! We've had such an epic story together. But perhaps you have done right. It is surely not the worst idea as it is very unclear how long this wretched war will go on for. It is very tolerant of Rafe to take you back but I guess the old wolf knows he's past it! Still he's a good sort.

Life on one of those estates is so isolated – I just don't know how you can bear it! It's like entering a cloister! As I remember it, the highlight of the week is a trip by cart to church on Sunday and it's your only chance for a chat with another living soul. And talking about chatter, there has been a fair deal of overseas gossip that has reached our crowd here! My wife Madeleine has come to know about you. I didn't try to hide it when she asked. It was no use – there have been some spiteful comments doing the rounds. But I'm sure they will die down when they get on to the next runaway bride! I guess it's easy to get married and quite another thing to live with someone on a daily basis. And you did have that splendid wedding – only you didn't know that you were committed for life. Like a prison sentence!

Madeleine and I are simply not compatible – it wasn't really our idea to get hitched up in the first place! So all things being contrary, I'm hoping I'll be returning to Ceylon as soon as this war's done.

I think about you a lot and of the happy times we shared. I hope we can pick up the threads of our friendship as soon as I am free again. This country is in a flurry of war still but everyone says it won't last. That may be so but in any case I'm soon to join the offensive. Can't say I'm looking forward to anything, but I have no choice. Can't say more. Mum's the word.

*Yours,
Stephan*

It was long gone World War 1 he referred to. There was another letter from the same Stephan, this one had been sent a few months later from Chester, England.

Dearest Estella,

It is with deep regret that I received your news. I'm replying immediately – but it has all taken so long to reach me. You surely know yourself, just how erratic the postal service is these days. I only got your first letter in February but I note that it is dated very much earlier. I'm home for just a few days of leave but the war drags on and it is impossible to plan anything. It pains me to hear of your troubles and that there is so little I can do from here. Please bear with me for my cowardice in leaving without wishing you goodbye. As to our parenthood, well that has come as a big surprise! I have already discussed the money side of it with my lawyer and he will see to it that neither you nor our child is kept wanting for anything. She will receive an annuity for life and a sum when she comes of age. Even if I never return from this accursed war – and I very much hope to return – I will take pains to make sure the right people come to know and will name a guardian for her as soon as possible. So I will be sending you the details of financial arrangements I have made for the child before my departure I am thinking along the lines of a monthly transfer through Grindlays.

I am so sorry not to be able to be with you at this time. My head is in a whirl. There are a lot of my former business contacts I try to fob off. Everyone wants to get back to business – but of course everything is on hold right now. The London fogs seem to be getting greyer and the cold twists into my bones. They seem to yearn after the heat they became accustomed to during the time I spent in the tropics. Seems like another world!

As I mentioned before, Madeleine and I live separate lives. She's quite the socialite and has a flood of invitations each week which I try to avoid as discreetly as I can. It's quite unbearable, I must say!

*I'll save all I really want to say to you until we meet again,
Kind regards to Rafe,
Yours,
Stephan*

And yet another letter from him too, dated months later:

Dearest Estella,

I have sadly not received a word about you for months. Your last letter seems to have been posted in late July, but I have only just received it! The post is as good as non-existent. It pleased me to know that our child is now born and that there were no hitches. I simply can't imagine a girl that looks like me but if you say so! I'm touched that you have given her my mother's name and I'm relieved that you found the courage to tell Rafe. It would have been an impossible strain to keep up any pretence. He's been a good friend to you and to me too. I will sign any papers necessary for the Birth Registrar that you send and also any necessary to give the child up for adoption – as you request. It is for the best. The future is too uncertain and the political situation is unpredictable.

As to this decision, I would find your judgement rather harsh if it is for the reason that you think that you are not a fit mother to bring up a child. You surely are, but under these circumstances of wartime, it is an entirely different matter. Let it be your decision, as only you can know.

I hear that Rafe will be returning to the UK soon since things seem to be folding up in the way of trade. Will you be returning too with him, when he retires to Chester? In other words – may I hope to see your sweet face here soon? I dearly hope so. If you do not come over I plan to ship out at the first opportunity, as soon as I get my release from the forces.

My very best wishes, and grateful thanks for telling me everything,

*Yours,
Stephan*

Now this was quite a kettle of fish! Sandy thought, putting the letter down brusquely. Estella was married to Rafe but had had a baby with Stephan who was married to Madeleine and off at the front! *Curiouser and curiouser*. And the baby was put up for adoption and named after his mother. So what was Stephan's mother's name? That would help solve the mystery.

She poked around a bit more ... More birthday cards with hearts and tender wishes. A blown red rose its petals sundered. A moth-eaten diary: Estella Deirdre Fergusson. She leafed through it. They were mostly dinner dates, parties, social appointments ...

An entry on a November 3rd, read:

'Rafe has returned to England but I've decided to stay on here after all. I don't lack for interesting company since I have made some friends among the left-over planters. Roaming these hills so freely, doing what I want when I want with no prying eyes, I just can't face the prospect of resuming to provincial life in a market town. I just know that everything wrong will all come bouncing back at me, if I return. Rafe's been most kind but memories are long and his family were shocked by my bolt. They will not have forgiven me for running away. It was cowardly of me, I should have wound up the marriage officially – but there we are. It's now too late to make amends for my foolishness.

What makes me miserable is that Stephan was called up so suddenly! Well, perhaps it serves me right. I'd no business carrying on with a married man. But this wretched war is dull and endless and we only had six months of happiness. Will I ever see him again? Will he ever return? When? This year? Next? Why does everything have to be so wretched? Why did he have to leave? Can I always survive these dark days in lost places, or one day soon, run mad ravaged by the mud and loneliness?'

Rafe? Estella? Stephan? Who were these people? And why were their letters stored in Lilian's suitcase? Sandy broke out determined to search out and interrogate Aunt Esther.

Aunt Esther was filling the old clothes iron, her feet swollen in her flip-flops. The heat got to her, seeped into her pores, gave her respiratory problems. She was coaxing lumps of red hot charcoal into the metal belly of the little accessory, using a pair of tongs. Seeing Sandy she started to explain the system of the air vents in it. She spread a cotton blouse out, rubbed the creases out and began to press it firmly.

»Lunch will be a little late today,« she said. *»I've only got the one helper. The girl who usually helps me has an appointment with the doctor. She's having a baby.«*

Sandy pulled up a chair and sat down resolutely on it. *»Do you remember someone called Stephan?«* she asked. The old lady slowly stopped her ironing and looked up a little dreamily. A question out of the blue.

»Stephan? Stephan? There was once a Stephan Ryder. But that was such a long time ago. Is that who you mean?«

»I don't know.«

Sandy told her about the contents of Lilian's suitcase.

»Letters belonging to Estella Fergusson! Your mother never told me she had any! Where could she have gotten hold of those?«

Sandy was studying her face inquisitively.

»You remind me of a magpie, Sandy!«

But since the magpie continued to look deeply interested in something, the old lady began to chatter while she pulled the blouse this way and that.

»Yes, well ... Stephan ... the letters would have to be from him! It was a scandal at the time. He died long ago in a ravine, you know! I was just a youngster then. He'd been out riding. The body fell by a stream and no one found it for days. When they did the flies buzzed around it maddened. His horse had returned alone but it was still two days before anyone missed him. It was only noticed when one of the servants passed by from the market with his weekly cigars. He used to live alone. She'd gone. Left him again. People said he'd been drunk as he rode and that was the reason for the riding accident.«

»Who'd gone?«

»He was having an affair with an Englishman's stranded wife. She had quite a reputation as a runaround in these parts! Always the partying type! She was married to a man named Ralph Sutherland, Rafe they used to call him. He was a tea grader. They lived up in Hatton. He was quite a bit older than her and had a post over here as a supervisor. Stephan worked under him, as far as I know. The next thing folks knew, she left her husband and moved in with him. People said the affair had already started in the UK before any of them ever arrived here. Just rumours. I really don't know.«

»So, the two men were business colleagues?«

»Yes, Rafe was very well to do. He came over first, shortly after he had married and she came out later. His rounds covered many of the tea estates – which meant he was often absent and she was left on her own with just the servants for company! Stephan was, at one point, living here for six months – but then he was called up to the war. He returned a long time later, after it was all over but he had suffered a chronic injury. His gardener said that it was the pain that made him take to drink. People said he'd left a wife behind in England, I don't know. It was one of those stories ... you know. Estella never got over his death and never went back home again. Rafe retired and returned to England. She drank herself into oblivion here instead.«

The magpie was still waiting, all had not yet been told. So the next words slipped out.

»*Estella is buried in the churchyard here,*« Aunt Esther said, with a few huffs and puffs, shaking out the creases from the next pillow-case she had to iron.

»*Yes, I know. I saw her gravestone among the others,*« chirped the magpie, carefully watching for a reaction.

Aunt Esther put the iron down all of a sudden. She seemed to have made up her mind about something.

»*You should have been told before. About the child she left.*«

»*He referred to one in his letter. Why should I have been told?*«

Sandy asked, sensing doom. Another long pause.

»*Because you knew her.*«

Sandy put the letters down on the table and studied Aunt Esther's face. It was a mass of confusing emotions.

»*I knew her? Estella's child?*«

»*Oh, Sandy!*« she said frustrated. »*Must I spell it out for you? Surely you know? Can't you try to guess? If you'd just think about it!*«

What was she saying? A pale white faerie changeling? There had only ever been the one. But what had she to do with anything? *If she thought about it?*

So she thought about it then. Yes, she thought about it real hard and then she knew exactly what it was about. Yes, she did. She knew who Estella was. She knew who Stephan was. And the pale white child? It could only have been *Lilian*.

– OLD MAN MOUNTAIN –

It was 1 p.m. The pendulum on the old clock began to swing dozily. A servant came in to tell them that lunch was served. Just the *Pleases* and *Thank You's* punctuated the meal.

After it, Aunt Esther went to her rooms to lie down and Sandy, well, she went for a long walk into the misty hills, to the feet of the sleeping warrior. Green was the grass about him, warm the earth below. She looked up into his blue body, dreaming above her in the clouds. She climbed up until she came to a dip in the land where a fresh brook sparkled. She curled up and fell asleep there for a long while among the dozy ferns and small fierce flowers that pushed their way through the quartz. And through her dreams he moved, roughly, brushed the flies away from her sleeping face. She dreamt she heard her mother's voice a songstress faraway in the choirs of Paradise, felt her gentle touch in the wind that ran through her night black hair. What was it whispering of? The golden dead buried in the earth's deep sides? The sounds of weeping? The sobs of children?

With the feel of raindrops on her face she woke. A low drizzle had begun. Grey clouds swirled by. She hastened back before the pending storm. Aunt Esther was seated in a favourite armchair among plump cushions. One of the giant Alsations lay at her feet. The other dog stood guard, his paws on the window-sill barking roughly at old man mountain. And as for R.I.P? And the secrets he had told? Well, he just rolled over onto his side and snored.

Aunt Esther had fished out some old photo albums for Sandy to look at and they lay by her on a small commode. She picked up

some knitting lying beside it. She knitted on in automatic mode, gazing absently out of the window, her lips counting her endless stitches while Sandy leafed wordlessly through the black and white photographs of yesteryear. They sat a long while in the darkening room to the steady clickety-click of the needles and the tick-tock of the far clock. It was approaching the hour for dinner. At a quarter to seven, post meridian, headlights shone through the house lighting up deep into its labyrinths. Marius's car drove into the courtyard with a passenger and Sandy rushed out to meet Titus!

Much later, they sat down together at the solid teak dining table – the niece and the three that were left – Marius, Esther and Titus.

»We did not want to overrule your mother's wishes,« Esther said at last. *»She doesn't seem to have been able to tell you that she was illegitimate. But in a way she seems to have arranged the explanation for you herself.«*

»Lilian was very much one of us,« Titus said, his voice tinged with affection. *»One more or less, it didn't really matter. We were such a mixed crop.«*

»She was part of our family. I don't think anyone remembered where she originally came from. We younger children never ever knew really – at least not until we were very much older,« Esther said.

»So when did she herself find out?« Sandy wanted to know after a longish pause.

Eyes darted around and it was Titus who answered:

»It was when her father, Stephan, died. She had just turned eighteen. There were legal matters to be wound up. My father told her.«

Sandy studied her hands ... *»And her own mother – Estella, my real grandmother, did she live near here?«* she asked finally.

»No, she moved even higher up country near Hatton to be with the golf set, after Stephan's death. She did not survive him long. I don't believe she tried to see her child again.«

»Strange that a child could be so different from her biological mother,« Sandy commented.

»Lilian from Estella? Well, no one really knew Estella,« he said.

»She was too young when she married Sutherland. And he too old. Estella had a restless, vulnerable personality and her moods changed quickly. Everybody thought she was rather a dangerous customer,« Esther explained.

Titus picked up the explanation again at that point. *»I've heard she grew up in a children's home. Maybe there were previous reasons for her troubles that lay far in the past. When Stephan was away at the front, the servants said she suffered from insomnia, lying awake for days. Maybe that's when she turned to drink. Perhaps they really were in love – who knows? After Rafe had gone back to England, Stephan did return once the war was over. But she had greatly changed. She'd lost her zest for life and was stiff and anorexic but still they tried to make a new start and set up house together. Things did not work out.«*

Titus stopped to organize some illumination, poured himself a shot of Laphraoig single malt Scotch whisky and continued with the tale, *»Stephan suffered from shell shock and his hearing was badly damaged. Their friends abandoned them. Estella became increasingly desperate, not caring where it all was heading for. Stephan tried to break free – of her and his own drink addiction. There were violent fights between them and at some point he disappeared. He was killed in a riding accident.«*

The muffled tones of the clock began to chime. Its urgent hands hesitated, lingering on the slow road from Never to Forever.

The time had simply flown. Uncle Titus stood up preparing to return home. *»I'm sorry. It comes as a bit of a shock but it's all so long ago, you know,«* he said placing a kindly hand on her shoulder. Marius stood up too at that point, to drive him home. Far in the sky a cloud had moved to block the moonlight. Over the clock and onto the floor crept a long shadow. The storm had lifted the roof just once too often. *Goodbye Granny Maeve ...* Sandy thought, *... so you were never really mine.* She heard the car doors slam. She lay in ruin – that was what typhoons did.

She picked up the old letters sadly to bid her aunt goodnight. Something fluttered slowly to the floor. In slow motion like a tiny parachute. It was a photograph tucked inside an air-graph Victor had sent. The photo landed face upwards on the cold concrete floor and four young soldiers smiled out from a group photo. The Governor General of Ceylon, Andrew Caldicott beamed out. Esther picked it up glancing at it briefly.

»There's one that looks a bit like Del's brother,« she remarked handing it over.

»Del's brother? Did you know him?« Sandy asked surprised.

»He was a friend of a young Scotsman I was once engaged to,« she replied quietly. *»Glen Daley.«*

»What happened to him?« Sandy asked.

»Glen?« Aunt Esther was silent for a while. The name seemed to linger in the air. Then she said: *»I've no idea. One lost so many people in those days.«* But Sandy had learned to wait for her old aunt's memories.

»Glen and I – we were ... going to marry,« the old lady said. A tired sigh breathed out of her. *»Soon after the announcement of our engagement, odd rumours began circulating about him. I didn't know what they were about but my parents insisted on my breaking things off. Then World War 2 started and he was gone. I never saw him again.«*

»What kind of rumours?« Sandy wanted to know.

»Oh, I don't know ... malicious ones ... « Sandy didn't press her on it.

»I suppose you loved him?«

»It's all water under the bridge now ... but I suppose I did.«

»Is that why you never married?«

»No. It's not the only reason. Who could I marry? There weren't so many young men left ... and I had to make a good match.« Her voice bore the traces of resignation.

»Victor never returned either,« Sandy said after a pause.

»No, he didn't. We heard he'd been lost in action in Germany. That was the worst thing about those times. Nothing was ever definite. 'Missing in action, presumed dead' leaves a window open for hope. You can wait a long time ... « she reminisced. »It comes back to me now as if it were yesterday, those young soldiers ... they had such a big send off at Colombo harbour! There was even a party from here that travelled down to see the boys off. Glen and Victor and Lilian – lots of young folk in shiny new automobiles. We used to think she was keen on him.«

»Keen on whom?«

»Victor.«

»Wasn't she?«

»No, he was keen on someone else.« There was another one of those odd pauses of hers.

»And what about Del? Where was Del all the while?«

»Oh! Your parents had never even met then! I believe he was working in the south somewhere. They first met when your mother searched him out to try and find out what had become of Victor.«

»You said before that there had been rumours. What were they about?« asked Sandy remembering the odd pause a few moments before.

»Oh, you know how people talk – they said they were having an affair.«

»Victor and Lilian? So what?«

»No. Not Victor and Lilian ... Victor and Glen.«

That was when Sandy saw stars. That surely had to be the last bombshell! But the old lady was now serenely rambling on, heedless of her presence in the room ...

»I remember the first time I ever saw Victor. It was an incident that always puzzled me around that time. Because Glen used to visit me here often. A servant tapped on the door of the cigar room where we were trying out a fat cigar and said that there was someone asking to see Mr. Glen. Someone called Victor. Glen sprang up like a bolt and left the room. I heard the front door bang. I followed as far as the door not daring to go further. Something held me back. The two of them were having a hellish row in subdued voices, standing by the portico and their upset voices carried to me ... The dogs ran around them but I heard what was going on ... 'I told you, never, never to come here! What do you think would happen if her father found out?' Glen was saying. A young chap's voice mumbled ... 'I couldn't avoid it ... you haven't been in contact for two weeks now and you're never home ... at least not to me. I thought you might have been called up to the front!'

Then Glen said something like 'Look, Victor. I was going to break it off anyway. I'll want to take over here as supervisor one day. Get married. But now there's so much gossip in the town. And you know who it's about? It's about us! That's You and me.' Glen was agitated, Victor defeated.

'Yes, I know – that's what I came to tell you, Glen. I've volunteered', he blurted out. 'You've done what?'

'I'm leaving the country.'

'Whatever for?' he asked.

*'That's nobody's damned business!' It was Victor's turn to be cross.
'Not even mine?' Glen demanded. I peeped out then. They were just
looking at each other as if no one else existed.
That was when I went back into the house and disappeared to my
room. I'd heard the rumours too. My young Scot stood around a little
and then drove off with Victor. That was the last time I ever saw either
of them. I broke off the engagement and never married anybody else.»*

She stood up slowly to go to bed. Sandy rose too. She was leaving in the morning. »*Goodnight Aunt. Sweet dreams,*« she said leaving a fond kiss on a withered cheek.
»*Goodnight Sandy, love. Sleep well,*« the old lady said while her smile became part of the night.

– A CLOSE SHAVE –

Words. Words changed the world. It was with them that you made all those devastating *declarations*. Independence. War. And Love. Well, which words would you need to swing a drifting ship round and head it for a harbour? The night rain was pelting hard again, beating against the shutters. She tossed and turned upon the snowy linen bed and fell into a dream.

Back in the government flats Del was shaving. His children hung about him fascinated. It began in the customary way: He started feeling the stubble on his chin in a pensive kind of way. To shave or not to shave? That pondering sort of look – the one, one has on one's face when one is wondering whether it is going to rain – or not? Then he took a quick brave peek into his shaving mirror. Hmmm ... It happened at the same time every evening. Nothing to be done about it. They had to go! He looked towards his children and they gravely laid out his shaving things for him. Cusson's Imperial Leather soap. A clean white fluffy towel. A puffed up shaving brush and a sharp little razor blade so carefully unpacked from its tissue paper covering. And then the daily ritual began. He sharpened his old Gillette blades rubbing them briskly back and forth in the palm of his hand peering intently into the shaving mirror all the while. 7 p.m. shadow. Indigo blue. It had to be done! It took an awful long time because the kids began to chatter all at once just then and make polite enquiries on his technique. And anyway, he was constantly interrupted because he had to keep stopping them from fiddling with *his* things, or should one say *the things he was using*. Fathers had no rights and parents had no private possessions whatsoever ... How could they when they

belonged body and soul to their children? So they fiddled with them as they pleased! Who did *he* think he was? And it all took so long anyway as he was also sure to be interrupted by Lilian too calling out for help with something from the other side of the house, where she'd be bathing the babe with Johnson's baby soap. Or Pears' transparent amber one. Sandy loved to help there too, but it was hard to be in two places at the same time.

Powdering the baby with a small pink puff after its warm bath in the fairy pink tub and trying to tie the pretty ribbons of its clothes and booties. The babies smelled lovely.

Sometimes she and Jem both helped Del work the shaving soap into a lather and wished they could shave too! But usually they weren't allowed to touch things and fiddle around, just listen, (be quiet *if possible*) and watch! Pay attention? Listen? Yes, of course – to the scraping noise as the sharp blade travelled over the skin meeting resistance from the strong black hairs trying peaceably to grow there un-interfered with. It was most interesting when he did his sideboards, and just the bit under his soapy nose. That was very tricky. ... And then the brush was washed clean in the grey shaving bowl and all the chopped bits of hair floated there among the froth and went gurgling down the plughole in a swirl. It came to the grand finale then: *The Combing*. He finished off with a careful hair dressing, rubbing Brylcreem into his shiny wet jet hair till it shone with silver streaks. Then he parted it all very exactly, right in the middle using a fine toothed comb. Not a hair dared step out of line. There it was done! Tyrone Power in person.

»*But now will you come out to play on the green, pleease?*«

»*Yes. Run along. I'll just get my shoes if you give me half a moment's peace.*«

Sometimes Sandy cleaned Del's black shoes for him. Rubbing the Kiwi shoe polish deep into the leather with her black little fingers. He liked to be waited on, did Del! He'd had so many sisters dancing attendance on him day and night.

Or else Del would tell his tall stories as they watched Kit bowl on the green from the balcony and Jem peddling around on his trike. Kit was quite some fast bowler but never quite as formidable as cousin Charlie who could have sent the M.C.C. for a six any day! Still he could hold his own against the boys of the government flats and that was good enough!

Some people were forever blowing bubbles but Sandy was forever asking questions: *»So what was Grandma 2's real name then, Del?«*

»Georgia. Georgia Tyler Lopez born the eleventh of April 1886 at the Sterling Estate, in Gampara. She was named after her father Georgius.«

»But isn't that a strange name?«

»Now who are you to say, madam? It's a Latin name. And that's what you've got to learn if you want to study medicine or any of the sciences. You've got a lot of words to learn!«

»Well, WHY??« Exasperation!

»Well, in fact, I can tell you this time. It's because any language makes a tree of words through time. And all the words hang on the branches and some fall off but the really important ones stay on. Some that fall off drop seeds and they grow into new language trees. It's quite a special skill because you can have private talks with people over time. For example, if you were to write a book this minute, well you could have a little chat with someone two hundred years in the future who hasn't even been born yet! Just think of that!«

Sandy resolved to write a book immediately. What should she say? Well, she'd repeat every word Del had ever said, for a start!

So, it would start: 'A world without books would be like an elephant without a tricycle' No, wrong! That was one of his jokes. 'A world without words would be a sorry place indeed. Words are seeds that store experience and survive though we don't ... it is a most effective way of communication with future generations of people to come –'

»Look ... what a lot of trouble I have had chasing after a Birth Certificate from the Registrar of Births! No words on paper! According to them I've just never been born!« Del interrupted her.

»I just don't have one!«

»Well, why is it important then? We know who you are!«

»That's not good enough! Because you've got to PROVE that you know who you are!«

»Well what's that good for?«

»Well, for example you don't want to be held responsible for the wrong doings of others do you?«

»No. Of course not!«

»And, I tell you it gets to be a real headache if you want to pass a Government Examination or to become an air pilot! You've always got to be able to prove you are who you say you are!«

Hmmm ... I am who I say I am... That was complicated! Pilots have to have them too?

»So did Victor have one then?« Sandy asked at that point.

»No.« replied the patient young father.

»Why did Victor go to the war then, Del? If nobody knew who he was!«

»I can't tell you, truly. Maybe you'll understand one day when you are older.«

»I'm already old, Del!«

But he wouldn't tell all the same.

Kiss of sleepy evening star, air flushed, clouds curled flamingo streaks flaring above ranges of hills. Toot! Toot! The train of thoughts chugged on ... And on the next day, a locomotive struggled down and over Kaduganawa Rock Pass like a giant slug, Urdu graffiti scratched into its dried out wooden seats. Sandy had packed her things together, phoned Erin and was riding the slow train back down from the high country.

PART FOUR

– LITTLE DEATHS –

Who should rule? And Why? Music laughed out of the speakers. Four dancing eastern deities twinkled above the dashboard of the bus amid garlands of artificial flowers. Shiva. Vishnu. Durga. Ganesh. An old Buddhist monk tottered on board waving a stern black umbrella and settled himself down in one of the two seats reserved for clergy, his bright orange cloths spread about him like a hibiscus. Somehow it all made Sandy want to cry. She looked out of the window fighting back her tears.

She'd made it to her rendezvous with Erin at the grand old hotel and they were now travelling along the coastal road that partnered the railway line. It stretched lazy as a cat down to the southern sea, past the harbour town of Galle, the town in ancient days known to Arab navigators as Tarshish. From there a great wet ocean rolled unchallenged to Antarctica.

There'd been no alarming incidents reported on the radio yet queer tensions strung the air. A taunting yellow lion fluttered on a flag tied onto the outside of the transport vehicle. It was the symbol of the nation – a rampant lion. Was the civil war on or had it been switched off? The little beast snarled at the doorpost, waving the sword of the Sinhala. No. It had not been laid down yet.

»Remember, we're just stopping a few hours, Subash or not!« Erin had said emphatically. Sandy looked up sharply. What did she mean? She hadn't thought of him in days!

»We're just not getting involved with that bunch of junkies down there, I repeat,« she repeated. Sandy kept furtively quiet. She

wasn't involved with anyone! *Was she?* Well, not with Subash in any case. True her heart had been in her mouth all along the journey – but that was for different reasons! To do with the fact that there were only two lanes on the modest carriageway and that the bus-driver was usually in the wrong one swinging exuberantly around the S-bends, undecided which lane he preferred. And as for the conductor – well, he balanced precariously on the door step on one foot, spitting out beetle juice and yelling out a string of destinations every now and then.

»*Perhaps he doesn't want to arrive,*« Erin said in an understanding kind of way. The breathless vehicle braked to a sudden halt on the main road at Unuwatuna and they all lurched headlong with it. Sour as a lime, Erin picked up her rucksack and they clambered off the bus stubbing toes and bumping elbows apologising profusely to all and sundry. Sandy had next to no luggage since she'd lost hers at Ranjits' when she disappeared that time. She hoped to pick it up now while they stopped off to leave the document for Subash.

Several people seemed to have been urgently waiting for them with Pepsodent smiles. »*Come with me, miss! Just two minutes walk! Have a look only. Beautiful rooms!*« By the time they got to the beach bar the persuaders had given up and there remained just a short trail of surly kids vociferously demanding bios. The owner of the bar finally shooed the kids away and the two young worriers flopped down indignantly under his protection and ordered immediate remedy – iced coffee.

»*You've been here before,*« the waiter said. »*Last week. You staying at Ranjit's?*«

»Here we go again,« thought poor Sandy feeling she was being just a bit too well surveyed. »No. We're just breaking our journey. We're on our way to Atlantis,« she said. That confused him!

»It's the wrong time of year for it,« he said trying to be clever. »Are you English?« he persisted.

»No, Sud Americana,« she insisted. Another obvious lie but he was asking for it! After that he'd taken the hint, curbed his inquisitiveness and let them be.

The sun was warm on Sandy's back. She got up walked to the edge of the terrace where they had parked themselves and scanned the beach. *Would you believe it?* There was the isolated torso of the Pirate popping up and down in the waves, his binoculars wound round his sun hat! He'd been propped up in a plastic seat and placed among the waves to cool. Surreal! The kids had done it and were splashing noisily around him. »Let me have a look through, please, please! please!«

»Pesky kids! Pesky adults!« he said but he passed the expensive binoculars over to them anyway. They squealed in delight.

»He doesn't seem to mind them,« Erin said.

»They're used to each other. He's been here forever!«

»How do you know?«

»Subash.« Erin looked up suspiciously. It was the way she had said it.

»OK. Right. Let's go find the sailor and leave him the documents. And then let's get on the first bus out, OK?«

»Sure,« replied Sandy acquiescent. »Hope the Pirate hasn't seen us.«

»He has. He sees everything. What do you think he uses those binoculars for?« demanded feet on the ground Erin and of course she was not wrong.

Black crows scavenged around after scraps of food below the tree-top restaurant. It didn't seem at all open. Where could the sailor be? »Where's there to go?« Erin asked, feeling a bit put out. After all they had come for a *holiday*. Sandy too was disheartened. Now they had to traipse around in the sun searching out displaced people. She saw a figure at the water's edge who she recognized immediately. Skelton! He was wandering down the beach in the direction of the Pirate. »Should we ask him?«

Erin's eyes passed over the skinny chap. »He's all bone,« she said. »Doesn't he scare you?«

»Yes. Actually he does,« admitted Sandy. »But since there's no one else around ... here goes ... « She left Erin standing among the crows and walked over toward Skelton.

»Hi,« she said. »Hey,« he said. His teeth were in pretty grisly shape. His yellow hair hung in straggly wisps around his neck like little snakes. »Spare some bread?« he asked. »Maybe,« she replied, asking »Is the restaurant closed?«

He looked her over. »Very funny,« he said, vaguely recognizing them both.

»I wasn't trying to be a smart ass,« she said. The sunshine seemed to bother him and he shielded his eyes. He tripped over to the treetop bar. He pointed to the tucked away rope-ladder. »See that? That means he's A-way,« he said. »So long. Stay loose.« It was a Goodbye.

»Hey, hang on a minute! Look, I haven't got any bread – I mean money. But tell me anyway! Where might he be?«

»I don't want All your money, honey – Just a little bit of it.« He squinted at her, seemed to do some thinking and said, »It's Sunday! He's probably gone to church.«

»Church! Very funny,« thought Erin, who'd followed after Sandy. No help there. »OK thanks a little,« she said.
»See ya,« he said and wandered off.
»Weird guy,« said Erin.
»Dope head. But I guess it's true,« said Sandy. »He may have gone to hear Sunday Mass or something. Noah's Christian.«
»What?« Erin was surprised. »Are you serious?«
»Yes, Erin. I am serious. We'll wait a bit. He'll come back.«

Erin fished out her Lonely Planet backpacker's guide and sat down on the sand in a temporary stance of submissive resignation. Sandy stretched out, closed her eyes and let the sunshine bathe her face. She was doing a bit of day-dreaming for a change.

»Do you know,« she said at length »There are people who say Jesus was a cosmonaut?«

»Oh, really Sandy! You sure you'd rather not go talk to Skelton?« Erin asked.

»No, really. They say we're a cosmic breeding experiment gone wrong. That's why we never understand what we are or where we come from.«

»Who doesn't? You should have come to meditation classes with me in Kandy.«

»I don't need a class, Erin. I'm tired of teachers. No one knows anything on this planet!«

A voice broke in right then. »Hey, I forgot. A guy left this for you.« Skelton stood there in a ragged *Metallica* T-shirt. It was a brand new empty syringe.

»For me?«

»Yeah, I'm sure he meant you, Brit chicks.«

»Brit chick yourself! Who left it?«

»Guy named Subash.« Sandy's mouth dropped open in surprise.

»Know where he is?«

»*Maybe.*«

»OK. OK.« She took out her purse and gave him a few rupees.

»*Now do you know where he is?*«

»*He's staying at Ranjit's.*«

»*Thank you so much!*«

»*Don't mention it. Stay loose.*« He dawdled off again.

»*Spi-ritual! Looks like a ghost!*« Erin whispered loudly. She was punching her book away into her rucksack.

»*OK, now let's get your things and move! It all gives me the creeps. Now!*« she insisted.

They rushed towards Ranjit's guesthouse past the end of the lagoon and around the headland. It was getting decisively hotter. From over the dunes travelled snatches of a tune '*... the lunatic is in my head ... You raise the blade, you make the change, you rearrange me 'til I'm sane ...*', Pink Floyd. Yes, those were cheering words ... it could only be Happy Hour at the Triton!

Ranjit's holiday visitors lounged around the place, so they played down their sudden arrival. He looked up surprised yet pleased to see them and hurried over, speaking in a lowered tone,

»*I was hoping you'd come back! I know all about what happened. I've kept your things safely. But you're not staying here, are you?*« He looked a bit worried.

»*No fear. It's too dangerous.*« said Erin. »*Everyone's annoyed with us. We just stopped off for her rucksack.*« She jerked a thumb toward Sandy. »*We're clearing off on the next bus.*«

»*Want to have lunch here first? I've just finished serving the guests. I can serve it round the back. No one will see you.*«

»*Well, yes. We have to eat somewhere. Thanks, it's kind of you,*« said a hungry Sandy.

»Where's sailor?« Erin asked.

»Gone to mass at the chapel.«

Sandy tossed a triumphant 'I told you so' look at Erin.

»Funny country,« Erin said.

After lunch Sandy decided to interrogate Ranjit. »Do you know Subash?«

»Sure. Working for me.«

»Where is he now?« The words spilled out quickly.

»I think he's having a bad time. Goes off walking for a long time every day. Supposed to be working here but I don't see much of him.«

»Must be in love,« Erin said pitilessly. Sandy looked daggers at her.

»Where does he go walking?« she asked.

»Way past the Triton, lonely beaches. He brought me back an octopus yesterday.«

»Fishing?«

»I don't know. Far away. Sometimes he catches crabs in the rocks.«

»How far is faraway?« Sandy wanted to know next.

»Maybe half an hour.« Sandy looked at Erin with a plea in her eyes.

»Yes, Fine. OK. Go find him. But I'm staying here with my book. Remember the last and latest bus is around half four. So be back!«

»See you soon!« she said and whizzed off at breakneck speed.

She passed the Triton. The vendors were there at their usual posts. »Hi Kumar!' Still here? When are you going?«

»Not sure now. My parents won't let me now. They say they want me to stay here.«

»Too bad. Maybe they're right.« He pulled a long face. »You seen a guy wandering off up there this morning?«

»Sure. The place is crawling with beach-boys.« He meant male prostitutes.

»Not a beach-boy.«

»Subash, maybe? He goes up there all the time. He doesn't look so good.«

Sandy was alarmed. »Why not? He hasn't been in a fight or anything, has he? Roughed up?«

»No. He looks more like he's sick.«

Sandy was going into a slow panic. »See you Kumar!«

»See you!«

She found him eventually sat amid some rock pools, his feet dangling in the water. He sat in the burning sunshine. He wore no sunglasses or head cover. His head hung in a limp way and he seemed to be cold. He was so still. Like a chameleon soaking in the warmth – or a stick insect playing dead. He didn't seem to hear her approach. She was quite near when he looked up. His eyelids closed over and opened slowly. A veil passed over his reptilian face. She couldn't tell whether he was pleased to see her or not.

»Hi!« She sat down beside him studying him intensely. »Why did you leave me the syringe?« she asked.

»Don't need it any more,« he said. »I'm going to stop.«

»Going to?«

»OK, I've started already. Can't you see?« His eyes were filled with tears.

»It's going to take a while to dry out,« she smiled sympathetically, brushing something wet away from her own eyes, looking away abruptly. It was too late. He'd already seen it. A renegade tear. He looked mildly surprised.

»What's the matter?«

»Nothing,« she said. »What made you think I was coming back here?« she asked.

»I was just hoping,« he said. Their glances crossed. She put her arm around him. He pulled closer to her. She touched his

cheek. A sentimental scene followed. A few kind words in a private world.

Sandy wandered back to Erin. She was studying the bus schedule. It was just after four.

»See? I've kept my word. I'm back!«

»Shit! So you didn't find him! Let's see if the sailor's back then.«

»Relax! I found him,« she said. Erin picked up her rucksack in slight disbelief. But she wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth! »Even better! Then let's go. We'll just make it for the bus!«

»Where's Ranjit?« Sandy wanted to know. »It's time to say goodbye.«

He wasn't far away, working in his scullery. Sandy held out the document she'd got from the dignitary. »Will you give this to Subash, please. I forgot. It's very important.« Slightly perplexed he studied the buff coloured envelope, with the government seal on it and then slipped it into his shirt pocket. »Sure, I'll give it to him the minute I see him! He was supposed to be helping me with the lunches.« He brought Sandy's rucksack out for her. »Now don't forget me and don't forget to send all your friends to me!«

»Thanks Ranjit. We won't! We'll send them All – we've got so many!!! And ONLY to you!«

»Where are you going?«

»Arugam Bay. And Yala Park. Don't tell anyone who asks.«

»Write something in my book before you go!« he insisted.

Erin wrote a listing full of praise: 'The serene smile of the proprietor waits to greet you with a sparkling Daiquiri in the scintillating shade of the palm fringed coastal garden...'

»There! How's that?« Ranjit glowed. Sandy had a peep.

»Over the top. You'll put everyone off!«

»Ladies, please!« Ranjit pleaded.

Didn't they ever stop squabbling?

– LOST HORIZONS –

»*So what did Subash have to say then?*« Erin wanted to know suddenly overcome by curiosity as the bus raced on. They were tearing down the west coast and heading south. »*He's drying out,*« Sandy replied wearily. »*He's going to kick his habit.*«

»*And I didn't even know he had one! Now she tells me. Now that is news! Do you search them out, Sandy?*« she chided. »*Why couldn't you just get fixed up with a nice safe business executive or something?*« (Luckily she was giggling as she said it).

»*No, they're the real junkies. Dead from the solar plexus up!*« Sandy confirmed, convinced.

»*So what's going on?*«

»*There's nothing going on,*« she said squirming.

»*Oh, sure!*« said Erin. »*Pull the other one! So when are you meeting up next?*«

It was no use. You couldn't keep a lot from Erin. She had a long nose for trouble.

»*Not for a while. Not for a long while. I'm going home first. I've got some commissions to finish and deliver...*« the silversmith was speaking ... »*And then I've got Shantini to worry about ... (it was the young mother's turn) ...* »*He's got to get himself sorted out, got things to get over. Maybe we'll meet in a year. Same place, same time. See what happens in between.*« (And that was the pony-tailed girlfriend speaking).

»*Sandy! I didn't know you had it in you! Common Sense! I've never heard such reasoning from you! And you think this budding romance will all keep? Has he got a fridge?*« She just didn't know what on earth got into Erin sometimes! Sandy was distraught!

»*OK, I'm sorry,*« Erin apologized.

»If it doesn't, it would have been a waste of time anyway,« Sandy conceded cooperatively.

»Am I hearing things? Sense and more sense?« Erin gulped in astonishment.

»It would also mean that I was incapable of learning anything from my major errors.«

»That's true. But what's wrong with flinging caution to the winds all of a sudden?«

»No, not this time. I'm going to try out my resistance. See if I've got any. Reason first.«

»I don't believe it! You're a man after my own heart!« Erin said and grinned widely.

The bus rushed on like a wounded animal. Sandy looked out of the window. Her recent encounter fresh in her thoughts. Subash. The shadows in his head. And the defeat. He had fallen prey to the morphine once more. She'd wanted to shield him but how could she ward off the persistent forces that seemed to have gathered together to terminate his life?

»Are you angry with me?« he'd asked.

»Yes, No. I don't know. It's all the same.«

»Well, you look as if you hate me,« he'd said.

»I hate what you are doing to yourself. I don't understand why you do it. Or maybe I do understand why you do it, but I still wish you wouldn't!« she'd said.

»Spoil the pretty picture of the world you had?«

»The picture's not been especially pretty for a long time, Subash. There's a great ugly stain spreading over it but I'm working on it.«

»My life's not worth the living of it,« he stated sadly.

»How should you know?« she asked.

»Well, who else? Don't I get a say? Who are you to say?«

»No one. I can't tell you what you should feel. Only thing is – it could be that I believe in restoration. You can repair things, bring them back to life and sometimes they can look more beautiful afterwards – even with the flaws showing through. Like antiques – «

»Women! You're all crazy. You bring children into this world and then try to convince yourselves and them that it's a good idea.«

»They are already convinced when they come! It's us who are already here who ruin things for them.«

»That's why there are things that make it all go away,« he mumbled.

»Yes, but the relief doesn't last. And you feel like death the rest of the time, so what's the point?«

»Exit from Hell for a while?«

»Wrong exit. Because the hell is in your mind.«

»You think the front gate's open or what?«

»Look, when you're down, you're down. It's a hole you can't see out of. It's a cold dark day with the flu. But you know, nothing is permanent. We're always moving, changing. Sunshine follows rain. It's the sun that's the key player. Act with a view to better times. And take your decisions in the good times.«

»Auspicious moments?«

»Yes. Those.« She'd kissed his cheek and walked away. Then he'd run after her and they'd sat down again.

And talked it out.

The journey was interrupted by the slowing down of the bus which ground to a halt at a roadblock. The passengers were ordered to disembark and pass through a security control, while the interior of the bus was searched by armed soldiers. At the far side of the road, a man was held between two soldiers. His hands were bound behind his back, his lacerated face was partially hidden by a black mask. There was dried blood on his clothing. The passengers filed quickly past him. As Sandy

passed he made a slight nod. She was surprised. A soldier signalled her out to a side with the butt of his gun. Erin's jaw dropped open. She stopped too but was ordered to move on. The passengers piled back onto the bus. Erin stared at the masked man. Why on earth had he singled Sandy out? She studied him closer. He seemed familiar. A small man. A small man in a dirty sarong. It was Siri! Erin got off the bus again.

»Wait please! There's been a mistake.« She went up to the soldiers.
»Let me see your passport.« He flicked it open and asked, *»How long will you stay?«*

»We are both leaving on Sunday,« she said. *»Have you any idea who she is?«* she bluffed.

»I have her passport here,« the soldier said. He opened it and saw the stamp. A diplomat's daughter. Better be careful He tipped his hat.

»Excuse me, miss. Please accept my apology.« Sandy breathed a sigh of relief and walked quickly past the masked man and boarded the bus again. The bus drove off.

»Siri? Yes, they must have picked him up. He's been badly knocked up.«

»It seems he's turned informer.«

»And he's getting even with you at the same time! He tried to get you taken into custody for the night. You'd have had such a fun time with the nice soldiers!«

– RAIN-MAKING –

Thunder detonated just as the brown jeep turned into the group of treetop lodges set up in a jungle clearing. The two passengers and the driver made a splashy dash for cover as a dense water wall closed in on them.

»*Very few tourists pass here off season ...* ,« the ranger was saying as he put down one of their rucksacks. He held his dripping canvas hat away so that the water poured out through the spout formed by the hat's rim. »*Just us and the other animals,*« he murmured. '*Rat-a-tat-tat*' replied the raindrops drowning out his voice.

They'd reached Yala animal sanctuary. It was one of old Seran's prize land stretches, one of the undisturbed wildlife nature reserves. A hideaway holiday organized by telephone enroute. Their host showed them around. There was a small washhouse with latrine on ground level, an open-air kitchen area with stove and gas cylinder on a rickety platform above kitted out with cooking equipment, a stone sink and a leaky tap. Sleeping facilities were hammocks strung in the rafters.

A patient smile, a teak brown face somehow older than its years, explained »*The rainwater's collected here – fine for drinking once you boil it.*« He wrung out his wet hat and pointed to a small water tank. »*There's a filter over there...*« he continued and his index finger led to a tall ceramic canister with a neat brass tap. A big black kettle stood by it.
»*And you'll find some mod cons too ... tea bags ...*« he pointed to a suspended cabinet.

His eyes reflected the grey cloud as he looked up into the ragged sky, lit up as it was with patches of stormy light. Somewhere the sun was hiding. »*Smell it?*« he asked, planting his feet squarely and crossing his arms. »*Lots more rain to come!*«

They looked upward apprehensively. Big plantain leaves dripped ominously about the shelter while the water seeped away in silver slivers. *Rain! Rain! Go away! Come again another day ...* would it ever? The man uncrossed his folded arms and started to light a lamp, struggling with the unruly gusts of wind that tossed the flame of the matchstick around. There was an unsure flicker and then the wick of the yellow kerosene lamp caught fire lifting itself up like an upright citizen safe within its glass housing. The ranger blew out the match and the glass bubble settled around the flame snugly.

»*We've got watchers posted around the place for safety, so someone will be sleeping under that tree – over there.*« He showed them a spot underneath a spreading Jak upon which ripe green fruit hung big as rugby balls. A rolled palm-leaf floor-mat leant against its thick trunk. The ground seemed dry as a bone. »*What about snakes and things?*« Erin wanted to know. »*Things?*« He smiled broadly.

»*I thought that was exactly what you came to see? Don't worry – no 'things' come near humans if they have any choice!*«

Sandy rummaged in her pack for dry clothes. »*You know, you can set your watch to the monsoon,*« the man said looking like he knew what he was talking about. »*A shower lasts just so and so long and the damp sizzles up suddenly in the sun the next minute. But I don't hold out much hope for you tonight,*« he said with an apologetic smile. »*The cupboard's got some blankets so you'll have to wrap up in them if it gets any cooler.*«

He wandered over to a stone hearth where the smoky kettle lived. *»Shall I brew a pot of tea to get you warmed up?«* The idea held great appeal. *»I think we'll have to make a fire too. It's going to be a long evening. Ever seen it done with sticks?«* That idea too had a kind of appeal. Their two heads shook negatively. He got himself organized, seated himself down and started briskly rubbing a pointed hardwood stick into a softer base of fig wood. A single spark flew into a small pile of shredded leaves he'd prepared. It must have been one of his party tricks. The leaves started to curl, steaming in the moist air. He blew upon them and a flame reluctantly leapt up. *»See?«* he said, *»With several decades of practice, it's gets easier! Want to try?«*

»I'll have a go when you're gone,« said Erin who had been carefully watching his technique. He set out some tea mugs for them and plonked the steaming tea-pot onto the table. And then, with a bright *Cheerio, Feed the fire!* he was off. A lonely evening in the lamplight loomed before them. The fire fizzled out.

»You think we can stick it out here, Erin?« Sandy asked anxiously lifting the hot enamel mug to her lips and burning them instantly. *»What'll we do for food?«*

»Want to take your chances with the likes of Lalith, Sandy?«

Erin picked the sticks up and started rubbing them together energetically the way she'd seen the ranger do.

»No,« Sandy sighed. *»Strangely enough we're probably safer here in the real jungle!«*

»What's that ranger's name?« Erin asked having forgotten.

»Ranasinghe,« her friend replied. *»Seems nice enough. He said he'd pass by in the morning – if we're still here!«* she added with a grimace.

»Yeah, remind me to write my will. I see I've left things far too late!« Erin said glumly.

Blinded moths fluttered around the lamp, singeing their wings on suicidal flight paths. Erin gave up with the fire-making and forlornly crawled up into a hammock while Sandy paced around the creaky plank terrace like a caged cheetah.

And all around them rose the unfamiliar sounds of the jungle coming to life. The night forest was awakening. Two jungle cats prowled outside the enclosure. A snarl as the human scent hit them and they scampered away.

After a while Sandy decided to lie down too in spite of her nervousness. What a day it had been! But sleep evaded her. She chased it here and it dodged her there. After a while she registered Erin's even breathing. When the luminous hands of her wristwatch glowed at 3 a.m. the moon sailed out from behind the rain cloud with a big smirk. So you thought you could fall asleep! Ha!

In the near distance, there was a sound of heavy movement, the sound of some big animal crashing a path through the undergrowth. Sandy shivered looking up into the night sky. Branches were being blown around. The stars seemed to travel with them. And in the heights, silhouetted against the moon, she saw them ... monkeys. ... dozens of sleeping monkeys.

– BATTLE FATIGUE –

Shortly before lighting up time, the wind dropped, the clouds disappeared and a stillness swept the area. The sun seemed to be exploding far in space. Sandy slipped in and out of R.E.M. dozing off and trying to wake up simultaneously. She was in one of those uncomfoting, half waking states where the command structure of the mind fails to rouse the body. She was falling, falling like a bird of paradise in its display swoon. Among feathers, avian skulls and bright, dark glistening eyes. Sinking in downy jungle beds and piles of wind-swept flowers. Birds swarmed in her head calling. Angelic birds with their linguistic capabilities: the *Psittacines*, the parrot family. The crows, the *Corvines* – a field of acoustics that begot meaning, morphemes moving into language. Malay, Greek, Chinese ... what raucous messages did the birds bring? The dream dispersed into the sound spectrum. It was the dawn chorus. She opened her eyes wide in surprise to see a forest clearing hit by blazing yellow light. Where in the world was she?

Then the programming fell back into place. *I'm on holiday!* There was Erin, up and sprightly, showered, dressed and drumming her finger tips on the table top impatiently. »*Thought you were never going to get up!*« she whined. It had just gone six! Still, up Sandy rose and followed her friend's example heading into the wash-house for a cold shower. The faucet in the bath room below jammed a bit showing traces of corrosion but the flow was abundant and the H₂O chalklessly soft. She rubbed up a stiff lather from a bar of red Lifebuoy carbolic soap that lay there. A harsh little scrubber. Scrub. Scrub. Scrub. The soft rainwater flowed over the epidermis of a silky body and made

it tingle pleasantly. Soon after they spread their wet towels around and sat drying themselves in the morning sunshine flooding the yard, at the mercy of its energy.

An hour later they heard the rattle of the jeep as it negotiated its way splashing up the muddy track. When it had halted, he stepped down casually into a puddle. And cussed in Sinhala! »*Hey Rana, mind you don't step in a puddle!*« Sandy called out gaily with a big grin. From then on he took meticulous care where he placed the muddy laced-up shoes containing his feet. Crazy man! He had brought them a food hamper containing pre-cooked lunch packs that had been prepared even earlier that morning. They contained rice and curries and were wrapped in plantain leaves that released warm fragrance into food. A small selection of packaged teas, coffee beans, bread rolls and fruit. They felt his watchful brown eyes rest upon them as they began to unpack the hamper.

»*Sleep well in spite of the storm?*« he asked. Sandy shook her head decisively. »*Not a wink,*« she said.

»*She went out like a light,*« Erin contradicted.

He started preparing a simple breakfast while they set out rattan chairs and almost didn't succeed in controlling an errant fold-up table that attempted to wander over the wooden landing. A pawpaw was quartered by Rana with swashbuckling efficiency. Its soft flesh lay open on a plate in a blur of orange. Black seeds glistened like the eyes of ~~minor~~ ~~minor~~ mynah birds. They scooped its flesh out leaving four green hulls, like little canoes adrift on the table top. Next came the tussle with the armoured scales of pineapples that seemed to fight back in an appalling, ferocious manner. Peeling back the tough skin cover from ashy plantains was easier. And

Hopla! before them lay a salad of raw mixed fruit to rival that of any Swiss spa.

»*Hear the hungry sky this morning?*« the ranger enquired. Sandy knew exactly what he meant! The dawn clamour in the jungle – how could you miss it? A foraging frenzy of unreasonable proportion, staged by angst driven parents while the urgent, open mouths of waiting baby birds called out tyrannously. He passed over a pair of powerful binoculars to her and she squinted through them into the branches of the trees. There hung the lawless monkeys glaring back. Ooo! Ooo! Ooo! A shower of nutshells followed aimed in their direction!

The coffee pot steamed waiting with the impatient little puffs of a locomotive. Erin poured it all out calmly and sat there looking sagely expectant. Luckily, Rana had brought a book on endemic birds and an ordnance survey map of the area.

»*I can't stop long today,*« he explained, »*I've got an appointment for a safari tour soon. But I'll drop by this evening on my way back – just to check up on you! I haven't had the chance to show you the little village at the fork in the river. The dhobis do their laundry work down there and you can get groceries in the boutique. Take a look around ... there are all kinds of wading birds downstream and quiet shady spots for lunch. I'll send one of the village boys to show you.*« So while they guzzled up the breakfast, he abandoned them.

After he had gone, Erin had begun to clear up in a particularly seriously unsatisfactory manner. Sandy picked the info-steeped map up. The rounded curlicues of the Sinhalese alphabet lurked among the geographical contours, straddling valleys and springing over stiff parchment ridges. And beside the ancient alphabet lay its cousin of the Brahmic family, the Tamil script.

The words she did not understand derived from Sanskrit and from Pali and shared a common lineage dating back to the pre-Christian era. She stared, hypnotized. The letters seemed alive, like so many little insects coiling into consciousness through concentric spirals, withdrawing into the foetal position now and then, guarding their intricate attributes and flourishes, pennants flying, inviting to communion.

How did that happen? What first stirred man to load meaning into marks, she asked herself? Signs that you could store, that passed through minds, through lives, and travelled in time like a pod in a slow release of seeds, germinating and fruiting into a thinking tree? Trees, symbolic of hidden knowledge, of good and evil and the tree of all living seeds – those were the three trees that had been spoken of in ancient texts. But Eden was an orchard. So what were the other species? Could there not have been other types? How many of them?

A chatter of annoyed monkeys broke into the drift of her thoughts. Purple-faced, leaf monkeys, dark grey fur and white whiskers. Vegetarians that fed on a diet of leaves, seeds and flowers. There were also grey Langurs to be seen in the jungles of the Central Province as well as longtails and blackface treetop monkeys. These were leaf monkeys. The three before her had sprung down from high branches of the jungle trees and were amongst them, baring their ivory teeth, roving golden eyes signalling mischief.

The simian visitors darted quickly here and there and tried to make off with the breakfast remnants that had not yet been cleared away. The shocked outcry of the humans startled some of the less audacious ones and they scampered away. The dominant male got entangled in the mosquito net looking

rather comical while a second male laid claim to the large bunch of plantains and began to clamber with his burden into the rafters. The ensuing ruckus caused a third monkey to tip a basket of coconuts over. He hurt his ankle and limped off into a corner complaining profusely. Oh, the pathos of it! The hairy fruit rolled all over the terrace. Loud were the cries of distress from all concerned! All hell was breaking loose.

A stored memory flared in Sandy's head with a quiet hiss. *Pssst! you there!...* it said ... Ah, monkeys!! She still had a scar on an upper arm to remind her of their *true* nature and the sequence of the event cooperatively replayed: She'd been watching an ever so cute and costumed Toque monkey beating a miniature drum in the street. He was pretty good at it! She'd been with Del. The monkey had been with its handler. Its tiny hands had the most perfect of nails and cuticles and delicately jointed fingers held out a red fez to collect a few cent coins. Sandy reached out to touch what seemed a toy. Yikes! Small sharp teeth bit in and the upper denture nearly met the lower one. The caresser drew back with a yelp of pain as tears burst their banks inside. So it had been off to the hospital for a tetanus jab and Sandy had wised up. Once bitten, twice shy they say.

Monkeys were certainly no man's fool. They'd learnt *the hard way* that men were a mean and murderous species that could turn far more vicious than any monkey ever would! But still even humans had their rights to guard their food! Sandy reached down to seize the coconuts scattered on the floor in a show of aggression, almost snarling herself and the other animals began to panic. She pretended to aim for the head of one way up above her. She threw it so hard that it hit the rafters loudly and bounced back with a crack! She was more

frightened herself as she picked up a wooden chair and let it drop with force. The monkey in the net unravelled himself and leapt away with a terrifying screech. Luckily the rest followed suit. She threw some more coconuts after them as they scampered away and flopped down breathlessly. It was the law ... er ... war of the jungle. *Had she won?*

»*I think you can stop now,*« Erin said with infinite patience. »*It's just possible ... they might have got the message!*« Feeling more than a little foolish Sandy said »*Yeah, maybe. Who knows? I've established our territorial rights here now, see?*«

»*Is that a declaration of possession? We're the usurpers, honey-bunch. It's they who live here, not us!*«

»*I thought they'd steal everything!*«

»*Now would they do that – they're our relatives!*«

»*What! You're talking baboon! No one, but No One, can address or resolve such a bestial ancestry.*«

»*Darwin tried.*«

»*Shouldn't have.*«

»*True. Ee- nough! Should we go off to the river like the man suggested?*«

»*Yep. Let's split.*«

They gathered the things they needed, took a couple of lunch-packs and were off like a gun shot!

– A FIERY SPARK –

Green lights danced among tiered rice fields, wandered downward to a river the colour of a rose.

The little island in the blue ocean was drained by one hundred and three river basins, its coastal lands rich in estuaries, freshwater lagoons, lakes. It was watered by three great river systems: the Mahaveli, the Kelani and the Kalu, the black river. Their tributaries often swelled to flood level during the two rainy seasons.

A young boy showed the way ahead. Soon he lagged behind reluctantly trailing a stick in the heavy grasses, beating them aggressively. The three trekkers came to a pretty spot at a shallow inlet where wings fluttered. Herons puffed up their feathers, wild ducks staged water landings and the disinterested boy ran off. Sandy flopped down onto a flat rock and fished out a book. It was the diary Paul Gauguin kept on Tahiti titled *Noa Noa* -- which means '*very fragrant*'.

Erin settled down to sketch after preening her sable-hair paintbrushes the way a man might twirl his moustaches. Plumes, feathered crests, splashes and a dome of sound as the slow hours passed.

Sandy put down her book all of a sudden. A bright green lizard scurried by, stopped in its tracks, fixed a beady eye on her and turned to stone. Not far downstream, an elephant bathed, arching his powerful back, shaking ripples down his flabby flesh. Tiny silver suns shivered, scattered over his skin as he splashed around, lazily playful in the flowing stream. Nearby sat his watchful mahout, a bent old woman.

Hillsides of cinnamon and teak scented the area with a subtle fragrance. On the far bank the old woman spread two saris out to dry among the rocks. She sat among them like a giant insect her luminous textile wings caught up in ripples of a faint breeze.

As the day drifted, others wandered down to the riverside. Young women stilled babies, young men began their laundry work, pounding the dirt out of sturdy cotton textiles, produced by the island's mills. Lithe arms dipped in and out, rinsing away the suds in the swift wash of the rosy flowing river, piling the cleaned clothes in foamy white heaps. A wild peacock spread its tail among the reeds threading its dainty path past a wayside shrine with its white flags and morning offerings of blue lotus.

On Erin's page a little lizard was taking shape. But the legs weren't quite right. She looked again. Erased it all away! Why, he was wounded! Been in a fight with some querulous creature no doubt! She wished he'd sit still, all the same!

Stillness? Nature had no shortage of it and her very first condition for creativity was calm. The steadfast calm that allowed the evaluating, regenerating and purifying processes to begin. Serenity was the quality required in the reproductive realm during the formative stages of replication. Distress was the fruit of tension, of atrophy. And panic the consequence of excess. That was why the off spring of humanoids were held in the required vegetative calm of passive, female custody.

Woman. Silk and languor, were her traits. But she was the embodiment of a force, slow and continuous. Manifest in the quiet grace of a river woman bathing. Manifest in the rhythmic toil of a slender hand, the fall of a tired tress. Seen in the steady descent of tea-pickers moving about the hillsides, babies and

heavy baskets tied to their backs. In the ragged women searching in submission among the refuse of the streets in quiet exhaustion. What was woman but a being that lingered in the waters of birth, heady with the secret of the revolving child that was homed within her? Her dream was of a new day, flowering every day, bringing forth bright creatures from a sacred pool, tuning in to the precision engineered hands of the clock of Life.

Even if mankind reached out for extinction, evolution never foundered. Nature's powers of evasion were ingenious and manifold. She employed failsafe strategies for continuity of species. Diversity. She conjured with all she had, with hermaphroditic reproduction, self fertilization, spores carried by wind, by bees, by seas. Among some species there were entirely female births, in others the brooding was done by males. In the case of the seahorse gestation took place inside the mammal's pouch. Nature wasn't fussy – she just wanted the job done! So seeds of grain crossed continents in the stomachs of migrating birds.

Shark tamer, sea serpent, snake-woman. The goddesses of old could charm the octopi, the river eels, the hydra wandering among blue weeds. Could Woman still live up to her archaic promise? The generous abundance attributed to her? She who could free herself from herself for another? Or had she too thrown her finest responses away? And if so, what would remain? An earth 460 million years old could not be threatened. If woman did not stir, it was the human race that would become a corpse dangling in the wind of time.

The dawn bird sang to Shakti. To the first born maidens of the goddess, her primogeniture. She gifted quintessential instinct, and a slowness to anger.

Yet woman, in spite of her divine impulses, had been enticed. Deadly worded in her mind were lies, passed down like drowsy grenades through the ages, from hand to hand, faithfully – to her tiny misshapen children. What had become of her? Had she not been born *knowing*? Knowing that hers was the trust for the passing on not only of the chain of life but of its intact spirit? Had she lost her memory? Lost the knowledge of how to re-forge the ancient bond of friendship that had once powered between the sexes? It had all been so carelessly severed. Now two jealous spirits went their separate ways, unwilling to accommodate each other. Memory was dead in woman and all her forgetful tribe. She had been drawn into false action in a symbolic universe. The old woman on the far bank stood up, waved to them and walked slowly away leading the huge mammal.

As the sun rose higher, sound intensified. Swarms, clouds of midges, bugs and water fleas materialized. Sandy put down her sketch book and waded knee deep into the mud to photograph a certain reed in a certain ray of sunlight then thought better of it struck by a sudden fear of leeches. By one o'clock, something was tugging them both once more into unconsciousness. The heat made such inroads into a person's waking state. They could hardly keep their eyes open through the leaf-wrapped lunch pack, tasty as it was. Cat-napping through the early afternoon, coming to when a soft shower started falling, splashing onto the notebooks in a fit of silvery mischief. It lasted only long enough to revive them. The air was cooled and soothing. They straggled back in silence through the puddles. Erin settled down to some serious practice with the fire sticks and Sandy settled down to a pot of tea and some serious consultancy activities concerning Erin's fire-making. »*No, that's not the way he did it ...he meant the other way round!*«

And so on ...

When the ranger arrived at sundown they had managed to make just two teeny sparks. He set down the ancient B.S.A. Single 12 shot gun that had been slung around his neck.

»Thrown my coconuts away? Don't like them?«

»No. I mean yes, we were in a fight this morning! With them!« He followed the direction of an accusatory index finger into the trees where the leaf monkeys sat seemingly tearing apart fruit and nuts in a maelstrom of destruction, their purple faces engrossed in their task.

»Ah, I see. An insurrection! You have the alternative of making friends with them, you know. They're not in any way anti-social,« he said. Sandy looked a bit dubious.

»Don't you trust me?« he asked with a grin ... *»Never mind! It's going to be getting dark soon – I'll light the oil lamp for you with an ordinary safety match, ok?«* The flame flared up with a hiss as the thin deft fingers took command. *»Hopefully you got on better with our feathered friends? Spot any of the species I mentioned?«*

»We think we saw some black-headed orioles but then again they could have been capped purple kingfishers, spot-bellied pelicans or sulphur-crested cockatoos ...« was the answer from the gloomy corner where Erin now perched.

»Or maybe they were crested serpent eagles? I see you are a very inept pair of ornithologists. Utterly lacking in both talent and enthusiasm.« He sat down a little bit perplexed, accepting a shot of toddy from a bottle they'd found lurking in a cupboard. *»By the way, are you expecting company?«*

Two pairs of scared eyes, with one big Question: Company - like who?

»It seems a man has been asking after the two of you in the village.«

Two pleading faces turned to him and he didn't miss the primitive fear he saw in them. *»If you've got troubles I think you'd better tell me,«* he said quietly.

Out came the tale about Lalith, Siri and the trafficking. And the kidnapping of Shantini. He listened attentively. Then he sat a while lost in sombre thoughts ... as if he were part of the gathering evening storm. *»It's so hard to understand these things,«* he said eventually. *»Is everyone for sale?«*

Hidden in dark leaves Erin began to shiver, saying, *»Let's make a fire, I feel so strange.«* Rana cleared the ash from the hearth. The workers around the place had been industrious. While the two tourists were away, small twigs had been tied inside bundles of newspaper and stored dry, ready for firing. Nearby lay a neat log pile. Erin started rubbing the pointed stick vigorously onto its base until she indeed made sparks. Slowly a flame licked around the dry twigs and smoke snaked through the wood startling loose a cloud of fireflies. Fire gained strength and began to blaze. Sandy gazed at it as if it was the first time she'd ever witnessed any natural phenomena.

Through the flames she studied Rana. *Homo Sapiens*. Now there was a representative of the *knowing* species. But what did he know? His smoky head was held between two intricate hands as if it hurt. What on earth was he? A self-willed mammal with a lecherous toy curled between his legs? A snake-man? A child charmer? Rana? No, not he. He wavered there before her undefiled. Yes, he did know something.

»I think it's to do with not having any resistance,« Erin was consoling Rana. *»You do anything you want to anybody until someone stops you. You aren't supposed to control your drives in our*

society. You just give in to them all. It's very simple. You don't need to manage your self, you just have to make sure you control other people. What's wrong with that?»

»Self indulgence? Only that it makes you illogical,« Sandy poked in – and she should know!

»Children have a right to innocence, to develop at their own pace,« he was saying, »If we accidentally bring them here, it still gives us no right to misuse them. A child is proof of ongoing processes beyond our present lives. It's impossible for me to see things otherwise. It's unfair to force a child through an adult mating rite before maturity.«

»You think they need your permission?« Erin asked coolly.

»No,« he answered morosely.

»Have you got a family?« Erin then asked him, reluctant to see him so despondent.

»Yes, of course! Did you think I'd escaped?« he laughed lightly then. »I've got two daughters and five grandchildren! What about you two? What are your future plans? Going to settle down too?« That struck the two of them out like lightning. How to explain to this un-complicated man their mixed up feelings on that issue?

»It's hard to find the right partner these days,« was the best Sandy could manage.

»Spoilt for choice? Too many products?« he joked. »Like the washing-powders? Can't choose?«

They laughed again. But it wasn't funny – because it was true.

»Yep, too many bright wrappers. Men need a lot of maintenance you know – and you don't even get a one year guarantee,« Erin contributed.

»Too stressful to make the right decision – so you leave the shop? Well, I like that one!« the man laughed delighted.

»*You know, I've got a little daughter ...* « Sandy managed to say. Rana posed no awkward questions. No funny looks swept across his face. He knew she wasn't married – he'd had to check her passport. »*A master of trapezes,*« Sandy thought. You'd think he hadn't heard! He changed the subject.

»*So, ladies! Since you are tired of waiting for Tarzan, shall we do that safari excursion tomorrow?*«

»*Sure, we're game!*« they both cried out at once.

»*Hopefully not!*« he said and then they all broke into a fit of mirth.

»*Good! Then I shall invite myself to a breakfast party with you and your monkey friends at around 7 o'clock and we can start off straight afterwards.*« They nodded in agreement like a pair of mandarins, taking the Mickey out of the ambiguous Lankan head nod. With that he picked up his gun and left, with a sigh – not exactly amused!

As the shades of night crept out a sense of desolation descended upon them, falling like a cold, cold star. The rain was falling gently as the watcher woman waved a withered hand and spread out her sleeping mat. Was she moving on all fours or did it just seem so? They watched her slow, dolorous movements as she crept among the jungle orchids.

»*Erin,*« Sandy asked fearfully, »*Who is that woman really – she gives me the shakes!*«

»*Sandy, please! He's already explained. She's the night watcher. The same one who was bathing the elephant this morning. She's supposed to be looking out for us.*«

»*She should be in a safe bed for the night at her age!*«

»*Safe? Ha! So who's safe?*«

»*Whose fault is it? We aren't free of blame either*«

»No. We're complacent with our own pig ignorance. It's a cop out on reality. War and poverty all around us but we don't give a hoot 'cos we've got access to MONEY! And that's because we're here from the well-scrubbed cages of Europe. We get our toys delivered to our doorsteps. Why should we interfere?«

»Why? Because we pay the zoo keepers to keep people penned up. The mahout, the snake charmer or the tea-picker – they've got survival skills – they wouldn't need our charity, if we left them alone.«

»Yeah, but we want a cut from their efforts. Have to do it ourselves otherwise!«

»What?«

»Grow tea.«

»We've got teas.«

»Not those teas! The other man's teas are always greener. Human nature, you know! We don't want what we have got. Only what we haven't.«

»It's not an either ... or – we want both.«

»Matter of fact, that isn't human nature. More like a neurosis.«

»Well, we're off our rockers.«

»Think so?«

»Yep, cos the way we see things, we end up in criminal stuff. You know extermination camps and so on – «

At that moment her mouth dropped open!

The rain had stopped. The moon moved. When the clouds turned silver they had seen it. Something vast stirring among the trees around the clearing. A mass of swaying weights. Indigo in the faint light the elephant appeared. What was he seeking there at this hour? Dusk flowering healing herbs? No. The gallant bull elephant steadied himself and bent an arthritic knee, lay flat his trunk on the ground and the old woman climbed onto his back. They faded away into the trees.

Day surprised the two bright sparks. Imagine! It made the poor sleepers rise at 5 a.m. Yet dawn found them in full sail, laughing at their lack of breath as they blew upon the dull embers of the night fire, hankering for a morning cup of coffee. The flames revived slowly and after a long wait the coffee pot began to whisper softly at the hearth. An hour or two passed before they saw the ranger's jeep beep down the muddy trail, his steady brown hands on the wayward steering wheel. It was 8.15 a.m. He had Pirelli's rubber tyres and Duckham's car oil but he was still late!

»Morning chimps! Got my breakfast ready?« he called out gaily.
»What are we having? Scott's Porridge oats? Nestlé powdered milk? Marmite sandwiches? All by appointment to her royal majesty?«
»No, we're having fruit, Rana. Fruit! We've gone native.«
»Thank goodness!« he said. Yes, thank goodness he'd cheered up!
»You know we natives never get it right!« he continued, *»We're constantly aspiring to be like you foreigners but it just never seems to work!«*
»Hmmm ... true ... Your wife a good cook?«
»Yes. No. But you know, I've got two good cooks. My mother lives with us.«
»Does that work? One man for two women to fuss over?«
»Now come on! Don't be jealous!«
»Good grief! Rana! You know there are plenty of reasons why things shouldn't work! Like sheer antagonism! You're obviously spoilt rotten!«

»*Tolerance, my ladies ... I have no answers for you.*« He beamed. They relaxed.

He inspected the coffee pot. »*Had a quiet night?*«

»*Not particularly but we're getting used to the orchestra,*« Sandy chirped.

»*Actually something did happen last night,*« Erin informed him.

»*An elephant of amazing proportions was crashing around here long after midnight.*«

He had come again? Sandy looked up surprised. This time she hadn't heard a thing!

»*He rammed the post over there,*« Erin said pointing. Sandy's head swivelled 90°. Rana glanced over casually, explaining in a most unperturbed fashion, »*That was probably just the rogue you saw.*«

»*Rogue?*« Erin asked puzzled.

»*An elephant that roams free of a herd. It's not usual – the trouble is that this one's blind. The villagers throw stones to get rid of him. They're afraid of him. So then he goes crazy ... runs rampant in the allotments and destroys their plants.*«

»*So would I run rampant if I couldn't feed ...* « Erin said, »*Anyway, he disappeared off with the old Vedic woman, again.*«

»*Old Vedic woman? Her name's Maharani. It means Great Queen.*«

The ranger went over to the balcony rail and called out. A young lad in a bright sarong came scuttling down the rock face behind the hunting lodge, two angry drones circling around him like fighter aircraft. He'd been in the caves above gathering honey. He slid down with the lithe grace of an acrobat, his bare feet poised in certainty. Rana asked him what he knew about the rampage of the night before. The teenager replied that *Elephas was angry again and that someone seemed to have been lurking in the grounds. And no, he hadn't seen anything.* And with a

wave, he was gone again back to the buzzing hive, the drones behind him all the way.

»*Mosquitoes been bothering you?*« Rana wanted to know.

»*Yes, they staged a few nuisance raids. The nets don't stop them. We've been under steady siege.*«

»*Maybe they enjoy a challenge! I'll get the lodge sprayed while we are away this morning. A girl from the village usually cleans around a bit,*« he reassured them.

The ranger had downed a mug of coffee and breakfast was now done. The three scrambled into the Land Rover and drove off on the rough track under a seriously azure sky.

Forests of teak, coffee bushes in flower, permeating the zone with a heady jasmine like scent. They passed rural huts to open land beyond. The tour of the animal sanctuary took up the morning hours, spent camouflaged at observation points watching wild animals in their natural habitats. A gorgeous feather, dropped here and there betrayed the presence of a peacock or a parakeet hidden among the ferns.

Sandy studied her feathers on the return trip. She had found three. Rana seemed to want to tell them something. He hesitated for a moment and then said,

»*I could tell you the story of the old elephant you saw, the man-killer,*« he said.

»*Man-killer? So, tell us,*« they said perturbed.

»*He won't let anyone touch the watcher woman – Maharani. In fact that's why he's blind. He charged once when someone was trying to beat her. The man went for his eyes with a pole and blinded him. The elephant killed him.*«

»*So that's why everyone's so scared of him?*«

The ranger nodded.

»Who is she, this old watcher woman?«

»She's not so old. She just looks that way. She was left in the forest once. Brought up by them.«

»By whom?«

»The elephants.«

»The elephants?«

»Yes, the elephants. She was found by people for the first time when she was around thirteen. She didn't know how to walk on two legs or speak like a human being. She was what is known as a feral child. After that she was taken in by the church mission and married off for a short time. Her husband became ill and died. They had a daughter and later when the girl married, Maharani went to live with her and the girl's husband. Unfortunately the young chap treated them both very badly. In the end they ran away from him, leaving a young son behind with the father. They came to live here, near the elephant herd. We don't trouble her. She's a native healer, she knows everything about the forest. She has other strange powers, too ... «

Instinct on track thought Sandy. Ranasinghe continued his explanation: »Later on, Maharani's daughter got married again - to one of our villagers as a matter of fact and she had another child - a son again. As I said she had already left a child behind from the previous relationship. Anyway, both boys are grown up now. The lad from our village got married not so long ago, before the serious political unrest started. He had a couple of children too - twins. It ended very sadly. Something terrible happened to the family during the insurrection. Their house was torched. He had been out that night tending one of the buffalo who was calving and escaped the fire. Maharani had also been asleep in the house and managed to run out although she was quite badly burned. But the rest of the family perished. That's when she returned to live with the elephant herd more or less permanently.«

»*The house was set alight? By whom?*« Sandy asked faintly disturbed – the story rang a bell somewhere.

»*No one knows. But there were rumours that it was done by her daughter's first son. The one she had abandoned.*«

»*The son of the wife beater, you mean?*«

»*Yes, he had drug problems too.*«

»*Who? The father or the son?*«

»*The father.*«

»*So the torching was the work of outsiders?*« Sandy asked feeling strange.

»*That's not what I said. Why do you say that?*« he asked.

»*Oh, I don't know. Something someone once said.*«

»*Well, I don't know. It's not true as far as I know. Who'd do a thing like that?*«

It was getting a little complicated to follow. The jeep jolted bravely along the muddy road.

»*Are the grown up sons still around?*« Erin asked.

»*No, one went a little crazy. The one who lost his wife, parents and young family. They say he joined the army. The older son I don't know about.*«

»*What about his father? The one with the drug problems?*«

»*He's still around. I think he lives in a town not far from here.*«

When they got back, Sandy shook off the story they'd been told and began to carefully examine a flaw in her new designer sandals. Rana watched with a bemused smile on his face.

»*Damn. They cost a packet!*« she swore.

»*You should have bought some real shoes,*« said Erin, smirking.

»*I know! Where's that toddy?*« Sandy poured herself a shot.

»*Want some?*« She held the bottle up, addressing Rana.

»*Why not?*« he said and then, »*Whoa ... Stop!*« as he regretted his rashness. »*It isn't water you know,*« he protested. She had poured out a huge measure.

»*Well! I bought something that looked like a pair of shoes,*« she protested in return, »*Only they're not much use for real feet.*« And she slipped her foot into the flimsy sandal again, taking a tiny sip of toddy.

»*What on earth are you on about?*« Erin asked. »*They're engineered to perfection! They're intended to last only a season – you want to be out of fashion, or what?*«

»*Of course not! We're in a throwaway world with its throwaway products and we are the throwaway people.*«

»*Not to mention its runaway economy and a careering climate. Cheers!*« Erin said clinking her glass with Rana's. »*Things are beeyutifully organized for you, Sandy Rodriguez, so that you can spend more time, earning more money, to buy more shoes. Same time every year – you're guaranteed to be in want! You know the 'Age of Mega Wastage' has been internalized and its existence is now denied. There's no such thing as XS. It all part of the re-cycling to create employment! Yes, absolutely! To create work! To keep consumers running round in circles chasing vanishing goods.*«

»*Great idea! Keeps our brain space vacant. What's wrong with that? What do you think Rana? What do you think we would think about – if we could think?*« Sandy asked.

»*Using your common sense?*« he suggested.

»*Hmmm ... interesting! You forget – we don't need any! We live in an efficiently packaged world and we're jam-packed with comforts, you know! Apart from that our controllers make sure we fulfil what they expect of us. We're expert at subliminal messaging and strategically place requests for conformity to the others, leaving them*

lying about untidily. All we want is more convenience, less effort ... « she explained.

Rana looked perplexed. *»They push you around in the gilded cages they own and convince you that it's you who are 'in charge! You are tolerated because you are a means to an end. Like a milk cow.«*

Erin was astonished by the comment from him. *»You're of course right,«* she said, *»Is it that obvious? It's hard to believe anything's wrong but I think we've had our minds disconnected from the mains some time ago now. Economy air flights, economy destinations, economy dreams. You know they're not my desires. Not my real ones. It's a bit like one of those so-called 'multiple choice' questionnaires you have to compile in examinations –you think it's all there! Fact is the module's structured to limit discussion and restrict the range of answers.«*

»But we've got 'purchasing power', « Sandy protested.

» ... and with every single purchase a little bit more power gets shifted to the side of the power hoarders. If they need to offer, we need to understand why! Capisci?« Erin said, with a friendly little punch at her friend's arm.

»Yeah, funny thing is deep down I do know what's at stake. It gets me so scared I don't do anything. Just keep still and make sure no one difficult gets annoyed with me.«

»Aha!« said the ranger who hadn't said a word for a while, *»You put up with everything, let's say you adapt and then because you can't shield your reality, you actually give it up?«*

One of the tree top monkeys had made its way down to him and was stroking his hand affectionately, looking soulfully into his eyes. He'd only half listened to them quibbling. Dissatisfaction seemed to be their habitual mode. They were

leaving the next day and yet another batch of stressed tourists would arrive, and storm around in direct conflict with the natural world – for all their affluence. He shook his head and rose to go. His mind still dwelt on what they'd told him the day before.

»I guess we won't see you again, Rana,« Erin said half apologising.
»We're planning on leaving early tomorrow. Trekking up the coast a bit before it gets too hot. We'll walk a couple of days and then take a bus straight to the airport. We're flying home at the weekend.«

He was a nice man. They shook hands sadly.

»Well, maybe you'll come back another time when you need a jungle!« he said. *»Now that you know where the wildlife is!«* They watched him drive off in a brown cloud.

Erin stood up decisively a few minutes later saying, determined to act positive.

»I'm going down to the river to sketch the pelicans, Sandy. Are you coming?«

»No, I'm too hot and bothered. I'll stay here and chill out. You go,« said the other moodily.

And so the threesome disbanded. And bereft of his empathetic guardian, the monkey scampered off too.

– THE BIG FISH COMES TO PLAY –

Sandy stood alone on the balcony of the lodge and looked up into the trees at the extended family of monkeys busily occupied with their feeding and mating activities. An intense animal energy emanated from them. At that moment she herself figured in an ancient warning system intrinsic to their survival. *Survival?* Was that all that was being so fiercely guarded? No, not really. Even monkeys had *ideas*. It was sublime.

And the *Homonoids*? *Narmada man*. *Attirampakkam man*. What remained of their ideas? Did they get washed away in the snows while glacier man Otsi slept in the Alps with a tummy full of berries? It seemed to her then that men had let themselves be melted down to a concentrate. Like a run over cat on a motorway in the rain. He'd bartered everything away for the sake of having nothing – and that he now called *convenience*. What would happen if the managers of the state machinery succeeded in taking total command of human evolution as they obviously aspired to and intended to go through with – if no one stopped them?

It was scary, yet the mind was unfathomable. An open door. When on a day of sunshine, you looked deep into a mirror, deep into your own eyes, the world there presented itself sometimes as a realm of radiance. And one that seemed to promise to unveil its secrets. But you never could say how you yourself would respond! There were so many automatic processes. Re-actions. Take that silly song of her father's for example ... sometimes it put her to sleep – other times she

couldn't sleep for not being able to turn it off! His voice from nowhere came uninvited into her head right then with his nonsense song! '... and who do you think was there? The great baboon by the light of the moon was combing his golden... '

Sandy glanced warily into the rafters searching out stray monkeys and gasped out loud! Not a monkey, but a man sat among the rafters quietly watching her. A silver set of teeth glittered. Only his hair wasn't golden, it was jet black. She caught her breath. *Lalith!*

Far in the distance, she could see the figure of Erin getting her brushes and watercolours out briskly – but she'd never hear her if she yelled. And strangely enough, his presence there at that moment seemed kind of inevitable. Truth to tell, somewhere in the back of her head – she'd been expecting him. They were in some kind of play off against each other. And here he was now, in the flesh, drawn by the same secret magnetism it seemed. *Fight or freeze!* It seemed to her that her body temperature dropped several degrees minus zero, into polar caves below the ice shelf where strange fish worms and creatures of earth's dark caves abounded in the absence of the sun. She had just the one reptilian option. Stand fast.

»So, who knocked your teeth out Lalith?« she asked coolly as if they met everyday at a bus stop.

He answered with not the slightest betrayal of emotion. »My father.«

His father. Only the mouth had answered. Yet something nameless issued from his mind, cut right through her outer personality injecting her with a sense of paralysis. She was held fast, hypnotized.

»*Want me to tell you all about it? Make us all feel better?*« A silence rocked her head. »*Say something now, there's a good girl.*«
»*When did you get them – the silver set?*« she mumbled, stupefied by the unpredictability of her own responses.

»*Don't like them?*«

»*I like them.*«

»*I got them for my 21st. My daddy paid for them once when he was in a really good humour. After all, he's the one who knocked them out.*« Dark fumes drifted through his teeth. He'd lit up a reefer.

»*Smoke?*« he offered.

»*No. Thank you.*«

»*Don't smoke anything?*«

»*No, not now.*«

»*Ah. Why not?*«

»*Get too high you can't come down again.*«

»*You need a bit of practice, that's all,*« he said springing down lightly. She backed instinctively away from him.

»*Like Subash?*« she asked. He was momentarily put out but hid it in the next instant, persisting in his languorous way, a smile dancing on his lips.

»*So you don't want me to tell you about it?*«

»*No.*«

»*Then I'll tell you. My father had me when he was around sixteen. I came out kicking because I knew what was waiting for me!*«

Hmmm ... Sandy thought ... very upset. Like Elephas.

»*He beat my mother up so often she ran away from him one day. Only she forgot to take me with her.*«

»*Forgot?*« she asked.

»*She forgot!*« he insisted. Sandy wasn't going to argue.

»*He never wanted me.*«

»*Didn't anyone else?*« she asked innocently enough.

»*Sure. You know who wants the kids.*« Yes, she knew who wanted the kids.

Sandy couldn't look at him for a moment. It struck her out like a missile shield. Had she understood him correctly, through the mocking banter? Surely yes, but she'd better make sure.

»*So who did he pass you on to?*«

»*He kicked me around a bit till I made myself a bit more useful. Some days he sent me out begging. On other days he rented me out to dealers. I used to dance and sing for them in the streets while they did their real business.*«

»*Which was?*«

»*Which was the flower trade.*« "That meant opium – she knew that now.

»*Just the flower trade?*« she asked. He didn't reply immediately.

»*No. Later I went home with some of them.*«

So. That was clear then.

»*Well, at least a nice guy like you wouldn't let anything nasty like that happen to anyone else, would you?*« she said feeling a bitterness rise up within. If he knew, *how could he?* He just looked at her blindly.

»*Couldn't have been that bad,*« she added remorselessly, suspecting that it was the cruellest thing anyone could say to him. Yet, he didn't flinch.

»*Amuse you to be flippant?*« he asked then, leaning against the balcony rail, a little bit winded.

»*No, not really. It's just all so horrible.*« A flicker of animation crossed his face.

»*Still, it hasn't made you any different from them,*« she continued. Just or unjust, an anger had broken out of her.

»Children haven't hurt you! How could you betray them! It was the people you were given to who should have known better.«

»I guess they weren't born as lucky as you,« he suggested.

»No. I guess not.«

»And who cares anyway?«

»You shouldn't let the evil done to you eat into everything you do.«

»Easy to say.«

»Yes, it's easy. It didn't happen to me,« she relented. »Is your father still alive?«

»You could say he's alive – I wish I had the guts to kill him!«

There was a pause in the fray. He stubbed his reefer out.

»He was very young when I was born – he isn't so old now. Want to be introduced? I'll tell him I'm going to marry you.« Now that nearly did make her laugh. The ice cracked suddenly.

»Why would I want to meet him?«

»Kill your curiosity?«

»Tell me first – what's a kid born for? To be drugged by Siri? To be sold by people like you?«

»We've lost out, lady. Look at my brother.«

»I don't know your brother.«

He looked a bit surprised. Then he said, »Ah. He must have forgotten to tell you then. The doped up guy who's so sweet on you? Eyes like diamonds? He's my half-brother. We have the same mother.« Well it wasn't Skelton – he could only mean Subash.

»Seems to wish he'd never been born,« she said to him finally.

»He's got his reasons – someone torched his house,« he said.

»Someone torched his wife and his kids, you mean,« she said watching for his reaction carefully, unsure of everything. Could have been the guy in front of her who had done it.

»His wife, his kids – and his parents,« she said.

He didn't like the way she seemed to be studying him.

»You forget that it was my mother too, who died in the blaze – I was angry with her but I'm not a mother killer. There are all kinds of jokers around anyway,« he said. *»It wasn't any of us ... there were people trying to get the fighting going, set the communities up against each other – to destabilize us all.«*

That was true in a way. Something had been done to set the Sinhala and Tamil at each other's throats.

Did she believe him? She didn't know. His legs twisted into a cramped posture. The ankles wound around each other tightly. She'd have to be crazy to do that!

»Well, seems his father treated him better than yours,« she said mercifully.

»Subash always had the luck!« he said bitterly. *»He always lived with our mother. I got to stick with my dad.«*

He sat there scowling. Where were his thoughts?

»Want to meet him?«

»Subash?«

»No, my father. He's not far. My car's here.«

»Your father? Here, near Arugam Bay?«

»Yes, he lives nearby, in the town I come from.«

It seemed a string of odd coincidences but then on the other hand the island wasn't large.

»Weren't you here looking for us?«

»For you? No! No, it's Subash who's here looking for you. I come up here every week to bring my father his medicine.«

»Medicine?«

»Yeah, our kind of medicine.«

»*So you admit you're sick?*«

»*We all are.*«

There was a pause and then she asked him:

»*How did you know we were here?*«

»*Someone we know told us.*«

»*Who?*«

»*You don't know him – the bangle boy, Vijay. He's our look-out. Fly on the wall. Sees everything.*«

Wading birds stalked curiously around Erin ... she was still sketching by the river.

Then Sandy did one of the insane instinct driven things for which she was notorious. She let caution fly with the wind and decided to chance it. She got into his car and they drove off.

– THE SAND BUG –

The little vehicle scurried over half submerged coastal roads to a town, to people strolling languidly in streets slowly fading into shadow. Hopper vendors had just set up their evening stalls and flat rice pancakes piled up in little towers. The car came to a reluctant standstill. Lalith got out slamming the door violently. Calming himself he opened the passenger door for Sandy. They entered a ramshackle shopping arcade and threaded their way cautiously through a maze of stalls to a textiles shop where gaudy saris hung. A door at its rear led through a gambling den to a damp turquoise tunnel where the saltpetre built up in a slow crust on thick layers of peeling gloss paint. At the end of it was a room. A dingy room where someone sat bundled on a bed, a dark heap among tormenting flies. He stirred as they entered, wrapping his rags around his wasted body. Even in the dimness you could see the white flash of his fishlike eyes.

He curled into a ball on the bed and beat a tense fist against the headboard a number of times. A harsh volley of Tamil words broke out with the reek of an unclean mouth. They were the first words of greeting from the lotus eater – Lalith's father.

She stole a glance at the target of the abusive address. What colours did he reflect down here in that wet cave away from warmth? He seemed to have turned into something translucent, lizard like, sweating in icy shivers of anguish, cowering before the withered man. The suave and languorous child vendor had evanesced.

»*What does he say?*« she asked quietly. He looked down at the floor humiliated.

»*I told him you weren't a customer. He wants to know what I brought you here for then? What shall I tell him?*«

»*Tell, him I asked to see the man for whom you tried to sell my daughter.*«

Lalith opened his mouth in protest. But before he could there was an eruption on the bed. Some exploding grey matter of the mind. Another show of fireworks.

»*Well, now you've seen him. You tell him!*« With a parting look at the broken being unravelling on the bed, Lalith threw a parcel down and fled from the room. Sandy followed him out. They left the place and jostled through crowding pedestrians to the parked car and got in.

Lalith had his face averted.

»*You said you were going to introduce us!*« She was trying to make him suffer. As if he didn't already!

»*I didn't know she was your child,*« he said through what were flowing tears.

»*So now you do!*« Still, she beat down on him.

»*What's the beautiful dreamer back there called?*« she asked scornfully.

»*Rumesh.*« he said turning the ignition key. *Rumesh?* The name had left tracks in her memories.

»*I once had a Tamil servant boy called that – when I was five. Ran away when he was fourteen.*« Light eyes too, she thought.

»*Where does he come from?*« she asked intrigued.

»*The high country.*«

»*How old is he?*«

»*Nearly forty,*« he answered, steering away from the waves reaching across the road, leaving behind long trails of frizzy surf.

»*Looks more like sixty.*«

»*That's what happens when you do what he does.*«

»*Could have been my Tiffin boy.*«

»*Maybe he was. Does it matter?*« They had stopped before the entrance to the hunting lodge. Their eyes met. It was time for that stand down.

»*Lalith.*«

»*Sandy?*«

»*You don't sell people.*«

»*No? Who says?*«

»*I do.*«

»*Well, I've been sold.*«

»*Well, don't do it back. It's up to you.*«

»*Easy for you to say.*«

»*Not so easy. We get our share.*«

»*Of what?*«

»*Disillusion.*«

»*Not like me.*«

Like steady shell fire. Or a hard rain. Then it quietened.

»*No, maybe not like you. But who's fault is it? Mine, maybe? It was in my home that he once slept, you know. On the floor in the other room. He's Rumesch, my errand boy.*«

»*You sure it's him?*«

»*Yes, I'm sure. I used to have to follow him home from school. He rode around me on his bike jeering all the while. I remember now. But he stopped me being afraid. Imagine!*«

»*So why did he run away from your family?*«

»Looking for a life, I guess. We didn't offer him much of one, did we?«

»Didn't find another one either, did he?«

»No, but he got you.«

»Lucky him! So what did I do wrong? His father was a European planter. A civilizer.«

»And his mother a Tamil coolie. A bonded labourer.«

»Where does it all start?«

»Where does it all stop?«

He was silent.

»The butt stops at us. It's the single power we can wield.«

He looked at her for a long while. Then he said,

»I'll think about it.«

»Good night,« she said placing a kiss on his sad cheek.

– EYELESS CAVE FISH –

It was late when he dropped her off. The pupil of an eye contracted to a pin-point of ferocity. Crouching in the undergrowth, a cheetah watched Lalith drive away.

And Erin? Erin was on the warpath! There was going to be another sundown showdown alright.

»How could you Sandy? You shouldn't have! With him of all people! Without telling me! Anything could have happened to you!«

»You shouldn't have done this! You shouldn't have done that! It's always the same! I just felt really sorry for him suddenly. That's all!«

»You did what?«

»I felt sorry for him – know who Lalith is?«

»No, of course not. How on earth should I know that?«

»Son of my old servant boy.«

»Really? You had a servant?« Erin's ice blue eyes widened.

»You take someone off the streets, give them food and shelter. They go shopping for you, do a few odd jobs in return. That's a servant boy.«

»Cuts a fine line between charity and exploitation.«

»And you know who else he is?«

»No, but I could make some inspired guesses.«

»Go ahead then! Guess!«

»Well, let me think « It'd have to be a process of elimination

There was one secret Erin was dying to unravel, so she said

»Well ... he's not Shantini's dad...« Now, that was below the belt!

Sandy flushed, caught off guard. No one, but absolutely no one was ever going to get that information out of her!

»Come on, tell! You're playing dangerous games.«
»Isn't everyone?«
»No. But we are.«
»We? You too?«
»Come on Sandy! Time to shed your old snakeskin. What have you found out about Lalith?«
»Subash is his half brother,« she conceded abruptly.

Erin was dumbfounded. »Obvious somehow, once you know,« was what she said.

»OK. And now what's Shantini's dad's name?« It was useless, she was relentless. Sandy took a deep breath.

»Nikos,« she said.

»Well done. Please go on.« It was horrendous! She sounded like a therapist.

»What can I tell you? It's like forcing someone to look at your old holiday snaps!« Sandy protested. But Erin looked adamant, so she continued,

»I met him in Cyprus. Del was accompanying some diplomat. It was his son. Bad mistake. I was in a bit of a dream.«

»But you never dreamt he'd let you down?«

»No, not all the way.« Erin looked reproachful.

Sandy defended herself, »It's so hard to live in a state of constant distrust. I don't know that I even want to!« she blurted out.

»Maybe, but then there's the heavy duty to pay. Was he maybe one of those people who can't give themselves a pass mark?'

»I don't know. He seemed to have a lot of things to prove.«

»Sounds original. Fast cars and lonesome girls?«

»He took a few of those along for the ride.«

»How long were you together?«

»A couple of months.«

»That's next to no time. It must have been tough on you getting the child.«

»Oldest story in the book. I should have known better. Tough, yes.«

»What happened next?«

»Nothing happened. He just broke off contact when I told him I was going through with it.«

»What do you mean?«

»Moved luxury flat and changed his phone number.«

Erin reassumed her tough front.

»Happens,« she said stiffly.

»It's called Love,« Sandy said.

»Didn't you try to talk to him round later?«

»No, of course not. He blew it. You know me. I get cosmic messages. No need to shout.«

»Maybe you should check back?«

»Can't. Things got settled. He tipped his Masserati over a cliff by Limassol a few years back.«

»Nice one.«

Stars glistened among the foliage like jewels. Discharged like laden raindrops after a sudden shower, the talk stopped, sinking into a substrata somewhere in the consciousness. What could a body say?

Waves of impatience, distrust and turbulent emotion subsided.

»Thanks for telling,« Erin finally said. There was no response from Sandy, apart from a slight nod. Caught up in the play of starlight, they looked up into the jungle night feeling as if they were the first beings that had ever wandered earth. The far

lights seemed to signal. All the yearning in the world, everything unreachable seemed to be up there. From stardust to earth's dust. Astral longing.

After a while Sandy said *»It's timeless. Makes me feel ancient looking up there. No beginnings no ends.«*

»And no answers,« Erin said, letting out all the breath in her where silent brooding things stirred. *»Life is overwhelming.«*

»Who named the stars long ago?« Sandy asked.

»Desperate people.«

»Like us?«

»Like us. What else was there to do?«

»See that constellation over there? It's Hydra, the water snake. Covers a third of the southern sky.«

»How do you know?«

»My friend the Tamil sailor told me.«

»Hasn't he got a name?«

»Yes. It's Noah.«

»As in Ark? Two of each species. One male. One female. The last chance?«

»Seems like we've been here before.«

»Seems like we've got to go all the way back.«

»He was in the merchant navy. Lives his life like a ship afloat, calling but never stopping.«

»The Navy! Can you imagine how that began? Galley slaves with no choices, shackled by men with a mission, battling from port to port exporting the grand imperial dream somewhere people didn't want it! Outsourcing the hang ups and the non-workable mind garbage. Sextants and compasses, tolls, rules, cannons and maritime law put to

work to order other equal entities around with. You know, humans created hell.«

»Yes, it's us who make nightmares real. Hope any budding generations of spacemen go about things differently if we get into any interplanetary relationships.«

»Sad chance. It's B.A.U. – Building As Usual up there. They've already started naming it, claiming it forever and sticking ugly little flags all over the place!«

»Seriously insane folk we are stuck among, Erin.«

»Yeah, well, seems not a lot we can do about it except get out as fast as possible ... Like that Danish guy said: 'I'd never have come if I'd known!'«

»Tourists shipped out to a war zones to keep the turnover ticking? Don't they give a damn if we die?«

»Nope. Converts to currency. Convicts went to colonies in Tasmania, and it's a one way ticket to Pluto for anarchists.«

That comment worried Sandy a bit. »Trouble is that hard-baked hunger for Heaven,« she said.

»Humppph! Tough!« said Erin.

»You know what Liutha, that fisherman at Unuwatuna said to me once?«

»No, tell me.«

»'The pursuit of happiness', he said, – 'What has happiness to do with pursuit? Pursuit is a stress condition.'«

»We certainly do it to ourselves,« Erin said, »Running after carrots and putting each other under pressure to confirm that we truly love racing after our tails, when we should be addressing the quandary we're in.«

»Guess we invented God to avoid that.«

»Clever guy, your fisherman. So how come he's a fisherman?« Erin asked then.

»Got fished up in someone's net. Now it's his lot to be still scratching in the dirt for his drinking water according to court verdict.«

»He say anything else?«

»I asked him 'What keeps you going?' And he replied, 'It's like fighting off a disease. One day we may recover.'«

'What makes the sickness thrive?' I asked him. 'The lack,' he answered. 'Lack? Lack of what?' I asked him, 'Money?' 'No, distance,' he replied. 'Distance from the disease.'«

»Quarantine,« Erin said with a sigh as she turned to Sandy with a serious face. »I guess he meant it's impossible not to be pulled in. About social infection ... I've been meaning to say something to you ... about keeping a safe distance.« She hesitated awkwardly, continuing, »I wish you wouldn't go anywhere near either of the two brothers again. They spell trouble.«

A helpless little shrug had been the response from Sandy. She burrowed her bare feet into the soil. Like a bull? Or an ostrich? A shot of Gaelic courage crept into Erin.

»You're thinking like a child – one that picks up birds that have fallen out of their nests in springtime. You've got to understand that you can't help.«

»Maybe you're right. Maybe it is like picking up a wounded bird. But what if no one ever does?«

Erin softened a bit. It was after all the childlike quality in Sandy that she loved. She got herself hurt nine times out of ten, but still she didn't turn cunning or start hating. »I can't say. I guess it's right to accept people even when they seem broken and wasted, but it's a bad idea to make a habit of it. That's all. I wish you'd think about it ... «

A cool wind drifted around their campfire and sparks combusted with tiny explosions. *Icy virgin queen in her shroud*, thought Sandy resentfully. And then she spoke about something that had been in the back of her head a long while. Something that had always puzzled her – about Erin.

»*You're not at all keen on men, are you, Erin?*« she asked softly. Nothing broke the silence but the calling of faraway owls in contact with their kind. Faint veins appeared beneath Erin's eyes. Thin blue rivers froze in a taut, still face.

»*I suppose I'm not,*« she said quietly. The words seemed to have journeyed galaxies to be uttered. Erin got up and walked away and Sandy thought of the chirpy cricket she'd been watching earlier – suddenly crushed, dragging a long broken leg behind it. She sat there wondering which nerve she had touched upon. *Erin*. Beautiful head-turning, alluring Erin. So strong, so cold, and somehow so inviolate. She'd never known her to have had a boyfriend. She withdrew the questions that were forming in her mind to the forgotten realms, lost in her own shadows. If you went too near a person, you got caught up in the air they exhaled, your actions mingled because you were part of their mind. Friendships formed where people managed to keep a controlled distance from each other avoiding collision. Erin had withdrawn in hurt. What was the matter? After a while, she went to search her out and found her swinging in a hammock, staring with unseeing eyes into a book she held in front of her in the darkness. She'd been crying. You could tell.

»*You know,*« Sandy began, »*I wanted to tell you about Lalith ...* « She related to her then where she'd been and what she'd seen. How she'd seen Rumes, buried living in the damp room at the end of the tunnel. When Sandy's story stopped, Erin slipped to

the floor in her bare feet and walked over to the balcony rail moving like a sleepwalker. Then she said:

»You know, Sandy – Me and Lalith, we've more in common than you think.«

What could she have in common with him?

»He hates his father and ... I hate my father.« She was very still then. *»For the same reasons.«*

The silence was beginning to sing and Erin's eyes were freezing in on her. For the same reasons?

A voice in the darkness continued, *»I could tell you about the way it was when I was young and it would take me a long, long time. But I guess I'll spare you the details.«* She stopped right there, letting the sparse information sink in.

The words seemed to be saying something hideous. They spun Sandy round and gave her body a blow. She didn't want to understand them. She averted her gaze and looked at the floor. *Will Liscannor? Like Hartmut? Wet things were trickling, splashing onto the floor. Erin broke the tension of the moment. She smiled her smile that melted icebergs.*

»Hey! Don't cry, Sandy. It's pointless. More things we can't change. Not you and I anyway.«

She pulled her friend to her and hugged her.

»We're always the helpless watchers,« Sandy said. *»We can't protect anyone, not even ourselves.«*

»Yes, well maybe that's because we're up against almost everyone – even our own parents.«

– UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER –

Subash gazed through the dark window of the derelict lighthouse, heard the prehistoric sea crashing restlessly. Saw the ghost of a face in the broken glass pane. It was his own face. There were no doors in the edifice but Subash couldn't leave, imprisoned by the intricacies of the maze created in his mind. He was waiting once again for his half brother Lalith – to bring him what he craved.

He'd accompanied him on his weekly journey to Rumesh – something he had never done before. Lalith never failed to go to the withered wreck, hanging fire for his opiates. Why had he gone along this time? Yes, why? And then he remembered ... slowly.

It was because he knew his brother and he knew that he didn't take chances. Someone had been getting loose-tongued with the police about his doings. Lalith knew who it was and where they were. And since he did, well, they certainly were in danger. Maybe he intended to do something about it.

The trouble with Lalith was that he could go very far and he didn't remember anything about it afterward. You couldn't see the madness enter him until it was too late. Things had always been that way. It slowly came back to Subash why he'd come – *to stop him.*

How did Lalith find out where they were? That was the easy part! He'd already explained it to Sandy – it was Vijay, the bangle boy who had told. When Subash had forgotten (for the fourth time) to deliver the silk threaded friendship bangles to

be sold at the uptown boutique, Vijay had become very annoyed! Subash was dead – unreliable! He decided to hop on the bus and deliver the items himself, worn out sarong or not! That's when he'd spotted the two tourists get on at the lagoon stop through his half closed eyes. Was it his fault if he had a long nose? Where were they off to? Ah, there was the one Subash had been running after ... everyone knew that of course. Because the eyes were always watching at their resort. Fat chance he had! Yes, then some French tourists had boarded and the two British holiday makers had hopped off. Vijay had even followed them a bit. On his return trip he'd bumped into his friend Nihal. They squatted outside the rail depot for a long time noting the comings and goings, smoking skinny beedies, winding and re-draping their comfy sarongs as was their wont. And it was Nihal who was able to tell Vijay about everyone who had headed eastward on the train that day. Not so difficult to find out where to exactly in a two horse provincial town with one railway station! So later on, when Lalith asked, Vijay knew. It was useful to have a little extra information to give Lalith. He usually paid you back generously for any favours you offered.

So here was Subash in a cold sweat. Or was it a hot sweat? He wasn't sure any more. The person he had come to fear most was himself. He was helpless before the reckless, deaf thing that preyed inside like a hungry animal. He'd turned into a coward and he didn't have the courage to admit it to that ghostly face in the mirror. He'd arrived with his brother a day or two before. Lalith had gone off, poking around asking questions near the game sanctuary as to the whereabouts of Erin and Sandy. But he couldn't get a careless word out of Ranasinghe, the forest ranger. And the local watchers under him followed his example, keeping silent. But he'd found them all the same. Lalith could always do things like that!

Oh yes, he knew his half-brother well. He knew all about those limits he never exercised, those rages he never curbed. Faith in none, man or beast. He'd learned the workings of cruelty, gleaning that it was a quality the weak admired and responded to with humility. Men envied him for his absence of pity. Women for the inhumanity which made him untouchable. Yet, if you knew his story, could you condemn him?

The man-eaters in the jungle of life – brother Lalith dined with them, not he Subash. And why not? Because he felt himself womanly, prone to attacks of emotion, the tears of a child. He couldn't slice out the horror in the cool way his brother seemed able to do and his sensitivity shamed him. Like Lalith, he too had his reasons. Things had happened. Terrible things. Both his parents had been in the burning house. Only his wife's mother had escaped, running out with her long hair on fire. His own parents, overcome by the smoke, had perished.

There'd been the loss of Kanthi his childhood sweetheart from the village near his home. In their three years together she'd given him twins. A tiny tearful girl. And a perfect little boy with a head full of black curls. Mini everything. Hands, feet and genital organs. He'd hardly comprehended their existence when they were destroyed and the place he'd had built for a future reduced to ashes. There'd been communal riots at the time. And then all his memory curled away and lay in a smouldering heap. He tried to revive the embers, restore it all to a place in his life - but it didn't work. The charred human remains had been cleared by the authorities and he'd been moved like a sick man to an uncle's home where he sat two weeks staring into space. He had never returned anywhere near the area where they had lived. If one could kill oneself by will he may have done it. But his pain wound deep inside and dug a

grave. The atrocity needled into his anguish and remained the only idea left to him. He lived like a corpse in the wind.

One day he joined the army. He never had to ask himself 'Why?' It was because he knew that the living didn't matter there. One could begin the dying processes. No need to hold onto anything. A long descent into the labyrinths.

Subash had seen men go almost gladly forward to meet death. No power on earth seemed able to stop them. There were strange tasks to savour, lusts to quench. There were men who killed publicly, extrovertly with relish. He saw how it drew them, toyed with them, disposed of them. You waded into death and became transfigured into divinity when it refused to take you, a deathless being to be feared like a force of nature. The proud became subservient. People capitulated, allowed you to hurt them, defile them.

The troops were guided by their 'superiors', choice man-slaughterers every one of them. Alpha dogs who turned loose the hounds in their pack and showed them who to devour. *Cut out the woman in you!* the soldiers yelled. If you didn't you'd soon see how they treated you. The girl in the squad! No man wanted to be touched like that.

Hygienic, mechanical murder. The army was a mincing machine and always had been. It used every last drop of blood it drained, got itself a good price for the flesh and flogged the carcass too. A soldier was a tool of silver-tongued investors who could sell you the emptiness in your own belly. Nevertheless, with the passing of time, even severe psychological shock wears down and he began to take account of his own actions. And that was when he sank among the petals of the soft white powders of the flowers of oblivion.

Deaths beyond Subash were calling to him. He thought he was stepping into madness. But he stepped anyway.

What was to be done about Lalith? The bad energies possessing them both were of a past, nestled among things that had once been. But how could they be undone? Hope lay ahead but Subash looked behind.

He was becoming obsessive about Lalith, beginning to see him everywhere, the backseat passenger in every car that drove by, the deeper shadow in the contours of a crag or cliff. Lalith's was the hand that held the rope being placed around a man's neck. Something dangling on the gallows breeze.

Who had torched his home? Was it Lalith as so many had said? And who had set his heart on fire? When Lalith told him he'd seen Sandy the day before, something like a raw jealousy began to gnaw at Subash. The time had come when the demons would break out.

A trick of time? Trick of the light? A window of black waves had risen, and then a shooting star. The night was clear, the waters swirled in a strange eddy. And then he saw the fish, circling in the shallows ... like birds of prey. The swordfish had come to battle, not to find new breeding grounds but to search out the deep, wounding, haunted places. He opened the door and went out onto the deserted scrubland, a ghostly thing of matter no longer vivified. As his feet crushed the pebbles, he heard the panther tread of soft leather soles on the stone pier behind him. Warily he cast his eyes over his shoulder to meet that mysterious pair of catlike eyes: Lalith walked in his footsteps. Their gazes fused and an ancient anger ignited in Subash. He threw his full weight upon his brother, his eyes

a-glitter. Lalith staggered backwards and fell with a crash. Subash pulled out a dagger.

As the moon rose the two half-brothers wrestled. One of them broke free of a vice like grip and fled into the lighthouse. Moments later a body crashed through flimsy window panes, through space and fell long till it hit water with a flat thud.

– FAINT WHITE DWARFS –

A mile distant, Sandy shivered. *»What was that?«*
»What?« Erin asked. *»A crow walked over your grave?«*

»Oh, nothing. I thought I heard a cry. Maybe a gull. I don't know. A gong in my head. Boing!«

»Ah, the schizophrenic voices.« Erin muttered, *»I'll have to get you to a shrink soon ...«*

Immersed in their dialogues, bouncing words against each other like dancing waters that came buoyantly forward and lapsed in a quiet emptied ebb tide. They'd been in and out of the warm seas all day dipped in a turquoise so vivid you'd think it would dye their bodies blue. Something older, deeper was slipping out from beneath the skin, shifting the brittle surface of their womanly solidarity. They had dug deeper past the restful releases of laughter. Defensive barriers fell away like shed snakeskin, a burkha for daily wear disappeared to reveal the complexity of the subsurface structure of two highly skilful creators of personae.

Skeleton of a dead bird, driftwood, an old tree root. Up the endless glitter of the coast, wandering amid perishable things that had once held life in them. Minerals, stones, fossils disintegrating, morphing. They stopped to lay themselves flat out among the sands. It was going to be a dry, warm night.

»Ursa Major,« Sandy said. *»It never was a teddy bear, you know. Or a ploughshare. Join the dots and you get one massive question mark. Eternal Life – would you want it?«* Sandy asked.

»No, not I,« Erin replied. »The endlessness would weigh me down. The infinite, empty, space.«

Sandy could understand that – it was the Emptiness that wearied a soul, the waiting over the centuries, the searching in a void from which no contact ever came.

»... You know, I'm not who I was when I began this trip ... « her companion continued, »I'll never be that person again. The one who walked down a city street one winter's evening and bought herself a poisoned chalice – allured by the scent of a dream existence. A last-minute escape! Now I know that dreams are not for fulfilling, they're for vanishing away.

They rented me an allocation of palm trees for such and such a period of time, so and so many square feet of white sands, plus a sea view, linen for my bed and food to still my hunger. I could take it on or take it back.

You know how I felt as I left that airport? That world of smooth talking pretence? The whole illusion folded in upon itself. They'd sold me a ticket and I strolled into a war zone. And what people said was oh, don't worry, it's forever on the news reels!

So what's with losing my one life? I started to see real people around me who were badly hurt. An emaciated man as thin as a shoot, blood on a bandana, a crazed mumbling head. A cripple using his hands to push himself along the street on a bit of board. A street waif who'd been mutilated so that she could bring more money begging. My brother man stood beside me for the first time, his fingernails torn back, naked, bloody and broken. He crawled his way along a black pavement caked in bird shit. Blood. Dirt. Excrement.

And I? I was 'on holiday' from an empty 'economic reality'. A taxpayer and a purchaser, washed up on a beach, clean of fault, in someone else's country. I tried to tell myself that it had nothing to do with me - but I was lying.«

With that she turned to Sandy. »Who made us? Who taught us?
What are we?«

»Know what your name means, banshee?«

»Yes, Ire land. The land of anger.«

»Or maybe you're one of the Erinyes – Allecto, Tisiphone or Meg-
era. The Furies that pursue evildoers. Or maybe Erin stands for
Erinnerung – Remembrance. It's what the god Aton did. He re-
membered. He reassembled his dismembered limbs and re-set. Put his
memory chips together.«

»Memories unstrung? So what's been forgotten?«

»Ever seen a tray full of newborns in hospital on one of those stainless
steel trolleys, Erin, little name tags on their wrists so they don't get
mixed up? Once the germination of ideas has been stamped out, we
wreck the creative system of the new arrival. Our mind set is always
set at threat level. We're afraid of the child.«

»You're getting close. Why?«

»Might ask you who you are.«

»Don't I want to know?«

»Maybe you do know. That's why you're afraid.«

»Afraid. Afraid of what?«

»The void.«

»But what use is a mind if people now believe that having one is some
kind of a hindrance?«

»They stay numb. Doesn't matter. Knowledge won't die away.
Infinity is reality. If the universe wanted us thrown out of it there's
not a lot you could do about it.«

»You know, I sometimes think that if there were any chance at all of
breaking out of this confusion, people would stampede.«

»One of us breaking out, would be a beginning. I don't think many of
the others would follow. We may be equal but we're not all the same.«

»So what does your name mean?«

»Alessandra? Al Iskandariya. Arabic. Don't know. Doesn't matter. Fact is I have no name. Nor have you.«

They went down to the water's edge and waded in. Two craniums afloat in a crystalline sea of night. Spaces of eternity, spirits crashing, shattering. Onto the wave crests came dazzling fish. Birds of spray rose from the waters. They might have been long dead. It seemed that the stars broke out of the sky. And there far among the studded stars, a wave rose above them carrying something in its bulk, dissolved it among the surf flowers. What was it? A human body? A flying fish? The wall of water eddied again and curled inward on itself in a vortex. And then they saw him dancing in the moonlight, laughing in the wind, riding on the crest: *A wild, wet child inside a towering wave.*

Night crashed down around them and Sandy sank down caught below in a swirl of the tide. She was swivelled up again, gasping for breath, but she was not alone as she rose. She slowly realized that a human form had materialized in her arms. She held it horrified, unbelieving. Erin pushed it upward from below and they dragged out onto the beach a body, crumpled in a heap of broken bone. Erin raised an arm that flopped back lifeless. Shook him gently to. He came to slowly. An ebony face. The dark eyes glittered as he turned in silent sufferance. *Subash!*

They tried artificial respiration, pumping his sodden lungs. He coughed and blood flowed, indigo in the moonlight. But he was slipping away fast, in and out of consciousness, at times beyond recall. Salt tears fell by the bitter sea while they tried keep him in their world.

He shivered in the harsh throes of pain. Found himself hysterically tangled up inside the towels they bundled round him. There was a presence with him. He seemed to come to briefly. A cruel laugh broke from somewhere deep inside him.

»*Watch out for Lalith ...* « he choked, spitting out his little clots of blood, »*Don't believe anything he says ...*«

»*He found us, Subash,*« Sandy said knowing they were running out of time. »*I've been to see Rumes. I know what's been happening,*« she said very slowly. The words were calmative. Sandy watched the sleeping face drifting in and out of consciousness. He seemed to be speaking to her all the same although his wonderful dark eyes never opened and the lips did not move.

» ... *I came here to stop Lalith – you don't know him! Things have never been right with him. We were fighting in the wind ... a demon took hold of me. A great anger made me invincible. No one could have stopped me. Lalith understood it and backed away. He ran up the stairs to the top of the lighthouse and I was close on his heels.*

I almost had him then! But I didn't reach him. He seemed to be lifted up and thrown through the lighthouse window. He went crashing onto the rocks below. For a while I gloated. It was hideous. Feelings of triumph filled me because I thought I had beaten him, killed him even. And I felt happy! But as I stood there looking from the window I heard him moaning. And a great sea of pity flooded my heart.

He's my brother. Was it I who had hurled him into the fields of death, thrown him out to be eaten by the paraw? What did that make me? There was a boat, I knew it! We had parked his car by it. I felt wings on my feet. I flew down the stairway, found the boat, started the motor and steered out towards the deep waters where he had fallen from the window. Somewhere he was screaming, but perhaps he could still be reached. Then I saw him. He was being carried out by a swift current.

The sea was battling wildly for him, dragging him away. It seemed hopeless but then suddenly, nothing else mattered to me but that he prevailed against the forces set against him. I whipped the motor onto maximum and sped toward him and threw a lifebelt out. When I got near enough to haul him out he seemed to get a boost of energy. He dragged me out of the boat into the water and crawled on himself as it pulled away. Then he turned the engine off and attacked me with an oar that lay there. He was covered in blood. When I went under for the third time he took off, giving me up for vanquished. I was floating out there. Like a strand of seaweed. It seemed I floated for a long, long time ... My memory is back now. I remember everything. I saw everything that was happening, everything that had happened and there was nothing I wanted any more. That's when you lifted me out, Sandy.»
His eyes, though distant, seemed to caress the girl.

»*It is the day of my death,*« Subash was mumbling again faintly in the real world.

»*Subash! Don't talk like that!*« Sandy cried out on the verge of hysteria. Erin sat cocooned in the calm presence of her mind. What did a person have to do at a time like this? First aid? Too late for that. The guy was crushed internally. Together they tried to place him very carefully into a lateral safety position, in case he swallowed his tongue or worse. But his command structure seemed to be closing down. He couldn't respond to any of their requests but kept blabbering in an incoherent way. What was he on about? »*I say it because I know it ... I remember what is coming ...* « He was rambling again, addressing unseen others. They couldn't make out what he was saying ... after a while he seemed less frantic. He was unconscious.

»*We shouldn't move him, we'll have to wait for light.*«

»*You stay with him. We need a stretcher. I'll start walking now.*«

»*Where to?*«

»*Back where we came from.*« Erin stood up to go convinced that there must be help around nearby.

»*That child... was he real, Sandy? You saw him too didn't you?*«

»*I'm not sure now what I saw! Wait till sunrise, Erin.*«

»*Lalith's car must be at the lighthouse.*«

»*The road's rocky. We'll go looking for help as soon as it's light.*«

»*Where is Lalith now? He can't be in good shape either.*«

»*No. But then he never was.*«

Subash was babbling again ... »*Lalith my brother – Lalith and I ... you say you know where he is...?*«

»*No. No, we don't. There's no one around. Just us. There was a little kid about, but I don't know where he is now.*«

»*A kid?*«

»*Yes. A little blue kid.*«

They tried to keep him talking. »*Do you know we were speaking about you just a little while before we found you?*«

»*What were you saying?*«

»*We wondered what you were doing.*«

»*And what was I doing?*«

»*You were looking out of a dark window.*«

»*I was in the lighthouse. Up there! He pushed Lalith out!*«

»*Who?*«

»*The child that lives in the sea. Look there he is!*«

They looked. A faint light seemed to emanate from the derelict lighthouse, scanning the waves. There was no one to see. »*Don't you see him?*« he persisted.

»*No. There's no one there, Subash.*«

»*He pushed Lalith out of the window! He pushed me out of the boat!*«

»*What were you doing up there?*«

»I was begging. Begging the sea spirits to dash me onto the rocks. Crack me open and wash me away. No one needed to know.«

»No one? Maybe we did?«

»Why should you care?«

»I don't know.«

»And why did that child push you?« Sandy wanted to know.

»Because my brother and I ... we offend the spirits of this place.«

Then he became very quiet and still. The bright night breezes blew. Erin turned away. It was clear to her that he wasn't going to make it through. Life was over for Subash. He'd already put his shoes on for the mystery journey. She pulled Sandy to her. They lay in a heap of three as the colours of night deepened.

When morning broke, a long while later, a sound came drifting ... *»Sadhu Sadhu Sadhu Satmaya «*... across the tangled waters. The waves seemed to resonate in the same frequency. The gentle chains of the chant reached out as the sun rose. He sat still as stone on the cool sands. A mendicant monk in orange robes among the white dawn rays. As they gazed at him in wonder, he turned as if he had been waiting for them to awaken. The small blue child sat by his side.

The man stood up. A smile passed over his face as he walked over toward them and the shattered body. The child raced on ahead of him and neither sad nor happy, knelt by Subash for a few seconds. Then he ran off. The Sannyasi lay his hands upon the body of Subash and began to incant in a low dirge. The world grew warm and among the beating of drums, a distant procession materialized, making its way towards them. A troupe of dancers, a gray gold elephant and the old Vedic medicine woman mounted on his back, swaying in a trance under a bright palanquin. The great blind beast settled his weights slowly onto the sands and she climbed down.

Maharani joined the monk and began to chant softly too. As the old woman's hands touched him, Subash stirred. A moment later he was gone.

– A BURIAL IN THE SKY –

A strange, wild mood reigned by the ruined lighthouse on the remote headland. There had been a second body washed up upon the beach earlier that morning. A few of the coastal folk had seen it and done nothing to retrieve it because it had been partially consumed by carnivorous fish. The body of Lalith had been carried out again by the tide.

And like Skelton, Sandy and Erin had missed their flight home.

Women from the nearby shanty town arrived, wrapped their ragged clothes around themselves and waited. They built a driftwood pyre for the body of Subash. They fasted. That night the corpse was burned, consumed by air in that far place. Buried in the sky.

During the days that followed the shanty town dwellers offered them food and gave them shelter in their sandy homes. The sea heaved and rallied round with ceaseless restless energy. The two brothers were known by all and news of the tragedy spread by word of mouth. Alms were given by the villagers. Sandy and Erin went to help prepare the packets of food to be distributed to all who came. Who would have thought so many would? Perhaps the birds had told. Or the sea child. The mystery child stayed through it all, his clear, all-seeing eyes darting here and there. He followed every thing, seating himself cross-legged right before them watching every move keenly. The faintest smile lingered upon his full red lips. What was he doing there like the wild birds, far from the world of people. How did he live? What did he drink, eat? Wish? Could he die?

It was their third day in the shanty town.

»*Who is that child?*« Sandy finally asked the Sadhu.

The monk had been preparing an offering of fruit and flowers. He looked around about him, puzzled.

»*What child?*« he asked. He was sitting right there! Sandy and Erin looked at each other. No, he wasn't tricking them. Could it really be that the man could not see him – the little blue one? But Subash had seen him too! The small child smiled, faintly amused. He stood up and made to run off. Sandy rose as in a dream to follow him. It was the darkest hour in daylight, the noon hour when the sun reaches its burning zenith and tips over, beginning its fall through the heavens.

He'd reached the water's edge.

»*Enna Nangi! Enna Nangi!*« sang the child, splashing into the ocean. It meant '*Come, little sister*'. And down he swam ...

Down into the vanishing sea, distilling its essences, sparkling in air. Bowing low to the Poya day, for that night the full moon would swim like a golden fish in the bright sea again. And dolphins sing on the reef. Lean men would skim over the southern waters in frail boats. For these were the nights of the fishers.

Faraway on the western coast, Gunna laughed joyous and threw out his rod. Liutha tweaked his ear and made a joke. A squid spurted a dark fountain from its inky defences into his eye, a large turtle paddled by pitching his catamaran, tossed his wet body into the surf flowers. A frail balancing on the boundaries of being. Caught in the vast nets of life, thrown far and fiercely, beached by the tides. Taken as the sea willed, held in a gentle play. While soft the Buddha dreamed among the waves, his song of multitudes.

A human form set in rock beyond all worldly sorrow, the Sannyasi began to chant. *'Help humans live in the world by resisting and avoiding killing, refraining from eating flesh, showing sympathy towards life, honouring the male or female, protecting motherhood, and sacred sources of survival, such as cattle.'*

How sure his fine voice sounded, a music stored within called to the universe. An old song from a bird's throat. Streaming thoughts from the Indus valley. The song of the human river that steadfastly wound its way on. A river of experience that had learned the routes into oceans. To a world beyond injury. He repeated his verses, wrapped his prayer items in a cloth and stood up to leave. It was over.

Or was it? It was always said that the orchards of Paradise held many trees. Among them a tree of knowledge, a tree of conscience of right and wrong and the tree of all living seeds. Three trees and three rivers: Styx of death. Lethe of forgetfulness. And ... *Mnemosyne of remembrance.*

Words of Maria Montessori entered Sandy's head: *'Events, distant in history though they are, one from the other, give us proof that these revelations of the children are natural phenomena, which generally remain unseen and unknown. This also proves to us that if they remain hidden and unseen, there must be certain conditions which are adverse to their manifestation. The children are generally in conditions that allow only fleeting glimpses of the manifestation of these phenomena of a deeper nature. Moreover, the conditions under which such phenomena can manifest themselves are Unknown ...'*

And the spinning disc of sun began to swing in Sandy's head like a great pendulum. From Never to Forever it traversed. Radiant spikes of energy reached out and touched behind her eyes. She felt an irresistible urge. She found herself walking

toward the monk. She just couldn't let him vanish away. He turned to her. Were they not her own eyes that shone in his? She knew this man. She was sure she knew him! *But who was he?*

A great patience moved him and he sat down again on the sands and in the steady sphere of her eyes and with no prompt, began to speak.

»Words can not explain us – if that is what you want to know. We are an idea in a mind, safe because we are in spirit, intangible and unassailable by each other, invisible to all. Our mind resides in the non-world of non-matter.«

»And what of the black holes of sorrow, of nothingness where hearts break?« Sandy asked.

»They are not of emptiness. They lead to the freed realms. We are here but to pass onward through the shadows of time, through dualities, opposing forces, which power side by side, to comprehension. Ours is a dual nature. A polarized one. Every action, every thought, sets its opposite in motion, fulfils a command given by the intelligence. We embrace two contrary aspects so we are in conflict with ourselves, because we bear the seed of falseness in equal measure to the seed of truth. So the force of destruction is potent and active in each of us. It takes skill and experience to learn to steer. To make right choices.«

»Duality? Participants and spectators at the same time?«

»Each word implies its opposite. The dual aspects are manifested in every concept or utility. A knife or a boat – it can serve both good and evil intent. Things grow in order to fall apart. A baby is born to die. In spoken language the two truths are expressed in active and passive moods. Doer and done to. We are messaged on passive levels and partake in active phenomena – as we choose. It is the will that powers between both. Man is present in a situation at which he is at the same time absent. It is what makes us godlike beings. But mankind's

thoughts are structures around fixed points of reference. Those of God are not. Like a geometrical shape, form has its limits and rigid definitions which by their very nature defy the idea of freeness. When the word unlimited is used by our species, its opposite is called up. Don't ever imagine you can understand freedom until you are free.«

»Free of what?«

»The play of forces. Acting and being acted upon. If conditions are benign, energies are summoned. Then follows the escape to nothingness. To bliss.«

She watched his lips move. It seemed to her that the man before her reigned sovereign in a realm where all had been distilled into quintessential patience.

»If you are in charge of your emotional creativity the richness of the limbic mind will find the gifts that are not ephemeral ...« he was saying, *»A man is a matter of stardust. A wanderer through time. His feet gnarled and weathered like tree stumps uprooted from having been replanted in so many weathered clays and soils. If he plants his feet carefully, then the trees of the mind will root and grow strong, bear blossom and fruit – until the yielding of all living seed.«*

He seemed indifferent to her presence, to the passing of time, to the seasons and the suns. He neither wished her to stay nor encouraged her to go. She sat there windswept as a deserted sphinx. But a song was singing in her head. Was she going completely crazy? A back to front song. Del sang in the deep noon. Among the angelfish.

'The monkey fell out of his bunk, and slid down the elephant's trunk, the elephant sneezed and fell on his knees but whatever became of the monk, the monk? Oh! Whatever became of the ...?'

Whatever became of the monk?

It seemed to Sandy as if two tectonic plates had suddenly collided and rocked the earth. She saw in her mind's eye, a man walking. A shoeless man in a torn R.A.F. airman's uniform. He'd lost his jaunty cap it seemed. Walking through uranium, hydrogen and nerve gas, through subatomic worlds, through an age of A-bombs, of biological warfare and density weapons. A drifting man whose roving feet carried him away from the murmuring of the world. A face fixed in her mind.

It was a young face in an old black and white photo with familiar features. Walking in his shell-shattered dreams through the tribes of Central Asia. Asleep among the goatherds in the tundra, surging through the plains of the Ukraine, to Astrakhan, sharing food with herdsmen in lonely shacks scattered along rocky roads. Through the bubbling brooks of Turkmenistan to Hindhu Kush, to Lahore, into the lush Punjab and Rajasthan among the stones, to Kashmir, to Katmandu in green Nepal, to Tibet in the Himalaya and through the Indus Valley, down the eastern coast of India to Goa, to lone Anuradhapura. Walking ... walking ... to the oldest tree in the world.

»And what do you make of the world and its war machines?« she asked him, now widely alert to something impossible.

»Have you ever flown above the land in a war machine, Sri Gannadeep? A machine of flying steel? The ones they use in Northern cities for dropping bombs on dreaming children in night cities?«

He turned his eyes very slowly toward her and seemed to see right through all she was. Her own eyes reflected back at her once more. Inside shone sea lights and submarine mountain ranges.

»*The type of thing they do at Mullaitivu and Killinochchi?*« she pressed on. »*The great and endless Killing of it all?*«
»*Yes,*« he said at last. »*Perhaps you could say it was me. Many years ago, I flew – long, long before I learned to walk.*«

The emptiness was ending. The unknown things were leaving Sandy. She had broken through the forbidden zone, left the Lethean stream of the underworld and all that was unrealized, crossed over the river of forgetfulness to the new confluence. The delta where three rivers merged. She saw it as it murmured soft in brooks, and bubbled: *Mnemosyne*, the river of remembrance, sourced at far Hernyka, in Hellas. The dead pilot who had reigned over the Emptiness stood before her in the flesh. And she knew now that he had never died but was as alive as anyone could ever be. Once he had been a man who had had a name. It was the lost airman – Victor.



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